

Tech System 351

Chapter 351 Nukes, Leashes, and Navies

On September 17th, 2017, North Korea publicly detonated a hydrogen bomb as a weapons test. Given the general uselessness of radiation in space, as well as the lack of heat transfer, the general consensus was that space combat vessels would be armed with hydrogen warheads instead of regular fission warheads. While humanity, as far as they were aware, hadn't yet mastered controlled nuclear fusion, the uncontrolled variety was much easier and plenty destructive enough to be used as a weapon against aliens.

Two days later, while the "civilized" governments were busy threatening more sanctions against North Korea, they launched a ballistic missile that passed over Hokkaido, causing alarms to ring out in every country that had missile launch detection programs and nearly instigating a full-blown nuclear war. If it weren't for the incoming aliens, humanity likely would have self-immolated that day; especially since the ballistic missile test came only days after a public hydrogen warhead test.

That day, the Doomsday Clock was set to 30 seconds to midnight from the relatively "safe" time of two-and-a-half minutes to midnight it was before the missile launch. Humanity was the closest it had ever been to doomsday.

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"They're really pushing our limits," Trump said as he read a report about the mess caused by North Korea's test fires.

"Looks like when Eden helped them with their sanctions, it gave them the balls to do what they want. After all, more threats of sanctions against them is pointless with those fucking blockade runners from that third-world shithole," Trump's new Chief of Staff, John Kelly cursed.

"Isn't China supposedly keeping their dog on a leash? As far as I know, North Korea is just China's attack dog. They let them bark and rattle sabers every now and then just to remind us that they could unleash them at any time," Trump asked.

"This time, even China seems to have been caught off guard," the CIA director reported.

"What do you mean by that?" Trump asked.

"North Korea has been breaking free from Chinese control thanks to the coalition formed by Eden. In the past, China was responsible for 70% of their food and energy needs, so they had a leash to control them with. But now that they can get what they need from Eden, with no strings attached, they've been growing closer to Eden and away from China. That's why, we think, they've become bolder—it's because the damn Edenians removed China's leash from around North Korea's throat."

“So you’re telling me there’s a chance things will get much worse than this?” Trump asked.

“Most likely, yes, so long as Eden continues providing them what they need without strings attached. As long as that trade continues, North Korea can do whatever the hell they want.”

“So let’s remove Eden from the equation and let China put a shackle on their dog again. After all, those morons are incompetent and the last thing we need is a war started by their missiles failing during the boost phase and falling on Japan, or worse, South Korea,” Trump said after a moment of contemplation.

“How about we promise to remove the sanctions against Eden if they cancel their deal with North Korea?” the aide from the State Department suggested.

“That won’t work. They already know we can’t do that on our own. It’ll take a Security Council resolution, and right now, Russia would probably veto it just to muddy the waters further. Or worse, they’ll want to trade our support for their slipshod plan, and that’s the absolute last thing we need,” the Chief of Staff replied.

“So how about threatening to sanction that... what’s his name? Adam? No... Aron. Aron Michael. How about we threaten him personally with sanctions, since his companies are responsible for producing and delivering everything that’s letting North Korea be ballsy. Then they’ll be forced to go back to begging China for food and oil, and China will have the leash again,” Trump mused.

“He’s a very important figure in Eden, and combined with his individual power and influence, he’s a huge target. But since a lot of his funds are in our banks, or banks that we can ‘influence’, that’s possible,” the CIA director said.

“I don’t think sanctions are a good thing at the moment, as we need their tech. And if we piss off the owner of the companies responsible for researching and producing it, it’s likely to backfire since he can use the sanctions as an excuse for why he won’t give it up to us and paint us as the bad guys,” the Secretary of State said.

“Then how about a naval blockade on North Korea? Can we do that?” Trump asked.

“It’s... technically possible. Naval blockades are considered acts of war, but we can interdict their trade ships and force inspections on them with the excuse of checking them for weapons and other banned items,” the Secretary of State replied. “It wouldn’t make it completely impossible for Edenian shipments to arrive in North Korea, but it would delay it by a lot. The tricky part is that Eden is a neutral country, so there’ll be some political wrangling and horse trading involved, but it’s doable... technically speaking.”

“Like we do in Cuba?” Trump asked.

“Yes, but it’ll take two fleets, since we don’t have coast guard ships capable of sailing that far. We’ve got the Ronald Reagan carrier strike group and the America amphibious ready group in the area, but we can’t pull any more than that without compromising ongoing ops elsewhere,” General Mattis replied. “Plus, it won’t be a perfect interdiction, but it’ll cover most of the ports at least.”

The discussion continued into the early afternoon as they worked out how the interdiction would be implemented, what they would be announcing to the public, and so on.

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“Father, I think it’s about time we start the final escalation act. We need to focus on the aliens, so it’s high time we stomp Eden into the mud. There’s a high chance the Rothschilds will try to stop our plans in Eden, like we did theirs in Yemen back then, so we should focus on building up public opinion against Eden now,” George Morgan said. He had learned that the previous upswell in anti-Eden sentiment had fallen once the public’s focus shifted to the incoming alien threat, which he considered a fine move on Eden’s part.

“We need something huge, and on American soil, otherwise the people won’t be angry enough to merit a military response. But it’ll serve two purposes... first, it’ll get our revenge against those peasants, and second, it can serve as the opening act to forcing takeovers in a lot of countries that are currently just wasting space and resources.

“And although the aliens are an opportunity, even if an unplanned one, we need to put those countries to bed within the next two years since we’re on a timer,” he mused. He was thinking along the same lines as many powerful governments were; it was time to reduce the cacophony of voices in the UN, or whatever the united government would be in the near future. And he wanted the first mover advantage.

“Let’s frame up a bombing attempt on the 9/11 anniversary this year. It’s the best time to unite people, as they’re already busy remembering that particular masterstroke of ours,” George suggested.

Chapter 352 We Figured We'd Give it to Everyone

“The clowns are getting really bold,” Aron said, reading his weekly report.

{They’re becoming variables that might disrupt our plan, sir. Are you going to stop them?} Nova asked.

“I really should, since there’s a chance they might start a war before we’re ready for it,” Aron said. The missions he had ongoing hadn’t been completed yet, and he would

need them to be in order to set the stage for the fight for dominance among humankind.

{But do you think they'll listen to us?}

"They've already distanced themselves from the Chinese, thanks to our trade with them. And since it's highly unlikely that China will accept North Korea's return, at least not without paying a price for their so-called 'betrayal', it's also highly likely that they would listen to us instead. They've already pressed a thumb on the scales in the wrong direction and seem to have not thought about the situation the entire world is in," Aron mused as he came up with possible ideas on how to deal with the situation in North Korea without letting it devolve into open warfare before he was ready to take the stage.

{I think, based on the speed our forces are completing their tasks, we can risk North Korea's refusal. Everything should be ready by the time the Kims suffer the consequences of their rash actions,} Nova said after taking a moment to check on the progress of the ongoing missions. All four of the forward operating and logistics bases had already been completed, and the Reapers and Nyxians had been spreading them from there. Soon, they would have forces available all over the world; and it had only hinged on the initial four.

Besides, if the rest of the world tried starting a nuclear war and devastating the planet, they just might get an unexpected result when they tried. Nova couldn't help but look forward to that inevitability.

"True," Aron said with a nod.

{So will you have Alexander cancel his diplomatic visit to North Korea?}

"No need. The visit to North Korea is just a stop on his way back from Taiwan, so he can deliver our request then. It'll work better face to face instead of exchanging messages through diplomatic courier pouches." Alexander's visit to North Korea was now set in stone.

{And what about the sensor tech the space-capable nations have 'politely requested' that we hand over?}

Aron waved his hand magnanimously. "Give it to them. They can't produce it anyway, so there's no need to keep it a secret." He smiled at the mental image of the looks on everyone's faces when they realized that little fact.

{Will do,} she replied.

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The countries that had requested Aron's tech had been planning on increasing the pressure on Eden in order to make them buckle to the more powerful nations' will. But they were quite surprised when the Edenian government simply published the schematics on their official Pangea account, letting the entire world have access to them without even trying to argue against the "request". The only issue was that every country had wanted the tech for themselves, and the schematics being

made public would prevent them from getting the leg up on their competitors, as they'd originally planned.

When they tried making a fuss about it in private, Eden's response boiled down to: "We were asked by multiple countries, so we figured we'd give it to everyone."

There was nothing anyone could say, so they could only gnash their teeth in frustration and get to work reproducing it. But there was a problem; everyone who had seen the schematics almost simultaneously realized that the equipment would be impossible to produce in any reasonable time frame, as the entire process would need to follow a natural progression. They would need to make the tools they would use to make more advanced tools that they would use to make more advanced tools... and the cycle would repeat a number of times, wasting precious weeks with each iteration.

As that was happening, the US government quietly pulled the naval fleets they had in Japan and the South China Sea to interdict trade to and from North Korea. When people caught wind of the interdiction fleets, the situation was brought up at a press briefing and the White House Press Secretary announced that the trade interdiction was a response to a recent escalation in North Korean aggression.

Tensions around the world increased, as the move by America could possibly provoke another escalation on the part of the loose cannon, Kim Jong-Un, and the Doomsday Clock ticked down to 20 seconds to midnight.

North Korea's response to the interdiction fleet was to pull some of its forces from the DMZ and deploy them, along with quite a bit of their long-ranged artillery, to the coast, where they began construction on larger bases. The forces would build the bases and occupy them until such a time as the US and Japan, who had joined the American interdiction fleet to cover the gap left by the overextended American navy, withdrew their fleets.

Although the situation in Korea caused a commotion in Japan, it was mostly for the sake of argument. Even the staunchest conservative would have no problem with the economic attack on Korea. There was even an old saying in Asia: the only thing China and Japan will ever agree on is that they hate Korea. The three countries had a long tradition of cooperation and competition that was highly complex, but it boiled down to all of them having, at one point or another, allied to deal with the third. China and Korea hated Japan, and Korea and Japan hated China just as much as Japan and China hated Korea.

The whole thing would have been rather silly if it hadn't been accompanied by millennia of bloodshed.

The North Korean response caused people to watch in anticipation, wondering what Eden would do in this tense situation, considering the upcoming diplomatic visit schedule. Michael Jackson had never eaten as much popcorn as he was at that very moment.

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Beijing, China.

"We can take advantage of the situation to break the bond between Eden and North Korea by causing an incident during the diplomatic visit. It'll show them that the

trouble North Korea brings isn't worth what they're getting in return," an MSS operative said.

"So will we just let them acknowledge Taiwan as a country? Right now is the perfect time to annex them, since the world's attention is on the visitors. So long as we do it fast enough, nobody will have time to react and we can use the incoming aliens as a shield against retaliation by countries that have defense agreements with Taiwan. After all, a prolonged war now would be disadvantageous considering the aliens," Wang Yi replied.

"Then we should make a plan for the Edenian diplomatic mission to Taiwan as well. That way we can make them reconsider their relationship with both countries.... But we have to be very careful, since they may retaliate and even consider it an escalation of hostilities," another member of the MSS suggested.

"We should consult with the chairman and move forward based on his vision, but I don't think we need to take a potential retaliation from Eden seriously. After all, they're small and weak, and don't have what it takes to make us take them seriously," the head of the MSS said, then tabled the topic for a later discussion with Zi Jinping.

Chapter 353 The Politics of Eating Gunpowder

A week prior to Alexander's diplomatic mission to Taiwan and North Korea, which hadn't been cancelled despite the two-week-long trade interdiction of the latter, China increased the frequency of their incursions into Taiwan airspace. They were sending more than fifty jets per day on "routine patrols over Chinese Taipei", rapidly increasing the already-existing tension between the two countries.

Those watching from the sidelines rightfully guessed that the intentions behind the constant and increasing provocations were to destabilize the situation to the point that Alexander would be forced to reconsider his upcoming diplomatic visit.

But contrary to everyone's expectations, the Edenian presidential office remained silent on the issue, implying that no changes to President Romero's schedule were being considered. Instead, their actions proved that the mission was still very much going to happen as the ARES logistical department began operating at full swing. Never-before-seen military cargo planes arrived in Taiwan one after another, bringing the vehicles that Alexander, his security detail, and Sarah—who would be visiting GAIA Technologies' business partner, TSMC—along with her security detail would use during the visit. That was paired with an increase in Nyxian activities in Taiwan as they combed the country from top to bottom, intent on plucking out any potential threats to the Edenian delegation.

Along with the cargo planes that were currently parked in underground hangars at Chiashan Air Force Base in Hualien County were two of Eden's modified KC-35 Stratotankers, which would be responsible for the fuel requirements of the presidential jet (one of Aron's modified A380 Superfortresses) and its Archangel Squadron escort.

A similar air wing was dispatched to North Korea in preparation for the diplomatic mission's arrival there, as well.

The situation attracted the attention of the easily distracted, and everything from the new cargo planes with the ARES insignia, to the ground vehicles they had transported, and even the ARES Aegis agents that were accompanying the materiel.

The Aegis agents were the ARES personnel that had been specifically trained to provide close personal security to dignitaries, whether visiting or abroad. They were the Edenian equivalent of the Secret Service for the US or the Protection Command of the London Metropolitan Police for the UK. They had arrived ahead of the delegation in both Taiwan and North Korea in order to set up the security measures that would be taken by the host countries to keep President Romero safe from harm, as currently, there was a battle of escalation between five countries—China, Taiwan, North Korea, the United States, and Japan—and the security situation on the ground was naturally concerning.

While the preparation work for the visits was ongoing, Eden dispatched two naval task groups, one headed toward Taiwan and the other toward North Korea, showing that they were adamant in their protection of the diplomatic mission they were sending out.

Footage of the fleets steaming ahead at their cruising speed had been released to the public through Edenian news channels, with the footage provided by Poseidon himself. That footage attracted the same group of easily distracted peoples' attention and debate over the capabilities of the ships ran rampant on the internet, even trending on Pangea for a couple of hours.

The two task groups that had been dispatched were two of the fleets from the Edenian Home Fleet Ready Reserve, who were treating their mission as live training for coastal patrol duties.

The spectacle that the Aeolus Air Force and Poseidon Navy were putting on caused many to speculate whether Eden was taking the opportunity to showcase their new vessels. If that wasn't the case, there was really no other reason to escalate the situation further than it had already been, which would mean that Eden was rattling sabers.

During the Edenian Press Briefing directly following the publicity blitz, the press secretary was asked about the deployment orders. The press secretary responded, "We are doing everything within our power to ensure President Romero's safety during his upcoming diplomatic visits to the Republic of China and North Korea. Just because we maintain our neutrality does not mean that we won't respond to blatant provocations, no matter the source."

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Eden's action, along with their reveal of new ships and jets, had caused many headaches to countries that couldn't believe a "third-world shithole" like Eden could have hidden that much. They were still trying to come to grasp with any country that could hide such huge fleets without being discovered until they were purposefully revealed. Together with that, and with the Edenian "incursion" into Indonesian waters, everyone was wracking their brains trying to at least estimate how powerful each of the ships in the task groups were. Based on the frigates' powerful guns alone, the other, bigger ships were absolutely terrifying.

Still, not many countries were too worried, as they believed there was no chance that Eden had mature technologies other than their guns, which think tanks had already come up with a solution for. Thus, they were either faking it, or using experimental technology, which everyone knew was extremely prone to failure.

They obviously hadn't learned their lesson from the consecutive launches of the Panopticon satellite network, or the more recent launches that set up deep space observatories in four of Earth's five Lagrange points.

Nobody was sure who had said it, but the common consensus among people that were paying attention to the rapidly developing nation was that Eden needed to be nipped in the bud before they grew capable of causing serious trouble to their "betters". Thus, Eden had acquired a very large target on its back.

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On the Russia-Ukraine border along the Crimean Peninsula, Russia had begun amassing a large number of troops, dividing the attention of the easily distracted between the recent antics between China, America, Eden, Taiwan, and North Korea and the Crimean Peninsula. People were wondering just what kind of gunpowder people had been eating that would cause such a massive, synchronized increase in tensions between countries that were, for the most part, considered "reasonable".

In addition to the exaggerated troop deployment along the border, Russia also began entering what military nerds would call "full battle preparation for an extended conflict of aggression", if they were polite. Fuel depots, supply warehouses, and deployable hospital buildings were springing up along the border like weeds after the rain.

Whenever Russia was asked what they were doing, they would only respond that they were conducting a large-scale exercise. Everyone knew it was a half truth, at best, but without solid evidence, there was nothing anyone could do but keep an eye on the situation without taking action. At least until Russia finally made a move that would give the observers a valid reason to interfere, that is.

It was almost like the weeks leading up to Alexander's visits to Taiwan and North Korea were cursed, as with the number of increasing tensions around the world, all it would take is a single spark to light a fire that may end up being humanity's funeral pyre.

Hopefully, that funeral pyre wouldn't be lit with nuclear flames.

Chapter 354 Invisible Locks

A few days later, somewhere over the Pacific Ocean.

An enormous jet was flying through the sky, high above the clouds. Everything seemed peaceful as the ponderous aircraft made its way forward at a decent speed..

Aron's specially modified A380, which had been repurposed for use by the President of Eden, looked dignified and regal as it passed over the ocean, headed to the Republic of China, more commonly known as Taiwan, where its passengers were headed for meetings with the recently elected President Tsai Ing-wen, who would be meeting with President Romero, and the co-chairmen of TSMC, Drs. Mark Liu and CC Wei, whom Sarah was scheduled to meet.

The same could not be said, however, for the squadron of fighter jets flying in close formation around it. They were also beautiful, in their own way, but it was much the same as one would look at a tiger, or a shark, and admire the animal's appearance.

"He really went all out," Alexander mused as he looked out of the window in his office and gazed at the fighter jets. The pilot of the jet nearest his window noticed he was being observed and wagged the wings of his jet in salute, then returned to focusing on his mission.

"He's tired of remaining passive and is setting the stage for him to step out into the limelight," Sarah replied.

"But do we really need to keep up the facade when nothing will matter soon, anyway?" asked Alexander.

"For a little while, yes. We need to keep acting like everything's normal until the proper moment. Once the other side makes the initial move, then we'll be free to act. But for that to happen, it's absolutely imperative that everything appears normal," Sarah answered, then added, "After all, we need a *casus belli* in order to seize the moral high ground, no matter how useless it may end up being."

"True," Alexander said, then returned to thinking about what might happen once he crossed into Taiwan's airspace. With the recent upsurge in Chinese incursions there, there was a distinct risk of his flight being intercepted.

Not that it would matter, as he was well aware that his safety was absolutely guaranteed as long as he remained aboard the plane or within any of the vehicles that had already been delivered for his delegation to use earlier.

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As the presidential jet and its escort approached Taiwan's airspace, four Chengdu J-20 "Mighty Dragons" scrambled from Longtian Air Base—which had recently undergone hasty repairs and was the primary air base from which the PLA jets would take off from in the daily provocations of Taiwan—and turned onto an intercept course headed toward the Edenian delegation, which was just under an hour away from its destination.

Normally, the fighter jets wouldn't have that range, but with the two modified Stratotankers meeting them halfway, range had become a non-issue, especially with the energy-dense fuel developed by Lab City and refined in one of the subbasements of the Cube on Avalon Island. The only thing limiting Eden's fighter jet range now was the pilots themselves, who had to battle fatigue during extended operations like this one.

As Alexander was working on various issues, his attention was briefly caught by the jet that had accompanied him outside the window of his office suddenly breaking formation and speeding ahead.

"What's going on?" he asked the empty air in the room.

{The escort is headed to intercept approaching Chinese aircraft,} his AI assistant answered. As she spoke, a recording of the Overwatch satellite feed appeared on the lenses of Alexander's AR glasses, showing the approaching J-20s.

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"Are we really going to do this? That jet is carrying the president of a foreign country! Wouldn't they take our actions as a declaration of war?" one of the J-20 pilots asked on his intra-squadron radio channel.

"You're assuming they can even spot us. They may be good at spotting things in space, but the visitors aren't being stealthy at all. Here, we have our speed and stealth as an advantage," another pilot replied. He was excited to be a part of their current mission, unlike the first pilot that spoke.

"You do realize there's an entire squadron of fighters escorting them, right?" the first pilot rejoindered.

"The party can just deny responsibility for anything that happens. Since they can't see us, who can accuse us anyway?" the second pilot sneered.

"Both of you shut up and focus on the missi—" the squadron leader began, then was immediately shut up when his equipment blared a lock-on warning, informing him that his jet had been locked on by a targeting system.

He couldn't believe his eyes and ears. In front of him was his radar, which showed nothing in its detection range, yet the lock-on tone was still blaring in his cockpit. Whatever had him in its sights was either another stealth aircraft, or one that could detect them from outside his radar range, which was hundreds of kilometers at the altitude they were currently cruising at.

Either one of those two options was definitely bad news for him. Before he could even think of equipment malfunction as a possibility, the rest of his squadron reported that they, too, had been locked on to by something they couldn't detect on their radars.

Then, before they had even fully digested the fact that they'd been spotted, a voice crackled to life on their supposedly secure intrasquadron radio channel. "Unidentified approaching aircraft, you are on course to intercept a diplomatic flight. You have thirty seconds to change course or you will be forced to do so."

The broadcast then repeated in Chinese, showing that whoever had spotted them had also identified them. "I repeat, change course immediately, or you will be forced to do so. This is your first and final warning, you have thirty seconds to comply."

The moment the second broadcast ended, more alarms blared in the cockpits of the stealth fighters as the number of lock-ons increased and their radars finally pinged. But the only thing showing on them was a single large jet: the Edenian presidential A380.

All four Chinese pilots found the entire situation surreal. They were being locked onto by invisible attackers!

The squadron leader wasted no time and ordered, "Mission abort. Abort, abort, abort. Change course immediately and return to base. I'll contact command on the way."

All four J-20s performed a simultaneous Immelman maneuver, not caring that they would become slower targets. They had already been targeted when they were flying in stealth, so who cared if they slowed down? What was more important was getting back to Longtian with their little lives intact, as well as the expensive stealth fighters they were piloting. Once that had been accomplished, they could contemplate what the hell had just happened.

Chapter 355 Shots Fired

Thanks to the early interception of the Chinese J-20s, the presidential jet's trip was smooth. They hadn't faced any further interference during the last 45 minutes or so of their approach and landing. Once Eden One had landed, the fighter escort refueled and, with the permission of the host country, took up patrol duties for the duration of the diplomatic visit in order to prevent any incursions that could possibly threaten Alexander or Sarah.

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As the Edenian visit was beginning, complete with all the pomp and circumstance surrounding high-level diplomatic missions, an entirely different atmosphere prevailed in the offices of the military leadership of China. They had received the debriefing notes on the short, but significant, encounter with the Edenian fighters near Taiwan and were scrambling to figure out exactly what had happened, and how. Their brand-new stealth interceptors had been... intercepted. And not only that, they were locked on by a targeting system from enemies that they couldn't even detect! It was a great loss of face for a country that placed great value on their national prestige.

"So you're telling me they discovered us, but we failed to discover them?" Zi Jinping asked as he slapped a folder onto his desk and massaged his temples with his other hand.

"Yes, leader. That seems to be the case," the Minister of National Defense answered.

"Do you believe it?" Zi asked.

"Based on the pilots' expressions during their debriefing, and the flight recordings, that seems to be what happened. But it's still difficult to believe that we couldn't discover their planes when they're flying the same Russian Su-35s that we're already intimately familiar with. After all, we have some of those, too, so we know for a fact that we can see them on our radars," the minister replied. In order to escape the blame, he would just give the president all the information he had at hand and allow him to come to his own conclusion. That way, if that conclusion were to later be found incorrect, it wouldn't be the minister's fault.

He was definitely a seasoned politician and had vast experience with buck-passing.

"Apparently, they've modified their jets to make them invisible to radar. That isn't a good thing at all—they're currently patrolling Chinese Taipei, so if we continue our air incursion plan..." the head of the MSS began, then paused to take a deep breath.

“They’d be well within their rights to shoot our jets down with the justification that they pose an imminent threat to their president. They’re only required to give a single warning before firing, since they’ve been granted permission by the government to be there,” he finished.

Zi Jinping’s face darkened. “So we can’t continue our incursions for now?” he asked.

“Unfortunately, no,” the minister of defense answered.

“I’ll add that to the list,” Zi Jinping said with a frown. “Right now, we still have a use for the Edenians. Taipei gave them permission to patrol their airspace, right?”

“Yes.”

Zi Jinping turned to the minister of national defense and said, “Find some martyrs among our pilots. They have a final job to do. It’s time to bring Chinese Taipei back to the fold.”

The minister of national defense thought for a moment, then saluted and left the room. He had been given his orders, and didn’t need to know about anything else that would be said in the briefing room.

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Three days later, somewhere over Taiwan.

Archangel 02 had discovered a Chinese J-20 over Taiwan. The previous two days had been peaceful, with no Chinese incursions, so the Edenian pilot had been caught slightly off guard when his AI assistant, who had been monitoring his long-range sensor array, notified him that a J-20 had been picked up on his LIDAR.

He immediately locked his targeting reticle on the J-20 through his HUD AR display and broadcast a warning on all frequencies. “Unidentified aircraft, you have entered a restricted airspace. I repeat, you have entered a restricted airspace. You have thirty seconds to reverse course and return. This is your only warning, if you do not comply you will be fired upon. I repeat, you will be fired upon.”

Then he switched to the secure intrasquadron q-com channel and reported, “Contact, contact, contact. Chinese J-20 stealth fighter on course for Taipei. I issued the warning—what are your orders, commander?”

“Close range and fire a warning shot with your guns,” Archangel 01, the leader of the Archangel squadron ordered.

“Roger, closing.”

Archangel 02 adjusted his course to intercept the J-20 and pushed the throttle of his jet to the stops and soon reached Mach 2.8, where he backed it off and entered supercruising mode. The current “fastest” jet on the planet was the Lockheed Martin F-22 Raptor, which could supercruise at Mach 1.8 or fly at Mach 1.2 with afterburners, so the pilot judged that Mach 2.8 would suffice. It would allow him to intercept the Chinese interceptor over an uninhabited area while keeping at least some of his jet’s capabilities hidden.

He soon got a visual on the J-20, which had made no effort to adjust its heading or speed. Aiming his targeting reticle ahead of the intruding Chinese, he fired a burst of tracers from his guns that passed ten meters in front of the target.

The Chinese jet turned to engage him as the other three pilots on patrol for the day also reported contacts of their own.

“Incoming intruders are hostile, engage at will,” came the order from Archangel 01.

“Roger, engaging,” chorused the other three pilots in the squadron.

Archangel 02 went vertical and gained 1000 feet of altitude, bleeding speed as he did so, then executed a hammerhead turn and came around behind the target. He reacquired lock on his target and released a missile as he reported, “Archangel 02, fox one.”

Then... there was no then. What had once been a J-20 briefly became a firework, then a rain of small pieces of metal that, perhaps years later, old men and women with metal detectors would dig up on the shore of Taiwan outside of Taipei and wonder what they once were.

Other than that brief interlude, where the Edenian patrol shot down four Chinese intruders, Alexander’s Taiwan visit was peacefully brought to a conclusion. He had signed a mutual defense treaty with Taiwan in addition to the standard trade agreements he’d been offering to all of the nations on his whirlwind world tour. In addition to that, he had set up an embassy and issued a public declaration recognizing the Republic of China as an independent country that was in no way beholden to the People’s Republic of China.

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The journey to North Korea was relatively peaceful. The escort pilots had handed off patrol duties back to Taiwan and the flight was smooth. The interdiction fleet made no attempt to stop the Edenian delegation as it passed over them, the escorts sarcastically wagging their wings in salute to the American and Japanese fleets as they went. They had all received the same notification from their assistant AIs that all observation instruments on the ships had been focused on them, but the pilots only snorted and wished them luck.

The naval escort, on the other hand, couldn’t say the same. After Eden One and its escorts had passed the interdiction fleet, the naval escort joined the other task group that had been sent ahead of Alexander’s visit. That fleet had been in a standoff with the American fleet outside Namp’o, the nearest port city to Pyongyang, for a few days before their “reinforcements” had arrived.

Heedless of the tension on the sea, Alexander’s delegation smoothly landed at the Korean People’s Army Air Force Headquarters in Pyongyang, where they were met by the Aegis team that had been sent ahead prior to the Taiwan visit. The Aegis team leader that had been in country longer pulled the presidential Aegis team leader aside for a briefing on the situation as Alexander stepped into his car in the Edenian motorcade and, with his extra security team, headed toward the Mansudae Assembly Hall.

Unlike the relatively peaceful and enthusiastic reception Alexander had received in Taiwan, an almost palpable sense of tension hung in the air here.

Even the weather seemed to agree, as it was unseasonably cold, overcast, and windy. He left his car, dressed in a midnight blue suit and a black greatcoat that hung from his shoulders to his knees and

topped everything off with a striped wool scarf in the colors of the Edenian flag. He put on his best professional smile and waved for the flashing cameras of the state media, who were there to document Kim Jong-Un's first visit from a foreign dignitary.

"Welcome to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, President Alexander," Kim Jong-Un's sister greeted in passable English.

"Thank you, Miss Kim." Alexander shook her hand, then gestured for her to join him as they entered the assembly hall.

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A few hours later in an underground bunker, somewhere near the DMZ.

A North Korean General answered a red phone on the first ring. His sole job for the past three years had been to sit in that office and stare at the red phone on the desk in front of him. There was nothing else in the room; no computer, no cellphone, nothing. Only a desk, a chair, and a hanging light fixture marred the dreary gray reinforced concrete of the windowless underground room. An ashtray that was overflowing with cigarette butts was on the opposite side of the desk, accompanied by an opened pack of counterfeit Huanghelou Xianliang Ban cigarettes.

"Yes.... I understand.... Yes, sir. Right away, sir. For the unification!" He stood and saluted, then disconnected the call and dialed a new number, one that he had memorized years before but had never needed to dial... until today.

When the voice on the other end of the phone answered, he said one word: "Fire." Then he lit a cigarette and sat back in his chair; they may be counterfeit, but they still reminded him of home.

Within minutes, almost ten thousand guns and MLRSs of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea Army simultaneously pulled their triggers. Other than the four thousand pieces of self-propelled artillery that had been moved to the coast to fend off the trade interdiction fleets of the United States and Japan, the rest of the over fourteen thousand guns were still trained on South Korea.

The guns spoke, shaking the very ground they were braced upon. It was the first round of shots in nearly a century of cease-fire between North and South Korea, but it would not be the last.

Chapter 356 Time to Unass This Place.

Mansudae Assembly Hall, North Korea.

"We'd like to see a reduction in your country's aggression, President Kim. It's making it very difficult for us to support you at the moment," Alexander said once the diplomatic greetings were done and the small talk was over. It was time for the meat of the conversation.

"Are you telling me what to do with my own things?" Kim Jong-Un growled.

As the diplomatic translator struggled to come up with a polite translation for that, not knowing that Alexander was already hearing a real-time translation thanks to his glasses' AI assistant, Kim Jong-Un continued under his breath, "Who do this guy think he is? He has no right to order us around."

He thought he was quiet enough that nobody would hear what he was muttering to himself, but it didn't go unheard by the ears of the genetically enhanced Alexander, his "translator"—who was in actuality a Nyxian—or anyone else from the Edenian delegation for that matter, who all shared the genetic enhancements that Alexander enjoyed. They all stopped what they were doing and turned to look at the North Korean dictator, causing him to go quiet and wonder why they were all looking at him.

"Listen here, President Kim," Alexander began in fluent Korean. Kim Jong-Un froze, finally realizing that all of his veiled insults had been understood by the man across the table from him. "While the entire world was punishing you for your violations of human rights, your insane measures to keep yourself in power and threaten the world, your greed, and the draconian measures you instituted to keep yourself in power by pushing your own people into starvation, we, the people of Eden, chose to come to your aid. WE, the people of Eden, chose to provide you the resources you need. WE, the people of Eden, chose to uplift you and your people. WE, the people of Eden did that. Not China, not any other nation, not any charitable organization, but us."

He paused for a moment, allowing Kim Jong-Un to digest what he was saying, then continued, "But you've been losing your reason as you shuffled off the shackles of Chinese control. You slipped your leash and immediately attempted to prove that you were exactly what the whole world believes you to be: a mad dog kept on a leash by China to prevent it from biting any and everyone it saw.

"You detonated a fucking hydrogen bomb, President Kim, and you announced it to the entire world! Then you had the unmitigated, absolute gall to launch a ballistic missile over Japan. A country which, may I remind you, is the ONLY one to have ever suffered a nuclear attack! Did you stop to think, even for a microsecond, about the fucking consequences? Did you think that we," Alexander gestured to himself and the other Edenians in the room, "would support your insane actions?"

"I—" Kim Jong-Un began, still shrinking back under the unseen pressure that Alexander was emanating. Whatever he was about to say would forever remain unsaid, however, as the door of his office hit the marble floor with a bang and Alexander's Aegis team rushed into the room.

The leader of the team, Antonio Espinoza, moved to Alexander's side and whispered, "Sir, it's time to unass this place. We have to go, now." Then, uncaring of the optics of the situation, he picked the Edenian president up and put him on his shoulder like a sack of potatoes and rushed out of the room surrounded by the rest of his team, who were pushing Kim Jong-Un's praetorian guards aside. The position Alexander was in was a little undignified, sure, but he wasn't trained to the same standard as an aegis guardsman. If bullets started flying, the aegis team needed to react as a single unit in order to protect him. After all, being embarrassed would be better than being shot.

Had the praetorian guard received the same news as the aegis team did, the chaotic evacuation would have raised even more of a commotion. But with the constant monitoring of various AIs—

barring Panoptes, as the cloud cover impeded the eyes of the Panopticon in the sky—the Edenians were the first to receive the news that North Korea had broken the nearly century-long ceasefire between them and South Korea. The shit had hit the fan, and the aegis team would think later; right now was the time for them to act.

The Edenians left chaos in their wake, the floor behind them littered with groaning North Korean Praetorian Guards and the hallways ahead of them rapidly filling with more. Soon, a gun was drawn and the guard that drew it shouted at the aegis team to halt.

Antonio looked to his left and nodded to the embedded nyxian. She took a large stride and flipped over the head of the aegis member in front of her, landing atop the guard with the drawn weapon and riding him to the ground, where she swiftly rendered him unconscious and began tearing through the praetorian guard in front of her like a tornado through a trailer park. While she refrained from using lethal moves, the trail of destruction she left behind was rather impressive; a single woman had left behind nearly as many bodies as an entire aegis team had up to that point. The main difference was that the bodies the nyxian left were silent and unmoving in their unconsciousness, while the guards dropped by the aegis team were groaning and rolling around in pain.

The chaos lasted for a few minutes longer, then suddenly came to a screeching halt as, in one synchronized movement, nearly every praetorian guard raised their hand to their earpieces and their faces paled. They had obviously received the news that they had fired on South Korea and had bigger proverbial fish to fry. Shield Espinoza called the nyxian back and the team stood to the side of the hall, gesturing back the way they had come. He figured it would be faster if they let the hundred-thousand-strong Praetorian Guard get out of his way on their own than fight his way through the lot of them.

Soon, the corridors of the Mansudae Assembly Hall were empty of all but the Edenian delegation, who swaggered out of the hall's front doors and into their waiting convoy, where they were joined by the pilots of their jets. It was a shame, but the hardware could not be left behind, so the miniaturized atomic printers in each of the jets executed their last orders and printed a large scuttling charge. The charges detonated in good order, ensuring that none of the advanced technology contained in the 14th-generation fighters or in the presidential A380 would be recoverable.

Though that was just a camouflage measure, as the advanced technologies had already been decomposed and used as the raw material for the scuttling charges themselves. What was left behind after the decomposition and explosion was nothing more than the airframes of the jets themselves: Sukhoi Su-35s, a KC-35 Stratotanker, and an Airbus A380.

All in all, Alexander's diplomatic visit to North Korea had ended in a much more spectacular fashion than his visit to Taiwan.

Chapter 357 It's Finally Kicking Off

While the Edenian delegation was evacuating from the Mansudae Assembly Hall, an entirely different confrontation was in progress a few dozen nautical miles outside Namp'o.

“Edenian vessels, this is the USS Ronald Reagan. You are entering interdicted waters and I hereby order you to stand down for inspection. I repeat: stand down for inspection.”

The Edenian task group continued steaming forward at a rather impressive speed, from the perspective of the American vessels between them and North Korea. “USS Ronald Reagan, this is the EV Sigurd. We are not a trade fleet and thus we’re not subject to your illegal trade interdiction of a sovereign nation in the first place. We’re currently on course for Namp’o, where we will be onboarding our diplomatic mission in light of the recent resumption of hostilities. Belay your order and get out of our way or there will be... trouble,” Home Admiral James Holbrook replied from the flag bridge of the Sigurd.

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“It’s finally kicking off,” Aron said as he caught up to the news.

[And at the worst possible time,] Nova said. The weather was being very uncooperative, with the unusual cloud cover over most of North Korea preventing the Panopticon network from acquiring solid visuals of the ground. They still had other options, like thermal and infrared, but the thick cloud cover was still making it impossible to determine what was what.

“Where’s Alexander?” he asked. He had received the news of North Korea unilaterally violating the cease-fire minutes after it had occurred, but had to rely on reports, rather than visuals, to determine what exactly was going on at any given time.

[The presidential aegis team is currently en route to Namp’o for a sea evac. Without the Stratotanker in the air ahead of time, they had to scuttle the air assets and evacuate by sea. Luckily, Namp’o is only a few dozen kilometers from Pyongyang, so it shouldn’t be long before they’re safely aboard the EV Hrothgar and headed back.] Nova brought up the feed from one of the aegis soldiers, then split the screen and displayed a progress map on the other side. North Korea had almost no cars and relied mainly on bicycle-driven rickshaws for transportation, which were easy to dodge and wouldn’t be able to jam the entire street like cars could. Thus, the evacuating delegation was making good time on their way to the port, where they would board the waiting Edenian submarine and begin the long journey home.

“That’s good. Keep an eye on them and let me know if their situation changes.” He turned his head and said, “Nyx.”

The shadows in the room gathered into a human shape, which resolved into the mother of spies. [You called, sir?]

“Our work is done in North Korea, right?” he asked.

[Yes, my children finished their missions and have already been exfiltrated. Nothing too out of the ordinary happened and it’s all been dealt with,] she replied, thinking of the reasonably few smoking craters left by the exfiltrating nyxians.

“Nova, call for a council meeting,” Aron ordered.

A few minutes later, the Edenian council appeared in the meeting room. They must have immediately logged in after receiving the order, since the time dilation in the VR was relatively high and it had only taken them minutes, not hours, to appear.

Aron caught them up on the situation and informed them that the presidential delegation’s evacuation from North Korea was in progress, then left them to draw up plans for their individual

ministries based on the resumption of hostilities in Korea and the situation brewing in Taiwan. He nodded to Nova and the two of them disappeared; Nyx had already left earlier.

Aron appeared in ARES Command and began issuing orders. "Raise our status to alert level two. I want ARES, Aeolus, and Poseidon to be ready for immediate mobilization. Cancel all leaves and call every soldier back to duty stations. Home Fleet is to increase patrols and send out the reserve. Order all transport convoys to flank speed, I want our cargo ships and merchant marine back as soon as possible...." He continued issuing order after order for quite some time. In a nutshell, the entire military was to be ready for anything within two hours real time, and the trade convoys had been ordered to submerge if they were intercepted. There would be no point in preserving his capabilities if it cost him experienced ship handlers. After all, no matter how accurate the simulation was, reality would always differ and experience still mattered.

"Yes, sir," the military leaders chorused, then logged out to deal with what needed to be done in reality. The AIs could handle everything else.

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White House Situation Room.

Trump had been pulled to the situation room moments after being signaled to wrap up his weekly press briefing and had been informed of the unfolding situation in Korea.

"So what're you suggesting?" he asked once the briefing was finished.

"Sir, we should deal with North Korea once and for all. With the developing situation in Taiwan, China is sure to be distracted, so we can flatten all opposition in Korea without their interference. Plus, since that madman fired the first shots, China won't be able to reinforce North Korea, while we can claim that we were forced to aid South Korea because of our treaty with them," General Mattis suggested.

"What about the damage to South Korea? And how do we convince them to let us be in charge?"

"Of course they'll agree to us being in charge. We're the United States of America, the most powerful nation on the face of the planet," the secretary of state sneered.

"And what will China do? Will they just watch from the sidelines?" Trump asked.

"North Korea acted first, so their mutual defense treaty with China won't come into effect. Since South Korea is the defending party, we're free to retaliate. That means China can't openly do anything to stop us, and we don't have to worry about anything they do in the background since the forces we have stationed in Korea are already sufficient to win any conflict there," General Mattis answered.

"Are we sure we know where all their nukes are?" Trump wanted it on the record that he at least asked in case things were to go south for the American forces.

“Yes. We’re bombing everything that’s been confirmed to relate to their nuclear program, and everything that we only suspect has ever been related to their nukes,” Mattis replied.

“Good. Carry on,” Trump said, then turned to the secretary of state and ordered, “Call congress and let them know I’ll be doing a congressional address later this afternoon.”

Chapter 358 Almost Perfectly Fucked

In a hidden underground bunker in North Korea.

“Why’d you do that!?” Kim Jong-Un asked a man hanging upside down by his ankles. The prisoner was bleeding from multiple cuts on his body and a small pool of blood had formed beneath him.

The prisoner fainted, and the dictator picked up a bucket of water and threw it at the man, waking him from his swoon. The water dripped down his body and joined the puddle of blood on the ground beneath him, diluting it and turning it from a rich red to a much lighter shade of pink. The soldier next to Kim Jong-Un punched the hanging prisoner in the gut, eliciting a groan from him and sending him swaying and twisting like a pendulum.

“Answer me, you KANNA SEKKIA!” the dictator screamed.

As the man swung back and forth, another soldier entered the room and whispered in Kim Jong-Un’s ear. “His family crossed the border to China three days ago, dear leader.”

Hearing that, the swinging man smiled, his teeth red from the blood leaking from his mouth. He groaned a hoarse laugh and Kim Jong-Un turned to him with a glare.

The man, now assured of his family’s safety, began speaking with some difficulty. “You think our saviors will let you go?” he sneered, then fell into a coughing fit. “You think a weak, pathetic country full of peasants—” he hacked and coughed again, then spat a bloody glob and continued, “—can give you what China can’t?”

“What do you mean?” Kim Jong-Un waved at the soldier beside him, who moved to the swinging man and stopped him from swaying.

“You abandoned China, who’s been helping our country since your grandfather’s rule. Then you tarnished our glory by allowing the new colonizers to rampage among our citizens and steal our legacy. And you would’ve let them continue taking advantage of us in the future,” the tortured man replied with great difficulty.

“And just what the fuck made you think that ordering an attack on our enemies would help us return to China?” Kim asked, his blood pressure rising from anger.

“They promised to support us... and even aid us in the great unification, taking our lost brothers and sisters who’ve been suffering under the yoke of the damned

yankees....” The conviction in the prisoner’s voice showed that he was a true “patriot”, one that firmly believed in his country’s propaganda.

Kim Jong-Un knew there was no need to question the man in front of him any further. He was obviously a member of the China loyalist faction that actually believed the line of garbage the leadership of North Korea had been feeding their citizens for generations. His face twisted in a rictus of rage, he picked up a nail-studded baseball bat and hit the prisoner’s head with it until it burst, splashing blood and brain matter everywhere in the dimly lit underground torture room. He felt the warm wetness splatter on his face, but was uncaring.

He dropped to his knees and raised his fists in the air, then screamed his frustration to the heavens, but his anger didn’t decrease at all.

Although he might look like he wasn’t that intelligent, he was actually quite cunning and knew that the dead man in front of him had sealed his country’s fate. And rather more importantly, the fate of his family with it. He was more than certain that China would never come to his aid, as their treaty only covered unprovoked attacks on them, not attacks that they had provoked themselves.

He couldn’t even attempt to salvage the situation, as before he had even caught the man hanging in front of him, let alone tortured him, South Korea had already been hit by artillery and missiles. The estimated casualties had already crossed the half a million mark since the barrage had landed hours before, and now he couldn’t even attempt to explain anything; there was no way South Korea would listen to a word he said!

He left the torture chamber and walked into the control room, still covered in blood and gore. When he arrived, he asked his remaining loyal generals what the current situation was.

“Once their artillery and rockets suppressed the traitors on our side, they stopped attacking. At the moment, most of our artillery along the DMZ has been lost or is still moving to a tertiary firing position after their secondary positions were destroyed. All of our fixed emplacements have been lost. We estimate a drop of 30% in our capabilities along the 38th parallel, but we can still pull back what we have deployed to the coasts and reinforce the main line,” one of the generals reported.

“We noticed a massive surge in troop movements from all over South Korea, all of them headed to the DMZ. We estimate that an attack by South Korean and American forces is imminent and they’re simply waiting until everything is in position for an overwhelming counterattack,” another general added.

“What’s our response been?” Kim Jong-Un asked. Although he was the supreme leader, he had only arrived at the command bunker a short time ago and had been occupied with interrogating the traitor that caused their current mess since then. So while he understood the general picture, he still needed more details to fully understand just how fucked they were.

“The moment we received word that we’d opened fire, we immediately ordered them to cease fire. Then we ordered all of our mobile artillery platforms to move along

their designated fire avoidance route and take up alternate firing positions. The South Koreans have so far been busy trying to destroy our long-range attack capability, so our casualties are fairly low at the moment. Most of our losses are in materiel, not personnel," the first general reported. He had preserved most of their capabilities, but the losses were still heavy and he was unsure of his future at the moment.

"We also ordered the mobilization of our entire submarine fleet. They were caught unprepared and are currently onboarding their crew and taking on supplies for an emergency deployment," the admiral in charge of North Korea's navy reported, feeling somewhat ashamed of their lack of preparedness.

"Our air force is at max readiness and the pilots can scramble at any time," the general in charge of the air force reported. His was the only force that had been ready when the hostilities had resumed between North and South Korea.

"Good. Now that everything's coming together, someone get me a line to Seoul. I want to see if there's any way to salvage the situation... there's no harm in trying, at least," Kim Jong-Un said with a speck of hope in his heart. He wanted to avoid an all-out war, as he knew there was no way the current situation would end well for him.

"We've tried establishing communications, but it seems like this time they're the ones that cut the line," the diplomatic attache butted in, his voice lower than the generals' as he reported.

"What about China and Russia?" the dictator followed up.

"Russia offered to sell us arms and ammunition. China said they would reinforce their border with us and only act once our enemies come close to that line. They offered you a safe place to evacuate to, and our citizens in the north are currently rushing toward the border as refugees."

"Fuck," the North Korean leader whispered. He knew they were almost perfectly fucked.

"Contact America and...." He issued instructions to his diplomatic attache as he considered his options. Various plans and counterplans were coming to his mind and he spoke without a filter about things including potentially going so far as to launch a nuke at the American fleets that had upgraded their mission from interdicting trade to blockading the North Korean ports entirely. In this moment, the emergency situation had forced his mind into overdrive and he could almost feel himself slimming down from the calories his brain was burning as it churned out countermeasure after countermeasure.

As long as he could hold off the American response, he could salvage the situation. North and South Korea alone were mostly balanced in capabilities, and with the devastating first strike his traitorous general had ordered, he would have the advantage if America would only stay out of it.

After all, if he was forced to flee to China, or even Eden, he wouldn't be able to guarantee his standard of living would remain at its current exaggerated heights.

"Prepare a speech. I need to announce a lockdown to keep our peasants from fleeing to China. Add in some propaganda about our upcoming glorious victory against the cowardly enemy that surprise attacked us," he ordered.

"Yes, dear leader," the attache responded, then left the room to carry out his orders.

Kim Jong-Un turned to his second-in-command and ordered, "Send three girls from the pleasure squad to my room. I need to calm down and think of other plans." He rose to his chair, feeling like he had sweated out three kilograms of weight, then paused and turned around. "Where did the Edenians go?" he asked. He finally remembered the arrogant president of Eden and the provocations he had suffered, along with the pressure he'd felt that had made him shudder in fear.

"We aren't sure. Our last report had them on the road headed toward Namp'o, but we lost them when they crossed the Pyongyang city limits. As for their jets, they were reduced to salvage by scuttling charges," the head of the Reconnaissance General Bureau reported.

Hearing that, the North Korean dictator sneered and left the command center, headed toward his quarters. He wouldn't waste time caring about the shitty Edenian president now that he had something more important to deal with.

Chapter 359 Six Seconds to Midnight

While the North Korean dictator was relieving his stress, his generals were working to carry out his orders as if their lives were on the line. Considering the Kim family's history, the North Korean military leadership wasn't entirely wrong in assuming that their heads would roll if they failed.

And as all of that was going on, China was also making movements of its own. Their aircraft carriers, the Liaoning and the Shandong, were being loaded with ammunition, aircraft, and sailors despite not even having been commissioned yet. But that was just one of the many things happening in China; convoy after convoy of tanks, supply trucks, and trains filled with soldiers were headed toward Fujian Province. As they arrived, they were sorted, equipped, armed, and loaded into transport ships that would soon be carrying them across the Taiwan Strait.

While the transport ships were being loaded, China's air force also kicked into high gear. Their Airborne Warning And Control System (AWACS) equipped jets were scrambled and took off, taking up patrol routes just on the edge of Taiwanese airspace. Their J-20 Mighty Dragon stealth fighters also increased their daily incursions over the "helpless" Republic of China, ensuring that nothing at all could be hidden from the People's Republic of China in preparation for their invasion and ultimate annexation of the long-contested territory.

As for China's ICBM program, it was also spinning up. All of their ballistic missiles had been tested and verified as properly working. The only thing remaining was to arm them with warheads, either

conventional or nuclear. At the same time, their air and missile defense systems were also undergoing a rapid cycle of self-testing and maintenance, ensuring that their defense was as airtight as it was possible to make it.

Although the movement of the People's Liberation Army was objectively enormous, the truth was that it was only about 10% of their forces. Another 70% of their military was undergoing the same buildup and movements, but focused on other borders. Specifically, the China-Russia border, China-India border, and even the China-Korea border were being heavily reinforced. About a third of their navy had also been deployed in the East China Sea and taken up patrol duties there to defend against another potential Japanese invasion.

China had suffered at the hands of Japan before, and their memory was nearly as long as their history. They would never suffer at the hands of Japan again, and a mere annexation of the Republic of China wouldn't distract them from their longest-standing enmity.

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Over the next six hours, the world waited on tenterhooks as the Doomsday Clock ticked ever nearer to midnight. It had already shattered all records and any movement now would break yet another historical record. And the organization that made the determination didn't disappoint, either; about an hour into the interminable time period that would be referred to in history books as "the six hour breath hold", the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists announced via Pangea and their website that the world was now at six seconds to midnight.

The ticking of the Doomsday Clock came on the heels of the international media breaking news of the troop movements of the nuclear powers. Russia had moved troops to their newly completed bases along the Russia-Ukraine border, India had moved troops to the India-China border and India-Pakistan border, and Pakistan had heavily reinforced the Pakistan-India border. The relations between those countries had always been... complex, with India and Pakistan constantly squabbling over religious ideology and China and India constantly squabbling over border frictions where, much like in Korea, a cease-fire had been maintained since 1962, but the countries had officially remained hostile to each other despite maintaining diplomatic ties.

But none of that was as hotly watched as the situation in Korea where, for the past twelve hours, a constant stream of news had been released, including the list of casualties and live streams of the ongoing rescue efforts in the devastated Seoul.

Currently, the South Korean internet had been hit the hardest. Practically everyone in the country was mourning the devastation, and their grief was only surpassed by their rage. Rage that was being aimed directly at North Korea by people lurking in the shadows and hoping to gain something during the chaos of the renewed conflict on the Korean Peninsula.

Minutes after news broke of the unprovoked attack on South Korea, a petition had appeared on the internet, gathering support for an armed and overwhelming retaliation against North Korea. Within an hour, it had already reached ten million signatures, making it the most-signed petition on the internet in the entire world.

As per the Cheong Wa Dae's rule regarding petitions on their website, any of them that pass 100,000 signatures would be addressed by the government. But that rule wasn't even necessary, as

the “Blue House” had already released a statement regarding the situation. The South Korean government would not let the blood of the innocent go unavenged and would be moving to ensure that the perpetrators of the horrific act of terror would pay the price with their lives. They had even gone the extra mile to paint North Korea as terrorists, since their attack had mainly been aimed at noncombatant civilians.

The response was issued from the presidential bunker, as the president of South Korea and all of his closest staff and advisors had been evacuated as the first shells were detected crossing over the DMZ.

The South Korean president didn’t stop there, as immediately following the attack, all of the reserves were activated and retired soldiers who met the standards were recalled to active duty in preparation for an overwhelming retaliatory strike on the North Korean “terrorists”. They didn’t even stop to think for a moment how strange it was that only a single barrage had been fired, or that it had only been fired at Seoul, instead of targeting military facilities. Their rage had kicked their reason far behind them, and all they wanted was to bathe in the blood of their enemies and offer them as sacrifices to the innocent casualties caused by the unprovoked attack.

With all of the increasing tension, there was weirdly no clear, official information being released. Everyone involved just announced that they would soon make announcements regarding the unfolding situation, and for people interested to stand by for those announcements.

Eden, too, found itself in the midst of a building storm. Although, their storm was minuscule compared to some of the other ongoing situations in the world at the moment. There were rumors going around that Eden would soon find itself being dragged into two separate wars, as a Chinese invasion of Taiwan would trigger their mutual defense treaty, and if Eden was found to have any involvement in the unprovoked attack on South Korea, they would also be dragged into the cesspit of American retaliation.

If those rumors proved true, it meant that Eden would be fighting a war on two fronts against two of the most powerful nations on the face of the planet: China and the United States. To most Edenian citizens that weren’t “in the know” about the capabilities of their own country, the thought was absolutely chilling.

Chapter 360 A Bright Night

Thirteen hours after the initial bombardment of South Korea.

North Korea was known for being one of the darkest countries on the planet during its nights, as had been shown in many, many satellite images. The country was so impoverished that most of the areas within it had their electricity shut off after dark, after all. But this was destined to be a much brighter night than most, even if the brightness was only momentary, much like the average ambient temperature in Hiroshima and Nagasaki had skyrocketed on the sixth and ninth of August, 1945, respectively.

"ETA to drop zone, fifteen minutes."

Jose Rodriguez, a member of the US Air Force, had his eyes on the instruments in front of him and offhandedly replied, "Payload status?"

"All systems green. MOP is ready for deployment."

In the blackness of night, thirteen B2 Spirit stealth bombers were flying through North Korean airspace, each of them headed to separate targets in a synchronized attack. A few minutes after that brief exchange, all thirteen of the bombers had reached their targets and, in an eerie example of synchronicity, announced, "Ten seconds to drop."

"Three.... Two.... One... release."

With mechanical thuds, thirteen monstrous GBU-57 Massive Ordnance Penetrators left the bomb bays of thirteen B2 bombers, which all pushed their throttles to the stops as they accelerated to put distance between themselves and the impending detonations. As they accelerated, they also banked in a perfectly timed display of skill as they adjusted their course to head toward their next, less critical destinations.

Their initial targets had been North Korean nuclear missile silos, which contained the bulk of North Korea's nuclear arsenal. Their next targets were the infrastructure that allowed North Korea to produce nuclear weapons in the first place—nuclear enrichment centrifuges, missile production factories, assembly sites, and so on.

It would be a much brighter night than usual in North Korea.

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While the bombers were carrying out their missions, underneath the surface of the ocean, a cat-and-mouse game was playing out between the American Los Angeles, Seawolf, and Virginia class attack submarines hunted down North Korea's rather numerous submarine fleet. It wasn't providing much of a challenge to the more technologically advanced American subs; their only difficulty was in picking targets from a target-rich environment, rather than finding them. It was much like shooting fish in a barrel, rather than digging rats out of their holes.

That was despite the fact that the North Korean submarines had been ordered to hide from the trade interdiction fleets at the time of their arrival just outside Korean territorial waters.

"Contact bearing two one seven relative, designated Sierra One," announced Petty Officer Ramirez, the lead sonar operator on the Virginia class submarine SSN-789 Indiana. The display in front of him was a screen that looked like a scrambled television signal, but to the experienced sonar technician, it painted a clear picture of a North Korean submarine.

Commander Harper, a tall man with salt-and-pepper hair, turned his head to Ramirez and asked, "Range?"

"5,000 yards and closing, Captain."

The commander knew that the submarine they were tracking was a credible threat. The Indiana was under orders: no hesitation, no mercy. They were in a state of war.

"Torpedo room, ready tubes one and two," Harper commanded.

"Weapons, tubes one and two ready, sir."

The tension in the CIC was palpable. Every sailor knew their role, and they performed with chilling efficiency.

"Fire control, solution ready on Sierra One?"

"Yes, Captain. Solution plotted and ready."

Captain Harper paused for a moment, a weighty silence filling the space. "Fire tubes one and two."

"Fire tubes one and two, aye," the weapons officer's voice echoed, followed by the unmistakable sound of torpedoes launching. Two powerful weapons raced toward their target, guided by the Indiana's sophisticated systems.

The minutes that followed were tense. The sonar display showed the torpedoes' path, their predicted tracks converging with the enemy submarine's.

"Torpedoes running hot, straight, and normal," Ramirez announced.

A distant underwater explosion reverberated through the USS Indiana's hull. The shockwaves were felt both physically and emotionally.

"Sierra One, no longer on sonar, Captain," Ramirez reported, his voice a mix of relief and professionalism.

Captain Harper nodded, his face stoic. "Communicate the hit to command. Stay vigilant, there may be more out there."

The USS Indiana continued its silent patrol, its crew ever watchful in the shadowy depths, knowing that, in war, every decision has both weight and consequences.

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It only took what felt like thirty minutes from the first bomb to the last for the entirety of North Korea's nuclear program to be erased from the surface of the planet. Everything, from silos to factories, were rendered extinct by American stealth bombers, while their submarines suffered the fate of becoming very expensive, life-sized aquarium decorations on the bottom of the sea. All of their naval bases had also felt the love, being on the receiving end of saturation fire from naval guns at standoff range and constant bombing runs by carrier-based F/A-18 Hornets.

It wasn't as though North Korea hadn't prepared many plans for what to do in case of an attack by the joint nations of South Korea and America, but they had expected that there would be a warning before any shots were fired. The US was fond of its own voice to the extent that it much preferred, as a nation, to speak rather than shoot. But when it did shoot, its shots were as accurate as they were painful.

Kim Jong-Un's belief that it could just deny involvement in the attack, as it had done in the past, or claimed that the attack had been carried out by rogue elements in the government—which it had—had turned out to be naive, at best. At worst, they believed that their nuclear arsenal would prove to be a restraining force on any potential hostilities and that things would end at the negotiation table, as it always had in the past.

But this time was different. The US had received actionable intelligence that accurately pinpointed North Korea's nuclear sites from South Korea (courtesy of the nyxians that had infiltrated the sites when they'd been welcomed to the country as part of the advance team ahead of Alexander's visit)

and had chosen to act instead of forbear. Trump himself had practically giggled with glee and danced a jig when he'd heard that particular bit of intelligence, even though he had wrongly credited the South Korean intelligence service with the merit.

It was definitely a feather in his cap as president, he thought. He could forever claim with pride that he was the president that finally put a decisive end to the Korean War, a conflict that had stretched the better part of an entire century.