

Chapter One

Dark Forces

The rain pounded the glass windows of the luxuriously appointed office as the two men sat across the oak desk from each other. The walls were paneled in a reddish wood that Colonel Kwock couldn't identify despite having been in the office twice before. On small display shelves along the walls and on cabinets were the usual pictures with smiling diplomats and important persons, military honors that Kwock doubted the tubby man sitting behind the desk from him ever earned. In all, it might be the office of any number of senior level bureaucrats in the government, but it was not. The fat man looking at him now with a tiny smile on cold, dead lips and sharp eyes inspired terror and respect if even his name was mentioned in most circles.

Each time he'd been summoned, Kwock had been given nearly impossible assignments that could not fail, and he wondered what

assignment he'd be given now. And whether he would live to see a ripe old age, of course.

"How may I assist you Director?" Kwock asked.

"Are you aware of the American's Trailblazer program?" He asked in a cold voice.

"No, Comrade Director." Kwock answered truthfully. "My concern has been attempts by American hackers to sabotage Xi City or espy our secrets."

"Correct." The Director nodded.

Head of the Chinese Secret Services Program under the Minister of Military Intelligence, Comrade Fong ran his organization ruthlessly and efficiently. No out-of-place cog was allowed, no matter how useful it might be. Kwock suppressed a shiver at the thought of those who'd disappeared or found themselves sent to work farms for not giving their all into some project of the Director's.

"That is the right answer. Now, to fill you in, the American Trailblazer program is their pathetic attempt to regain mastery of the heavens from us, the rightful owners of space."

"How, Comrade Director?" Kwock asked when the Director fell silent to fill a glass with expensive Western Cognac.

"Ah, the important question." The Director nodded approvingly. "It's simple: they intend to send a ship out to take control of one of the neighboring systems." Fong replied. "If they succeed, they will be the first to do so, and it will

show them to still be a power to reckon with. Also, if the worlds are close enough to be habitable for humans to live comfortably, then they will have a distinct advantage over us. Ease of construction for new military bases and industrial complexes without the need for complicated and bulky atmosphere containment. Less need for environmental controls to not poison a thin atmosphere to render it unbreathable. They could very quickly build up a military might to challenge our superiority in the home system." His eyes flashed while Kwock noticed with apprehension that his hand clenched his drink in anger.

"Surely we can easily stop any such initiative from going through." Kwock protested. "After all, we control their entire space program now, don't we? All their precious companies are absorbed by StarCommercial and will obey us."

"There Comrade Li betrayed us." Fong said angrily. "He did not acquire enough of the companies to make a difference or keep tabs on radical American companies and CEOs. Precious scientific talent escaped his grasp and continued to work for the American government. The results of his bumbling are that a single ship was constructed. How, we still are not entirely sure."

Kwock wasn't surprised. He'd been to America before as part of his undergraduate studies and he knew that American scientists were far more independent than perhaps Comrade Fong expected. Threats could only go so far with them, no matter how many Fong had killed.

"If the ship is constructed, perhaps we can launch a team from Emperor Ho Station and seize or destroy her." Kwock suggested.

"Unfortunately, we cannot." Fong replied. "We would lose control of our own space initiatives. Our analysts suggest most of the Western countries would back out of our agreements, and possibly some of our communist brothers as well. That is enough to give the Premiere pause, and he will not sanction a grab in Earth orbit. However, if we can hack into their ship's navigation systems and arrange for it to stray off course and close to Mars, then we can claim they were attempting to capture Xi City and seize the vessel."

"The Americans will complain." Kwock noted absently, already thinking of the hurdles his team would have to face to hack into the ship's computers.

Fong noticed for his smile reappeared. "Of course they will, and they will demand their ship back, but not until our engineers have taken it apart piece by piece and copied every system and propulsion technique it has, and then we will keep as much of the ship as we can and leave them to reassemble it on their own."

"While we build our own ship and launch an attempt to conquer the system first." Kwock finished.

"Exactly." Fong nodded. "Can you do it?"

Kwock thought about the problem, then nodded.

"Section Fourteen has the equipment necessary, I will have them retasked to dig up information on this ship and see if we can't introduce some sort of fault into their navigation program. Do we know when the ship will take off?"

"Unfortunately, we've only just learned that the crew has just left Earth and is bound for the ISS."

"That piece of junk is still in the sky?" Kwock asked in amazement. Then the rest of the message came home.

"The crew is already in orbit?! Then that means the ship must be ready to depart, or almost ready. Comrade, I must get to Section Fourteen immediately if I am to have a prayer of breaking into their navigation system!" Kwock said urgently, a feeling of fear touching him. He knew the further away the ship was from Earth the longer the signals would take to reach the ship, the shorter his team would have to put together a new course to feed into their computers so that they would near Mars close enough to intercept.

"Of course, comrade." Fong said urbanelly. "There is a car waiting for you downstairs. I'm sure you won't disappoint me."

Kwock shivered at the cold tone and saw the hard look in Fong's eye.

"It will be done, Comrade Director." Kwock promised. "And I will go to Mars myself to retrieve your prize."

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