

# **Tom Clancy Zero Hour**

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## Prologue

Musudan-ri Missile Test Facility, North Korea

“How is he?”

The innocuous-sounding question was anything but. In fact, to refer to the man in question simply as *he* without the accompaniment of one of his many honorific titles was grounds for execution. But for Eun Pak, that ship had long since sailed. He remembered what was at stake with every breath, and Pak intended to ensure that his coconspirators did as well.

“The same.”

Pak examined the man standing before him, considering.

Choi Ha-guk, chairman of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea and its Supreme Leader, had been incapacitated for the last week. One week since the Russians had unexpectedly handed Pak the opportunity of a lifetime. In most other places on earth, one week was not a significant amount of time.

Seven days.

The length of a typical American vacation.

But in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, or DPRK, one week was time enough for an empire to fall.

Or rise.

But only if the weak-kneed man standing before him was telling the truth.

“And how is your baby daughter?” Pak said, coloring the question with a smile. “Her name is Seo-jun, correct?”

Of course it was correct.

Though Pak was an unremarkable middle-aged man with a slight build, hairless scalp, and thick glasses that magnified his watery eyes, he was also a member of the Korean Workers' Party. More important, Pak was a ranking member of the Politburo. A role with no parallel outside of the hermit kingdom. But here, in the land that time forgot, Pak was a minor deity. Certainly not on the same scale as the Supreme Leader, but powerful in his own right. Even a minor god such as Pak could erase an entire bloodline with a single telephone call.

Judging by the pasty look on the man's face, this knowledge wasn't lost on him. The man was a minor party member also and a doctor to boot, but in the DPRK, science was no match for deity. Either way, the doctor's time on earth was finite. If Pak was successful in his endeavor, there would be no witnesses. If he wasn't, well, Pak didn't intend to die alone. But just because the doctor had to be silenced didn't mean his infant daughter had to share the man's fate. Pak might be thorough, but he wasn't a monster.

Not without reason, anyway.

"She is fine, comrade," the doctor whispered. "Just fine."

"Good," Pak said with a nod. "Then let's ensure she stays that way. Tell me again his status."

Even here, in the sanctity of his temporary office located at the Musudan-ri Missile Test Facility, over six hundred kilometers away from seat of government in Pyongyang, Pak refused to speak the Supreme Leader's name. Past generations had attributed mythical qualities to the nation's ruling dynasty, and while Pak didn't subscribe to such superstitious nonsense, he was cautious for a different reason.

Unlike many of his fellow ruling elite, Pak made it a point to keep track of the advancements taking place beyond the DPRK's borders. He'd heard of listening devices that activated based on the utterance of a specific word. While Pak had his office swept for bugs regularly, one of the Supreme Leader's sycophants in the Ministry of State Security might have hidden some technological marvel that activated only when the Korean dictator's name was spoken. Pak hadn't risen to his current station through cowardice, but neither did he spit in the face of fate.

The man huffed out a breath, his lips smacking together like a horse's.

Pak thought the gesture something that a peasant might do. A mannerism unworthy of a doctor who attended

the Supreme Leader, but Pak let it pass without comment. Pak had ascended to his current station through meritocracy, but not the kind that resulted in promotions for bureaucrats in other corners of the world. No, Pak's skill was in a discipline much more basic.

Survival.

As a sitting member of the Politburo, Pak worked in the DPRK's decision-making apparatus. The Politburo's members were second only to the Supreme Leader and his family when it came to governance authority. Contrary to his predecessor cousin who'd championed the concept of *Songun*, or military-first as it pertained to DPRK politics, the Supreme Leader had vested more authority in the Politburo. The Supreme Leader had assumed power in a military-backed coup. He evidently didn't want to lose his position and life in a similar manner. This restructuring of the government had muted the all-consuming influence of the Korean People's Army and increased the influence of Pak and his fellow cabinet members.

But Pak's high-profile position wasn't without risk. Members of the Politburo who fell out of favor with the Supreme Leader often just disappeared. A single misplaced word or misunderstood facial expression could mean death. And when it came to the deaths of those who disappointed them, the leaders of the DPRK both past and present were anything but boring. In his three decades of service in the Korean Workers' Party, Pak had seen men stabbed to death by bayonet-wielding soldiers, burned alive by flamethrowers, mauled by attack dogs, and torn limb from limb by anti-aircraft guns.

The Supreme Leader's lust for capital punishment wasn't limited to hapless paper pushers or military officers. Several branches of the dictator's family tree had been pruned in a manner only slightly less morbid. In addition to the cousin who predated him, the Supreme Leader had consolidated his power by dispatching a team of killers equipped with an experimental nerve agent to Malaysia to deal with a wayward half-brother. Pak had survived the lethal palace intrigue this long because he'd learned how to read people, how to recognize their tells. For instance, the doctor standing before him was as prone to hedge against relaying bad news as anyone, but when the man mimicked a horse, his words were true.

"Outwardly, his condition hasn't changed. But I think he's getting better."

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“Why?” Pak said.

Pak was careful with the amount of influence he placed on the question, maintaining a stoic face while his heart raced. Much hung on the doctor’s answer.

The doctor ran a hand through his sparse hair as he hunched forward, his thin frame sagging under the question’s weight.

As a medical attendant charged with the Supreme Leader’s health, the man ranked much higher in North Korea’s unofficial caste system than the average citizen. In practical terms, this meant that the man and his family rated rations in great enough quantity that they wouldn’t starve and living quarters with both power and running water.

But the effects of malnutrition were evident all the same.

Though only in his mid-thirties, the man looked two decades older. The wispy patches of hair sprouting from his scalp were prematurely gray, his shoulder’s stooped, and his skin sallow. While the median height and weight of their cousins to the south had steadily increased since the Fatherland Liberation War ended seventy years earlier, North Korea’s population had withered both figuratively and literally. Life expectancy, weight, height, and overall health had all been in a steady decline for years.

The frail men and women surrounding him were constant reminders to Pak that an existence separate from the murderous undertones surrounding the politically elite was no guarantee of a longer life. In fact, the opposite was quite often true. Pak might live with one eye always open, waiting for a dagger thrust at his back, but he wouldn’t starve to death.

That was something.

“His respiration and heart rate have begun to spike at increasing intervals during the day. This indicates that the patient is healing. His mind is slowly walking the path toward consciousness.”

“How long until he wakes?” Pak said.

The doctor shrugged, his bony shoulders barely lifting his shirt. “There’s no way to be sure. The periods between the increased heart rate and respiration are growing shorter and the manifestations longer. If the patient

continues on this trajectory, I expect him to regain some semblance of lucidity in as soon as forty-eight hours.”

“Two days?” Pak said.

Another huff.

“It could take longer. Conservatively I’d estimate a week, but I think he will be conscious much sooner.”

*Two days.*

The words crashed against Pak’s carefully constructed façade like a howling typhoon. Up until this point, everything he’d done was explainable or deniable. There would still be loose ends to clean up, like the good doctor, but on the whole Pak’s exposure was minimal. Or as minimal as could be expected in the hermit kingdom, a place in which entire families ceased to exist at the whims of a boy-king.

Over the last several days, Pak had edged around the opportunity the ancestors had provided him. It was not unreasonable to think that the Supreme Leader’s incapacitation might even have been staged. An elaborate stunt to test his inner circle’s loyalty in preparation for yet another purge. Now that he was finally convinced that Choi really was incapacitated, Pak faced an ultimatum—act or watch the opportunity of a lifetime disappear.

Pak’s gaze settled on the polished brass shell casing situated at the corner of his desk. Unlike his spacious office in Pyongyang, Pak’s current quarters were decidedly more Spartan. If the scientist Pak had displaced to claim the space had a personal life, it was not evident. No family pictures or knickknacks graced the walls or shelves. Instead, every spare meter was devoted to academic books, charts and graphs covered with indecipherable equations, or reports detailing the successes and failures of previous missile tests.

Pak’s brass shell casing was the one exception.

The cartridge was from a 7.62-millimeter round commonly fired by the AK-47. Though he’d long ago learned the value of keeping his public workspace sterile as to not provide potential enemies with anything that could give them a deeper insight into Pak’s motivation, such decorations were not uncommon. The shell casings were supposed to serve as a remembrance of the regime’s martial history, but to Pak, the length of brass signified something more.

The cartridge had been passed down to him by his father, who in turn had received it from his father. A man

who'd been slated for execution in one of the many mass killings orchestrated by the boy-king's grandfather. Learning of his fate from a trusted friend, Pak's grandfather had arranged for his own death. A farm accident that was plausible and therefore not considered suicide. With this gift, Pak's grandfather had maintained his family's status in the Party and shielded his lineage from further harm. This selfless act defined Pak's life in two ways. On one hand, Pak wanted to honor his grandfather's sacrifice. On the other, Pak had vowed to make himself and his lineage immune to a single man's homicidal urges. This was quite simply the opportunity of a lifetime.

Two days wasn't much time, but it would have to be enough.

"Excellent," Pak said, sweetening the word with a rare smile. "You've brought honor to yourself and your family."

"Thank you, comrade," the doctor said, bowing at the compliment. "I am honored to serve."

"Yes, you are," Pak said. "And this is how you will ensure that honor passes from you to your daughter."

The hopeful expression the doctor had been wearing began to fade the longer Pak spoke. By the time Pak finished, the doctor's face was again the color of ash. This was to be expected. Pak was a man of his word. The doctor's daughter would reap the benefits of her father's sacrifice, just as Pak had with his grandfather.

Unfortunately for the doctor, the similarities wouldn't end there.

## Chapter 1

Seoul, South Korea

Jack Ryan, Jr., considered himself a man of culture. Even so, he'd never before experienced a flash mob. At least he thought it was a flash mob. This was South Korea. If there was anything Jack had learned in the handful of hours he'd been on Korean soil, it was that things here were a bit . . . *different*.

And that included flash mobs.

One moment Jack had been contemplating the towering stone statue of Admiral Yi Sun-sin, the next he was body-to-body with a plaza full of chanting Koreans. Though the early-afternoon sun had yet to burn through a gray overcast sky, and scattered puddles of oily water from the morning's rain still coated the pedestrian area's stone walkways, the iffy weather did little to deter the growing crowd. People poured into Gwanghwamun Plaza from adjacent streets, spilling past the office buildings lining the west and east sides of the plaza and threading around the concrete barriers and stone planters designed to keep frisky Korean drivers at bay.

Jack had taken Domingo "Ding" Chavez's advice. Rather than renting a car, Jack had grabbed a cab at the airport. Once again his mentor and coworker had provided Jack with safe counsel. While he wasn't exactly a stranger to driving overseas, as near as Jack could tell, Korean traffic signs were merely suggestions. In fact, none of the Western driving norms Jack was accustomed to seemed to apply. After he and the cabbie experienced two near misses before even leaving the airport proper, Jack had decided that feigning sleep and reciting the Rosary was the best way to allow his jet-lagged mind to cope with the sudden onslaught of stimuli. Lisanne Robertson had followed suit, cradling her head against Jack's shoulder and closing her eyes. With the feel of her thick, dark hair against his cheek and the smell of her olive-toned skin just inches away, the traffic hadn't seemed quite so horrible.



Or maybe Jack had just come to the realization that dying with a beautiful woman's head on his shoulder wasn't such a bad way to go. In any case, the avalanche of bodies now pouring into the plaza made the taxi ride's madness seem like a Sunday drive.

At six-foot-two, Jack had no problem seeing over the crowd, but he was less successful in locating an avenue of escape. The people really were coming from everywhere, and the first human wave had washed up against the statue and was now pooling in swirling eddies. Jack was a big man even by American standards. His two-hundred-twenty-pound athletic frame usually ensured that bystanders kept their distance.

Not in South Korea.

Like in many Asian countries, Koreans didn't subscribe to the Western idea of personal space. Though to be fair, flash mobs by nature were all about crowding as many people into a confined space as possible. Assuming of course that this gathering actually was a flash mob. Jack was not the hippest guy when it came to social media, but the videos he'd seen tended to feature impromptu concerts or dancing, not chanting people holding signs. Which meant this probably wasn't a flash mob at all. Koreans had a long history of protesting government abuses, both real and perceived, and this tradition far predated Instagram or TikTok.

Using the life-like rendering of Admiral Yi Sun-sin as a reference point, Jack pressed through the crowd until he arrived at the statue's elliptical-shaped base. Mounting the two steps leading up to a viewing platform of sorts, Jack assessed the situation from his newly found observation post.

The plaza was oriented north-to-south, with the statue of Admiral Yi Sun-sin on the very southern tip surrounded by an array of decorative fountains and specially designed stones commemorating the admiral's victory over a Japanese fleet back in the 1500s. A second statue sat to the north of the admiral, this one a golden rendering of King Sejong the Great seated on his throne. Beyond the throne, a long stretch of closely cropped grass pointed to a traditional temple-style building framed by a pastoral set of mountainous foothills, an unexpected sight in the center of a city of more than nine million people.

But there was nothing pastoral about the press of bodies surging into the plaza or the ranks of riot police taking up station between the demonstrators and the office buildings. For the first time since he'd set off on his

solo sightseeing trip, Jack was glad that Lianne was back at the hotel. She'd elected to crash in her room for a short nap before dinner.

*Her room.*

Those two words carried with them a world of significance.

Pushing away his romantic quandary for the moment, Jack focused his sluggish brain on the task at hand. While he was all for experiencing as much of South Korea as possible during his short trip, participating in a riot wasn't on his list. Though he was wearing a hat to hide his dark hair and sunglasses to conceal his blue eyes, Jack was under no illusions that he somehow blended into the crowd. Between his height and girth, he stuck out like a sore thumb, and if there was one place where blending in mattered, it was in a rambunctious crowd, especially one overseen by riot policemen looking for an excuse to make an example out of someone.

While his potential escape route to the south was clearly untenable, the north looked more promising. Much like the National Mall in Washington, D.C., this area of Seoul was packed full of cultural icons, museums, and the like. In fact, the Blue House, the Korean version of the White House, was only a couple kilometers to the north. It stood to reason that security measures would become progressively more restrictive in that direction of travel.

Jack figured this meant that if the crowd became unruly, the demonstrators would confine their activities to this section of the plaza rather than risk the wrath of the Presidential Security Service, whose security cordon would tighten the closer one came to the president's residence. Besides, if things truly got out of hand, Jack could always seek refuge at the U.S. embassy conveniently located on the eastern side of the plaza. Though they might tolerate a bit of social disobedience directed at their own government, the South Korean National Police Agency would take a dim view toward anyone targeting a foreign embassy.

His decision made, Jack moved north using the giant golden statue as his guide. As he pushed through the crowd, he was careful not to let the riptide of bodies drag him down the steps to his right. The stairs lead to a lower tier and the recessed entrance of a museum dedicated to Admiral Yi Sun-sin. The lower landing's high walls to the east and steps to the west were channelizing terrain, and Jack instinctively knew to avoid it.

These were not the thoughts of an average tourist.

Very little about Jack was average.