

Chapter One

Launch!

"Three...Two...One...Liftoff!"

The voice barely finished speaking before the chemical boosters of the rocket kicked on, crushing him to his seat.

"You're clear of the tower." The same voice said a second later. Then, "Beginning rolling sequence."

"Roger tower. Roll starting." The calm voice of the big Texan in front of him, James Ryder, said as the shuttle began to turn. None of the six people in the control cabin could really do much under the heavy pressure, he himself felt like he had a gorilla sitting on his chest. He could barely lift his arm let alone reliably flip a switch.

Talk about feeling helpless!

A small counter in the cockpit kept track of the time since launch in minutes and seconds. When it struck 2:00 there was a shudder and a noise dimly heard over the powerful roar that

filled the cabin.

"Rocket booster separation." Houston announced.

"Roger Houston Control." Teresa Norton, the copilot and XO replied.

Josh watched as the blue color drained from outside the windows, the orange flame on the edges began to taper off as fire will in a sealed room as the oxygen depleted. Of course, that was exactly what was happening here, night fell outside the shuttle as the countdown timer reached eight minutes.

"Jettisoning Fuel Tank," Teresa said.

A brief shudder went through them.

"We're free of the tank and headed for deep space," Teresa replied. "Contact with the ISS in twenty-eight minutes."

She turned back to them, the clear dome of her helmet not quite obscuring her pretty, dainty face. "Feel free to move about the cabin everyone."

Everyone chuckled a little as they unclipped their seat-belts. Instantly Josh felt himself rising out of his chair as he started to float through the air. He could feel his face split in a huge grin as he rose out of his chair about four feet and bumped into the ceiling.

"This is great." He said. Teresa laughed.

Josh floated up to the ceiling of the shuttle like a little kid cut loose in a toy store. He couldn't stop grinning as he caromed around the cabin, hampered only a little by his exo

suit.

"Look at me!" he laughed, assuming a familiar pose. "I'm Superman! And I'm going to explore the homeworld!"

"If you're Superman, where's your red underwear?" John joked.

"At the laundromat." Josh riposted.

Laughter filled the cabin.

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The shuttle continued to hurtle through space towards the station. Josh regained control of his excitement and quickly resumed monitoring the security systems, testing several anti-hacking filters just in case.

"You know, the nice thing about flying in this old analogue system," he commented, "Is that no one has a reliable computer that can interface with it."

"There is that." Ryder agreed. "But watch it, bub. I ain't that old, and I flew one of the last missions, remember?"

"Yeah, I remember." Josh said, continuing to monitor his screen. "But even that mission had more advanced systems than this one. This is like, I don't know, Apollo-era stuff here. Or at least, the very first shuttle...what was her name?"

"The Enterprise." Teresa replied.

"Yeah, that one. The negative is it required all those special courses back on Earth just to be able to take a ride on this thing, let alone fly it into space. The positive is pretty

good though: there ain't much a hacker can do with these systems, they only relay data at best, you can't reprogram it from Earth."

"True, she ain't designed to hook up to any of those fancy modern systems." Ryder agreed.

"And her guts are good." John broke in with a growl. "Went over them myself. If anything's gonna fail, it ain't gonna be the mechanics."

"I'm sure nothin's gonna happen." Ryder said calmly. "Not at this point, anyway. They'd be goin' after the Argos, not the Discovery."

"Right. The Argos has all of the latest certified American tech in her, and she would be easier for the PIS (he used the slang for the People's Intelligence Service of China) to hack into her systems. I don't think they are going to want to destroy the ship." Josh returned absently, thinking of what his briefing officer had warned him against. "I suspect they will want to steal her instead."

"How would they do that?" the voice of Dr. Samuel Churchill piped up next to him. He wasn't a relation of the famous Winston, as far as he claimed, but he did come from London and was the sole foreigner on the ship.

Josh shrugged. "Best guess? Attack the nav programs on the Argos, altering her trajectory or burns by a few seconds. In space, a few seconds can have huge effects on the final

trajectory. We could easily go off course and not know about it until it was too late if the computers were malfunctioning."

"Which is why I'll be there." Teresa assured them. "There are back up systems that are completely non-electronic in the Argos, just in case the computers malfunction. That way we can still be able to pilot the craft and have a good idea of where we're going."

"The math that must involve..." Dr. Churchill murmured, awed.

"Top of my class at MIT and Stanton." Teresa said cheerfully. Josh knew she was being modest: Not only had she been top of her class at both universities, but she'd also gotten dozens of honors and scholarships as well to her name, had been head of a research and development cell at DARPA before going into the Navy and reaching the executive slot on America's most advanced carrier. Smart didn't even begin to cover it.

"I suspect they'll try anyway." Ryder said calmly, his grey eyes looking over his console in front of him. "After all, that would be a huge coup for them."

"All this talk of these Machiavellian schemes to get the ship." Doc's voice sounded amused. "Are all very interesting, but it would be far easier simply to expose the mission and demand she be turned over to them in violation of the World Space Treaty of '26."

"America never ratified that one." Teresa pointed out calmly. "And a good thing too."

"England did." Churchill pointed out. "Oh dear, that would put me in an uncomfortable position wouldn't it?"

"That's right mate." Josh grinned over at him. "A cleft stick of your own making."

"Oh god," Doctor Churchill grumbled. "What would the bards say?"

A red light flashed, and everyone's focus turned back to their display.

"It's okay." Teresa said with a slight laugh a minute later. "Just some space debris ahead, I've factored it in and adjusted our course."

"Which reminds me," Doc Sam broke in. "I never got around to asking why we're using this antiquated piece of equipment and not a more modern commercial substitute?"

"I can answer that." Josh replied. "The commercial businesses are all owned now by subsidiaries of China's StarCom, their government-business conglomerate. Even old Mr. M's company finally sold out to them, though I heard he had to be dragged kicking and screaming from the CEO slot. He's still suing them, but all his capital's tied up in court costs and China's leaning on the executives, putting a lot of their people into positions of power over there as fast as they can. I don't think even if Mr. M could wrest control back he'd ever be free of Chinese influence."

"Ah, hence why we were suddenly put on this fine piece of

history." Sam nodded, patting the bulkhead next to him.

"Right. They got her out of the museum, ran a systems check on her, put her back together and got her ready at the old Kennedy Center."

"The Kennedy Center!" Sam asked in surprise. "I thought that it had been abandoned, except for some office buildings and a small fuel lab."

"On paper anyway." Josh laughed. "President McMillan got it done with black budget funding and skimming what he could off those bloated Initiatives and Budgets that Congress has been pushing on him lately."

"Amazing what can get done when one person has the idea and willpower to see it through." Sam commented dryly.

"And the time." Jim said. "We've got to remember that. We're lucky he got in that second term, or we might have lost even this slim chance."

"What chance?" Sam asked. "The Chinese had to know we were building her; how could we hide such construction from them?"

"Don't know." Josh said. "That's above my paygrade or security clearance."

"And Ah'm not allowed to tell you till we're in deep space and out of contact from Earth." Jim said.

"Coming up on approach." Teresa announced, breaking in.

"We're a degree and a half down course." Jim said.

"Adjusting." Teresa replied.

"Strap back in guys." Jim said. "We're coming up on the
ISS."

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