

## Part I: Escaping Mars

## Chapter 1

### A hacking attempt from Mars

Kwock muttered a curse under his breath as the blip on his screen refused to change course.

"Is the satellite working?" he demanded.

"Yes." Su Lin said calmly. His right hand in black ops, she was dressed in a comfortable business suit. With her grey eyes and aggressive attitude, she struck many as being an aspiring CEO right out of college with her child-like features and soft curves, but Kwock knew better. Underneath her façade was a tough commando with twenty successful sabotage missions under her belt and twelve assassinations in hostile theatres across the globe. She was tenacious, intelligent, and focused on achieving whatever mission came her way.

Now she stood beside him in the darkened room where over a hundred young men and women, his hand-picked team of slicers, breakers, hackers, virus-makers and swindlers worked under his

direction to coerce, snoop, break, or steal from every government in the world. Now they were all focused on a single goal, to bring the Argos to Mars. And they were failing.

"If the satellite is working, then why isn't that ship changing course?" Kwock demanded. "They should be at least fifteen degrees to right now and fifty thousand kilometers away from their current position."

"We don't know." Su Lin said calmly. "It could be the ship's sensors are configured differently than we expected, or it could be the computer is programmed to ignore space debris larger than what we've been supposedly putting in front of it. At this time, we can't tell. We do know it's receiving the signals from Emperor Ho station, and initially the ship responded to our commands."

"Well, it's no longer responding." Kwock pointed out. "And we had better come up with an answer quick if we don't want the Director coming down here to ask why."

"Comrade?" a tentative voice broke the silence that fell. Kwock turned and saw one of the programmers holding up his hand. His young face shone in excitement as he waited for acknowledgment.

His section supervisor began to move to him, but Kwock found himself actually closer and hurried up to the station with Su Lin, approaching behind the tech so he didn't see them coming.

"What is it?" Kwock asked as he came to the station.

The tech jumped in surprise and flushed in embarrassment and fear as he realized who it was standing there in the dark.

"I've found out some information on the Argos." He said humbly, bowing his head and gesturing to his screen where a technical document with the words TOP SECRET stamped at the top glowed.

"What does it say?" Kwock demanded.

"Sir, the Argos is built to be a *manual* ship." The tech said excitedly. "All the automation is put in as secondary subsystems."

Kwock blinked stupidly at the tech.

"But, but that's crazy!" he blurted. "No human could calculate navigational courses in space with enough detail!"

"Maybe sir," the tech said. "But according to this document, she is meant to be manually controlled. I think to prevent us from slicing into her computers and shifting her off-course."

"Intelligent." Su Lin murmured appreciatively. "They were expecting this effort on our parts."

"Yes." Kwock groaned, "And it makes our efforts a thousand times more difficult. We can't control human pilots and bring them to Martian range."

"Why can't we?" Su Lin asked bluntly. "After all, as you so rightly pointed out, no human alive can plot so many points by

themselves, they are going to require navigational computer aids. And if they are still using them, then we can feed them false information."

Kwock thought about her suggestion.

"It won't be easy." He said coldly analytical once more. "They will be on their guard for any such intrusion into their systems. They may have already discovered the navigational components come from China."

"They could hardly remove them." Su Lin pointed out.

"They will have spares." Kwock told her. "And worse, they aren't necessarily going to be our own equipment. My understanding is that several American companies were contracted, not all of them ours. Small shops and the like that we never concentrated on, keeping our efforts focused to the larger, more reputable companies. They may have components that don't have Silent Dragon tech in them."

Su Lin paused, troubled.

"We can't do anything about it." She said at last. "Too much is depending on us, comrade. We must try to spoof their navigation and hope for the best."

"True." Kwock looked at his gold Rolex watch. "We have twenty-two minutes to create an optimal plan and implement it. Let's get started."

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