

## **Chapter 16: Zak v Krushkov**

### **The 2080s**

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## Chapter 16 : Zak v Krushkov

*3:45am SST Tuesday 15 January 2085*

Krushkov and Brigard swiftly found their way to the jail. Krushkov led the way, marching in, and pointing his torch towards the cell door.

He roared. The door was open, and the cell was empty.

‘I knew this would happen,’ he lamented. ‘He’s one step ahead of us every time.’

He glared at Brigard.

‘And you’re an idiot!’ he shouted.

Brigard made no attempt to answer back.

Krushkov let out a hysterical laugh.

‘Well they can’t hide forever. We’ll just put a gun to the heads of some women and children, and they’ll come crawling out of the woodwork.’

‘What if the women and children escape?’ ventured Brigard cautiously.

‘If the restaurant is empty when we get there, I will laugh even harder. But where are three hundred people going to hide.’

Krushkov turned and made to leave.

‘Boss?’ said Brigard nervously.

‘What!’ said Krushkov.

‘Have you noticed how cold it’s getting?’ said Brigard. As he spoke, a frosty cloud billowed from his mouth.

‘I’ve had other things on my mind,’ said Krushkov with irritation. But he felt it, and rubbed his hands together. Both men were wearing just thin jackets over their t-shirts.

‘I bet he’s turned the heating off,’ said Brigard, starting to panic. ‘We’re gonna freeze to death.’

‘You dimwit,’ sneered Krushkov. ‘The ship’s in direct sunlight. We’d boil to death if it didn’t cool the air inside. The air conditioning will be working hard to get the temperature down, so I doubt it can get low enough to freeze us.’

Krushkov folded his arms and shivered.

‘It is getting cold alright,’ he conceded.

Zak punched the air on hearing this.

‘Come on. Give up,’ he shouted.

Brigard bent over and took a deep breath.

‘I’m so tired,’ he muttered.

‘Oh stop moaning,’ Krushkov shouted. ‘We’re going downstairs, so you’d better summon up some strength.’

Krushkov and Brigard returned to the reception hall, crossed the walkway and went along the balcony to the top of the stairs.

Zak watched them all the way.

‘Let’s see how your weak legs cope with super-gravity,’ he mocked.

The two men hurried down the stairs. As they neared the bottom, they both stumbled and lost their footing. Brigard nose-dived with his arms out, while Krushkov stuck out his left leg in front of him. Krushkov produced the loudest scream as they both crashed onto the floor, rolling through a big icy puddle and sliding to a stop.

‘It’s freezing,’ cried Brigard, as he pushed himself up from the floor, drenched.

Krushkov turned to sit up, then gripped his left ankle and groaned.

Brigard jumped to his feet, but slipped and fell over again right in front of Krushkov, sending a big splash into his face.

‘Whoa sorry,’ Brigard pleaded.

Zak waited for Krushkov to explode. But instead, he slumped disconsolately, and wiped the slush from his face. Slowly, he got to his feet, but needed to crouch to steady himself.

‘I can hardly stand up, the gravity’s too much,’ he said. He took some deep breaths. ‘My ankle’s gone and now I’ve got the shivers. That is one smart kid.’

‘Thanks,’ said Zak.

‘We have to keep going,’ said Krushkov, through gritted teeth. ‘Once we get to the restaurant, we’ll be able to take back control.’

Zak wanted them to give up, but had thought carefully about how to prompt them this time. He spoke firmly to the two men.

‘I will continue to increase the gravity and lower the temperature until you guys can’t move. I can have you lying flat out and frozen to the floor. But I’ll do a deal with you. I’ll ease off if you head straight back to the cargo hold, jump in your ship, and get out of here.’

Krushkov staggered over to the stairs and dropped himself down onto a step. It appeared he was considering Zak’s offer. He laughed and shook his head.

‘I don’t believe this,’ he said.

‘I think we should take it,’ said Brigard.

‘Shut up Brigard,’ said Krushkov. ‘Okay kid,’ he said, almost breathlessly. ‘Have it your way.’

‘The rest of your gang are there now, waiting for you,’ said Zak.

‘At least let us get back up the stairs or we’ll never make it,’ said Krushkov.

‘Go ahead,’ said Zak.

The deal was done. So to aid their progress, Zak resurrected the lights and power, but only along the route back.

Brigard picked up the sack and helped Krushkov to climb the stairs. Then, as instructed, they headed towards the cargo hold.

Zak smiled, as he noticed they had made a big mistake.

He set off again, going straight downstairs from the gymnasium. While on the move, he checked the situation in the cargo hold.

Romero, Fang and Ubogu were sat by the entrance at the top of the stairs, no doubt because of the excessive gravity on the lower floor. Sato had joined them.

‘That kid was right under our noses,’ said Romero. ‘I can’t believe it. He must have deactivated the alarms we set up.’

‘Krushkov and Brigard are still out there,’ said Ubogu. ‘They’re vulnerable. Maybe we should help.’

‘It’s risky,’ said Romero. ‘We can’t communicate with each other. If we go back out, we could lose even more people.’

‘Maybe we should leave them,’ suggested Fang. ‘Krushkov said that if any of us were late, he’d leave us behind.’

‘You must help them,’ said Sato. ‘What’s the Red King going to do when he reviews the mission and finds out we *left* Krushkov behind.’

‘Okay, perhaps we can take the risk,’ said Romero, getting to his feet. ‘The passengers may be free, but they’re unarmed. And we’ve got a bit of time to play with.’

The others acknowledged him, and wearily stood up.

Zak could not let them go searching. That would delay matters.

‘Attention,’ he said, broadcasting to the cargo hold. ‘I am happy to announce that Krushkov and Brigard are on their way to meet you. I’m letting you all escape. Aren’t I nice?’

They all jeered, but evidently welcomed the chance to sit back down again.

Zak watched Krushkov and Brigard struggle along the green corridor. Krushkov had his left arm around Brigard, and his left foot raised. Brigard strode forward quickly, sack over his shoulder, pulling Krushkov along, who desperately hopped with his right foot to keep up.

‘Wait a second,’ said Krushkov, forcing Brigard to stop. ‘I need a rest.’

Brigard let go and stopped in front of him.

Krushkov looked at him with horror.

‘Where’s your gun!’

Brigard checked his shoulders for the strap.

‘Oh, I... I don’t know,’ he said, mortified. ‘I must have dropped it when we fell over.’

‘And what if one of *them* finds it?’ roared Krushkov. ‘Get after it quick!’

Brigard handed Krushkov the sack, then started running back to the reception hall. Krushkov called after him.

‘And hurry up. We won’t be waiting.’

Krushkov turned and staggered along forcefully by himself, as if motivated to be rid of Brigard.

Brigard reached the reception hall, and carefully descended the stairs. The lights were only on along the route he had taken, and it was dark elsewhere. He searched around the bottom of the stairs for the gun, but couldn’t find it. He kicked the puddle in frustration.

‘Looking for something,’ said a voice from the shadows.

‘Uh-oh,’ said Brigard.

Zak stepped into the light. He held the machine gun, and had it aimed at Brigard.

‘I know how to use one of these,’ he said. ‘So don’t try anything.’

A stunned Brigard raised his hands.

‘Now go into that office behind the reception desk,’ said Zak.

Brigard didn’t move. There was clear distress in his face. ‘Do... do you know there is a bomb on board?’ he asked in panic.

‘I do know that. I intend to get rid of it,’ said Zak, resolutely.

‘Right. You’d better, all we’ll all die,’ said Brigard.

Zak simply continued to stare and point the gun at him.

Brigard hurried into the office. ‘Well in that case, good luck,’ he said, before closing the door.

Zak remotely locked it behind him.

Herbet had led the rest of the senior crew into the maintenance zone. Zak decided to update him, but not to tell him that he was now armed.

‘It’s nearly done Herbet,’ said Zak. ‘The hijackers are in the cargo hold, apart from Krushkov who’s on his way there.’

‘Well done,’ said Herbet. ‘That was great thinking. Who knows what Krushkov would have done had he reached the restaurant. And we’re safe, they won’t be coming this way.’

‘Thanks,’ said Zak. ‘They should be leaving very soon. But they’re still armed, so I think you should stay put for now. When the hijackers are in their ship, I’ll let you know.’

‘Zak, I have Emergency Security Clearance as well. I’m watching all this,’ said Herbet smugly.

‘Oh yeah,’ said Zak with a laugh. ‘Nice one.’

‘But I also have Super Emergency Security Clearance,’ said Herbet. ‘Now that I am free, it is my duty to take over and lock you out.’

‘What!’ screamed Zak. ‘That’s not fair!’

‘What are you planning to do with the machine gun Zak?’ asked Herbet.

Zak was completely thrown. He hadn't actually thought about what he was going to do with it, only that he should beat Brigard to it. He also knew that there was no reason he should remain in charge, other than that he had successfully led the fight so far.

'Be very careful Zak,' said Herbet. 'It doesn't matter how good you think you are. If you put these guys in a life or death situation, they'll fight with all they've got. I can see you're already injured.'

'I've got to rescue the Ambassador,' said Zak.

'There's no need to do anything unless they threaten to take or kill him,' said Herbet. 'And don't risk getting us all blown up for one person.'

'Okay,' said Zak, with resignation.

His head dropped. Every knockback caused fatigue to kick in. The high gravity was taking its toll on his injured leg.

'Your plan is working Zak,' said Herbet. 'It's a brilliant plan, and you've done an amazing job so far. So I've decided I'm going to ignore the rules and let you stay in charge. We'll come down to help as soon as it's safe.'

A surge of energy made Zak leap into the air.

'Yes!' he shouted. He took a deep breath to revive his confidence. 'Hey, Darren Thorne's badly injured in the gym. You'd better send a doctor.'

'Will do. And I'll send one down to treat you. Although given the way you're running around, you mustn't be as hurt as you look.'

Zak smiled. He closed his eyes and saw Krushkov opening the door to the cargo hold.

Krushkov piled through, dropped the sack of guns and fell forward onto the floor.

Zak realised that he should get close to the cargo hold, in case a threat emerged to Caviana's father. He ran up the stairs to head there, keeping one eye on events.

'I need a minute to rest,' said Krushkov, from his position on the floor. 'Then we'll be off.'

'Where's Brigard?' asked Romero.

'The idiot left his gun behind,' said Krushkov. 'I sent him back for it. If he's not here when we're leaving, tough.'

‘We’ve got to wait for him,’ protested Romero.

Krushkov coughed angrily.

‘Romero. Why did you bring everyone back here, just because a kid told you to?’

Romero bowed his head. ‘Sorry. We lost communication. I feared we’d be left behind.’

‘You were the one person I thought I could rely on,’ said Krushkov.

‘Are we ready?’ asked Sato, impatiently.

‘We need to do a couple of things first,’ said Krushkov, ‘so I need one last effort from you all. That kid is in command of the ship. There’s not much he can do now, but we must act quickly. Can anyone think of a way to stop them ejecting the bomb?’

There was a slight pause, while the others thought about it.

‘We could destroy the robots. They’ll never lift that container by themselves,’ said Ubogu.

‘They’d be able to lift out the bomb,’ said Romero, ‘but the container is locked, and it won’t be easy to break open.’

‘That’ll do for me,’ said Krushkov. ‘What about priming the bomb – are you ready Sato?’

Sato pulled a device out of her pocket. ‘Ready.’

‘Do it then,’ said Krushkov. ‘I’ll observe from here and come down when you’re all in.’

Romero, Fang and Ubogu grabbed the remaining guns from the sack and positioned themselves at the top of the steps. Fang held his gun awkwardly due to his heavily bandaged hands. He had just enough finger sticking out to pull the trigger.

The robot arms hung from the ceiling, their elbows forming a right-angle as if ready for action. Their skin was whitened by a layer of frost, as was most of the contents of the cargo hold.

The three men fired at one robot, targeting the joints. The bullets punctured the skin, and it soon became peppered with tiny black holes. Flaps of skin began to peel away and smoke seeped out from a resulting hole. As the hole grew, wires and tubes sprang out. There was a bang, and the wrist and hand went limp. Another bang signalled the collapse of the elbow. The lower limb drifted down until the entire arm hung vertically. Smoking and lifeless.

The men turned their attention to the second robot, and crippled that one in the same manner.

‘Good work,’ said Krushkov. ‘Now get in the ship.’

The three men started to descend the steps.

‘Watch those steps they’re slippery!’ shouted Sato.

Romero and Ubogu stopped suddenly on the icy steps and grabbed the rail on the left. Fang lurched for the one on the right, but his hand was unable to grip it. He lost his balance and his feet slipped from under him. He put his hands out to break his fall. As he landed on them, there was a crunch. He screamed, and rolled the rest of the way down the steps.

The others cringed as Fang finally reached the bottom. Romero and Ubogu made their way down steadily, holding the rail. They helped the distraught Fang to his feet and guided him towards the docking bay.

Zak imagined how painful Fang’s hands must be at that moment. But he was scared to think what his legs would feel like when the adrenaline dried up, and his psychological anaesthetic wore off.

He was monitoring events from just outside the door of the cargo hold. Krushkov sat the other side, oblivious to his presence.

Sato made her way across the floor to their container, which was stacked on top of another container. She held up her device.

Zak presumed that she was now going to set the timer on the bomb. This step was missing from his plan, and he could barely watch. But by now, he was used to watching everything. Almost without thinking, he selected a view from behind Sato, so that he could see the readings on the device.

She looked at it, then pointed it up at the container. She waited a few moments, then checked the readings. Nothing appeared.

‘Come on!’ she said, impatiently.

She waved the device around, until finally it beeped and a message appeared – “Connection to nuclear device”

Zak gasped. This was some bomb.

‘You’re sure those containers are swapped over,’ said Krushkov sternly.

‘Totally sure boss,’ Sato assured him. ‘The computer reported successful completion.’

‘And the container is locked?’ he asked.

Sato stepped up to the stack of containers and managed to pull herself up so she could reach the frost covered lid. She wiped part of it to reveal a small screen. Zak zoomed in, and could see that it displayed a locked padlock symbol. Sato rattled the lid but it didn’t budge.

‘Yes, it’s locked,’ she said.

‘Set the timer for five minutes,’ said Krushkov.

‘Five minutes! We don’t need that long,’ she said. ‘We only need three minutes to reach the safe distance.’

‘Set it for five minutes, and get in the ship,’ ordered Krushkov.

Sato jumped back down and checked the device. She entered five minutes and started the countdown. On seeing this, Zak quickly created a timer on the ship’s computer to count down from five minutes. Then he had an idea. He displayed the countdown in giant numbers on the walls of the cargo hold.

Krushkov and Sato noticed this immediately, and turned to each other.

‘The kid’s still watching us then,’ said Sato.

‘It’s a countdown to his own death,’ said Krushkov. ‘I hope it makes it more exciting for him.’

Sato put the device back in her pocket and jogged carefully over to the docking bay. Krushkov made his way steadily down the steps, his face twisting in agony each time he put his left foot down. But instead of following Sato to the docking bay, he turned in the opposite direction.

As Sato lowered herself into the ship she noticed Krushkov.

‘Where are you going?’ she said with astonishment.

‘To get the Ambassador. He’ll earn us a substantial ransom,’ said Krushkov.

As Sato digested that, Zak knew that he now had to rescue Caviana’s father. But first, he had to wait and see what Sato would do.

‘Are you mad?’ said Sato. ‘Don’t jeopardise the mission for it.’

‘I need some kind of bonus,’ said Krushkov. ‘I’ve lost five men.’

‘The Red King will be more angry at you for taking the risk,’ said Sato.

‘Watch the door,’ said Krushkov sharply.

‘I can’t,’ said Sato. ‘I’ve got to get the ship started.’

She looked down into their ship.

‘Everyone’s strapped in. You’re on your own - boss,’ she said firmly.

She let out a yell of frustration as Krushkov ignored her and continued towards the kennels, then she dropped down into the ship.

Krushkov hobbled along in visible pain, but appeared determined to collect his extra reward. As soon as he had disappeared into the kennels, Zak entered through the cargo hold door, and crept down the steps.

To reach the kennels, he took a route around the edge of the cargo hold. He had to stay out of view of both the docking bay and the kennels’ entrance, so used the Mind Patch to keep an eye on both locations.

He hid behind a container near the kennels and waited, with the machine gun in his hands. Krushkov would soon be in his sights. He would have the chance to take revenge for the murder of Geremi.

It would be so easy. But was that really what he wanted?

He watched as the door opened and Caviana’s father emerged, nudged forward by the barrel of a machine gun. Krushkov followed him out.

‘The docking bay,’ said Krushkov. ‘Move!’

Krushkov steered Caviana’s father onto the widest path along the centre of the hamster wheel. They progressed along the curve towards the docking bay.

Zak crept out behind them and followed them onto the path. He aimed his gun at Krushkov.

‘Krushkov!’ he shouted. ‘Drop the gun.’

Krushkov and Caviana’s father both stopped and turned their heads to face Zak. Krushkov didn’t drop his gun, but lowered it. Caviana’s father saw that Zak had him covered, and made a run for it. He headed towards Zak, and hid behind a column of containers out of Krushkov’s line of sight. He nodded at Zak.

Krushkov laughed.

‘Well, if it isn’t the little urchin,’ he said. ‘You’ve been a right little god in this ship. Locking doors here, turning off lights there, sending us round in circles...’

‘Drop the gun,’ insisted Zak again.

‘Why don’t you shoot me?’ asked Krushkov, mischievously.

‘I want you to take your ship and go,’ said Zak. ‘The clock really is ticking now isn’t it.’

‘You won’t have time to get rid of the bomb,’ said Krushkov.

‘We’ll see,’ said Zak.

‘You’re afraid to shoot me aren’t you,’ said Krushkov, taunting Zak. ‘Come on, you must play games. Or are you too young? It’s no different to firing gunge. Try it!’

Zak wondered what Krushkov was playing at. Why did he want Zak to shoot at him? Perhaps he thought it would be weak of him to fire the first shot. He would have no idea that Zak could kill him before he even moved.

The countdown reached the three minute mark. Krushkov surely had to leave now. Zak was getting worried, but to his relief spied movement over at the docking bay.

Zak lowered his gun, and flung it across the floor to Krushkov. It slid on the ice and caught Krushkov on his damaged ankle.

Krushkov winced, but appeared more stunned by Zak’s unexpected move. Zak raised his hands.

Romero and Ubogu climbed out of the ship to find Zak with his hands up. They grabbed their guns, but did not raise them.

‘Boss!’ shouted Romero. ‘We’ve got to go. Come on!’

Krushkov ignored him. He turned to face Zak, and aimed his gun.

‘You gave up your advantage too easily kid,’ he sneered.

‘I haven’t given up my advantage. I’ve won already,’ said Zak.

Krushkov looked at him with amusement.

‘How’s that?’ he said. ‘I could shoot you down in a second.’

‘If only you could watch my personal video record, and see what I’ve done,’ said Zak.

Concern appeared on Krushkov’s face.

‘What do you mean? What have you done?’ he demanded.

‘I’ve sabotaged your mission. It’s going to fail,’ said Zak confidently.

Krushkov’s face tightened, and his moustache twitched, causing frost that had formed on it to glisten under the lights.

‘Impossible!’ he bellowed. ‘What have you done?’

Zak could see Romero and Ubogu running wearily towards them.

‘Tell me, or I’ll kill you,’ said Krushkov.

‘You’re going to kill me anyway,’ said Zak.

The moustache twitched again.

‘Okay. Tell me, and I won’t kill you.’

Zak stared Krushkov in the eyes. He was sure that time had run out on him. He desperately hoped that Romero and Ubogu were thinking the same.

The two men approached Krushkov from behind.

‘Sorry boss,’ said Romero. ‘We have got to go.’

Romero grabbed Krushkov’s gun, while Ubogu picked him up and hauled him over his shoulder.

‘What do you think you’re doing?’ roared Krushkov.

They ran back towards the docking area, Krushkov yelling protests and trying to break Ubogu’s grip.

Zak waved at them.

‘Safe journey!’ he called.

Krushkov’s protests became inaudible to Zak as the men dropped down into their ship, and the docking bay floor panels slid shut.

The cargo hold door burst open, and in rushed Herbet followed by several crew.

‘We’d better check the container, just to be sure,’ shouted Zak, pointing to it.

‘Yes, we’ve come prepared,’ said Herbet.

Two crew members with crowbars climbed up to the container.

‘Let’s get a camera on the hijackers,’ said Zak.

The giant image on the wall switched to show an external view, and the countdown retreated into the top right. The walls were riddled with bullet holes, and stacks of containers blocked some of the view, but the image was clear enough.

The hijackers’ ship detached itself from the Colossus, fired its rockets and pulled away. The external camera followed it, but it quickly shrank to a tiny dot, then became too small to be seen.

The countdown reached two minutes.

More people arrived in the cargo hold, eager to help. Zak lowered himself to the floor, and sat awkwardly.

Herbet and Caviana’s father rushed over to him.

‘Are you really alright Zak?’ said Herbet.

‘He has been exceedingly brave,’ said Caviana’s father.

‘The doctor is on his way here,’ said Herbet. ‘The environmental settings are returning to normal.’

Zak took deep breaths as he became more aware of the pain in his leg, and concentrated on staying calm and conscious. He could hear the two crewmen hacking away at the container, but it was proving tough to open. Before he knew it, the countdown had reached one minute.

At that very moment, the giant image changed to show another scene. It contained a group of men wearing masks and holding machine guns, standing in front of the official flag of the MMM. The anthem that Zak had heard before played for a short while then faded out. The man at the front spoke slowly.

‘We, the Militant Mars Movement, take responsibility for destroying the passenger ship Colossus.’

The whacking of the container continued, but the speech was loud enough to be heard clearly.

‘The ship was one of many, bringing theiving corporations and their workers to Mars. Bringing them to plunder its natural wealth, and destroy its natural beauty.’

‘It’s a pre-recorded video, and they aren’t the MMM,’ mumbled Zak.

The man continued his speech, and the countdown reached single digits. The container lid was cracking, but stubbornly refused to break. All but the two men trying to break it were fixated on the video.

‘We vow to preserve the sanctity of the Mars environment, and defend it from...’

The video froze as the countdown hit zero.

There was a loud crack, and the container lid flew off. The men peered inside.

‘No bomb in here!’ one of them declared with a big smile.

There was a collective gasp and sigh of relief.

Then he laughed. ‘There is something though. All our valuables!’

There was a huge bang and the ship shook. Everyone staggered and the crewmen were forced to jump from the container.

The giant image switched back to the external view. Out into space was a lengthening streak of debris, the remains of the hijackers’ ship. The Colossus had been hit by a shockwave.

Zak realised it was all over. But instead of elation, he felt miserable. His strength was depleted, and his mind could no longer hold back what his body was screaming at him.

‘Tell everyone what you did Zak,’ said Herbet.

Zak looked up from the floor at the crowd gathering around him. He managed to pull a smile, and found the reserves to mumble an explanation.

‘The hijackers’ had a container here, where they dumped everything they stole from us. Sato instructed the robots to swap it with an identical one in their ship that contained the bomb. The robots completed that. But I gave the robots another command, to repeat the last thing they did. So the robots swapped them back, and the hijackers didn’t notice the change.’

Zak laughed weakly.

‘Even better,’ he said, ‘they destroyed the robots, then primed the bomb on their ship.’

All around him had their jaws somewhere near the floor.

‘He had to draw the hijackers away from the cargo hold,’ said Herbet. ‘Which he achieved, but at great cost to himself.’

A doctor arrived and started to examine his legs.

‘He has lost a great deal of blood,’ said the doctor. ‘We must get him to the Medical Centre immediately.’

Zak found himself lying on his back.

‘How were you able to keep going?’ asked the doctor, leaning close. ‘Did you pump yourself full of painkillers?’

‘No,’ whispered Zak. ‘I’m used to getting hurt.’

He had another chuckle to himself, then passed out.

\*

*10am SST Friday 18 January 2085*

Three days later, the Colossus arrived at Mars and docked with the Mars One Space Station. Zak had spent the intervening time including the deceleration period confined to the Medical Centre at 23-I-R. When the time came for the passengers to leave the ship, he was finally let out.

Realising that he only had minutes to pack his things, he tried to rush back to his cabin. But the physical trauma had left him weak, and though the injury on his leg was healing fast, he could only hobble his way there. He arrived to find Skye waiting for him.

‘It’s all done for you,’ she said with a smile, pointing to his packed suitcase.

‘Thanks,’ he said with surprise.

‘I know our lives are important and everything,’ she said, ‘but I’m really glad you managed to save this.’

She held out her hand. Gran’s ring was back in place.

‘Yeah,’ said Zak. ‘You can count yourself lucky. If it *had* just been a robbery, they would have got away.’

Skye’s smile became wily.

‘You killed them,’ she said. ‘How does it feel?’

After all the praise he had received, this was the first suggestion that he may have done something wrong.

‘I don’t look at it that way. I haven’t even thought about *them*. They killed themselves really. They primed the bomb while it was on board their ship. They just didn’t know that’s where it was.’

‘I’m not worried,’ she said. ‘You saved hundreds.’

So Skye was not put out. But would everyone be so accepting?

‘I want to give Tom a quick call,’ he said. ‘I only had the chance to send him a short message.’

Skye tutted. ‘A quick call? Go on then.’

Zak sat down and checked the communication time to Earth. It read 9 minutes and 10 seconds.

‘Ah!’ he said. ‘Oh hang on, he’s left me a message.’

Zak played it back, with more than a little trepidation. He had made a request of Tom - would Tom have fulfilled it?

A muscle-bound commando stood awkwardly in a jungle clearing, with a face that betrayed disappointment. The avatar system accentuated emotions, making it difficult to hide feelings. But the face managed to struggle into a smile.

‘Hi Zak. Sounds like you’re still in hospital. I heard everything on the news, it’s been the big story for the last few days. When I heard the ship was hijacked I was sure you’d be on the case. Then, when it was all over, the report came through that you’d foiled them. Amazing.’

Zak wondered if that meant he had achieved fame already. Bonus!

‘And what a great way to mark your arrival on Mars,’ continued Tom, ‘by upsetting the planet’s leading criminal fraternity. Life is going to get interesting to say the least.’

Zak gulped. The commando’s dark expression returned.

‘So, you’ve decided not to come back,’ said Tom, his voice croaking. ‘That’s the end of the team then. I’ve let them know we’re disbanding.’

‘Oh,’ said Zak. The end of the team! He had thought Tom would just replace him. He suddenly felt guilty for ending an era.

‘But, it’s not necessarily the end of your career,’ continued Tom. ‘I’ve done what you asked, and got you the cheat for the Mars network. Yeah, I asked around, and someone acquired it for me.’

As Tom spoke, the code appeared in large type, running across the wall.

‘Yes!’ shouted Zak. He knew Tom could get it, but worried he might withhold it from him.

‘You know, it’s going to be difficult for you in the Mars League. It’s a different style of play, as you’ll find out. But here’s a challenge for you – can you make it to No.1 in the rankings? Be the best on Mars? If you can do that by the time you’re old enough to come back, then maybe you’ll have a chance. And just because we can only video message doesn’t mean I won’t be following you and hassling you.’

The talk of rankings seemed to jolt Tom’s avatar back into its usual lively self. It pointed determinedly at Zak, and Tom’s voice came with passion.

‘I’ll never be as good as you, so my dream is to see you become a champion. Don’t let me down!’

With that, the message ended.

‘What a snivelling, insecure little idiot,’ said Skye. ‘You’re better off a million miles away from him.’

Zak couldn’t be bothered to argue with Skye. Tom’s challenge exactly matched his own aspiration for this planet – to conquer it.

The cabin door opened, and Dad poked his head around it.

‘Time to go,’ he said. ‘You can leave the cases, they’ll be taken separately.’

Zak and Skye got up to leave.

‘Hey Zak,’ said Dad cheerily, ‘everyone is talking about your heroics. You’re going to be a very popular lad. I bet you’re glad I dragged you along now eh?’

Zak smiled. ‘We’ll see.’

‘Well, I can’t say this with your Mum around,’ said Dad, ‘but I’m very proud of you.’

‘Yeah?’ said Zak.

‘Yes. I should have been more supportive of you. So if you want to play V-Commando, that’s fine with me. Play it all you like! I’ll do whatever I can to help you succeed.’

‘Wow, thanks Dad,’ said Zak, amazed at this breakthrough.

‘Hey, I hope we’re not going to have any favourites around here,’ said Skye.

‘But you don’t need any help Skye, you haven’t got an ambition,’ said Dad dismissively.

‘Oh right,’ said Skye, raising her hands in disbelief.

They left the cabin for the reception hall, to take the pod. They arrived to find a queue stretching almost entirely around the hamster wheel. Mum and Dad had to join it at the back, but Zak was offered a seat on the bench. All the passengers knew that Zak had saved the day, and were aware of his injuries. Skye sat with him.

A man in a crisp blue blazer approached.

‘Hello Zak,’ he said.

‘Hello Mr. Herbert,’ said Zak.

‘We have a lot to thank you for,’ said Herbert sincerely.

‘Yeah. Maybe we could have stopped it happening in the first place,’ said Zak.

‘Perhaps,’ said Herbert. ‘But we’re not allowed to spy on people. Geremi would have been in big trouble for granting you that access.’

Zak looked at him in disgust.

‘I’m very sorry Zak. I wish it had been me,’ said Herbert. ‘I didn’t do my job properly.’

Zak’s gaze dropped. It was Herbert’s first expression of regret over Geremi.

‘We’ve found a new home for Rocky,’ said Herbert hesitantly.

‘Oh,’ said Zak, perking up. ‘Where?’

‘The Ambassador has volunteered to adopt him. Or should I say – the Ambassador *was* adopted by him.’

‘That’s a great idea!’ shouted Zak in delight.

‘In fact, it looks like the man himself wants to talk to you. I had better go. I hope we’ll meet again one day.’

‘Thanks Monsieur Herbert,’ said Zak.

Herbert laughed, and saluted him.

‘Skye! Zak!’ It was Caviana, accompanied by her father, who strode up enthusiastically.

‘Zak,’ he said, shaking Zak’s hand. ‘I have not had the chance to thank you. Your bravery saved us all.’

Zak shrugged, to play it down.

The Ambassador waffled on about how he would be honoured, but Zak had his ear on the girls' conversation.

'They finally sorted out the valuables,' said Skye. 'I got the ring back.'

'That is wonderful,' said Caviana. 'We had sentimental items of our own that had been taken from our cabin. We have many reasons to thank Zak.'

They both turned and smiled at him. He smiled back with unease.

'It's such a shame you're going to live in a different city,' said Skye.

'Yes,' said Caviana with sadness, 'three thousand kilometres away.'

That sounded far. Zak wondered what transport was like on Mars.

'But we shall play together,' said Caviana. 'What is that game you were recommending?'

'Park Party,' said Skye. 'We'll team up and meet loads of people.'

Zak wouldn't be seen dead playing Park Party. He suspected Skye knew this.

The Ambassador finally finished. Zak muttered 'yes' even though he hadn't heard any of it.

'There is some good news,' said Caviana. 'Father will be visiting your city frequently as part of his duties, so perhaps I could stay with your family.'

'Of course you can,' said Skye. 'I'm sure my parents wouldn't mind.' She turned to Zak. 'What about you Zak? Do you mind if Caviana stays?'

Zak could hardly speak.

'Er... no,' he said. 'That's great.'

Caviana glanced back and forth at both of them in bewilderment.

'But Zak I thought you were going straight back to Earth?'

'No. I've decided to stay on Mars.'

'Oh!' said Caviana, nervously. 'What made you change your mind?'

‘Well, I suppose I was being selfish,’ said Zak uncertainly, reluctant to go into a full explanation; which was that the death and danger of the hijack had revealed to him something he’d never realised - that he loved his family. And so he had accepted Caviana’s challenge also. He would still pursue his dream, but would do it differently.

Caviana lurched forward and threw her arms around him, pinning him back against the seat. It was a tight hug, and not a short one.

‘I would love to meet you again,’ she said, and laughed. ‘You will have to tell me how you are progressing at that horrible game of yours.’

‘Do you realise how uncomfortable I feel right now?’ he said, referring to his unease, rather than her suffocating embrace.

Finally she released him, and gave him a quick kiss right on the lips.

‘I hope that makes you feel more comfortable,’ she said.

Zak wondered if the artificial gravity had suddenly switched off. His head was floating around the hamster wheel. He hardly noticed her say goodbye.

He gazed as Caviana and her father were escorted to the front of the queue, and onto the next available pod.

‘He seems like a useful guy to know.’

Zak dropped out of dreamland with a bump. It was Ragboy, with his two bruising brothers. Skye stood up to face them off, but Zak remained seated.

‘Ragboy,’ he said. ‘How did you get out of the restaurant?’

‘I sneaked through the kitchen. The guards were in a right state by the end, you were driving them nuts.’

‘You nearly ruined my plan. I had to break my cover,’ said Zak.

‘Yeah? Well you left me to die,’ said Ragboy.

‘So what are you, a ghost?’ said Zak.

‘The doctors fixed me up. Apparently we were next to each other in the Medical Centre. But we were both conked out on drugs.’

‘Good,’ said Zak, ‘or you would have tried to lead me on an escape.’

Ragboy laughed.

‘You know Zak, you’re alright,’ he said. ‘You saved me from those hijackers.’

Zak was taken aback. It was a genuine attempt at gratitude. He remembered that at some point, he had thought of something good to say about Darren Thorne.

‘Hey Ragboy, I realised something.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Without you, I would never have stopped them.’

Now Ragboy was taken aback, as if that was the first complimentary thing anyone had ever said to him.

‘Yeah,’ he said enthusiastically. ‘We’re a team! Next time, we’ll stick together.’

‘Next time!’ choked Zak. ‘We won’t be doing this again, but give me your number, I have a game you might like to play.’

‘Cool,’ said Ragboy. ‘And I promise I’ll never make fun of your girlfriend again.’

‘We’d better get going,’ said Skye urgently. ‘Mum and Dad are nearly at the pod.’

Before she finished her words, the contact details were exchanged. Frustrated, she pulled Zak to his feet, and dragged him towards the pod.

‘Before you ask,’ she whispered. ‘*They* can’t stay.’

Zak pushed through the pain barrier to keep up with Skye.

‘Hurry up,’ said Mum. ‘It’s about to leave any second.’

Skye shoved Zak into the pod and squeezed in herself, just as the pod door was shutting. Zak cried out as he fell sideways onto the seat. They strapped themselves in, and the outer door closed, leaving the pod in darkness.

Zak let out a loud exhausted sigh.

‘You see what guns do Zak,’ said Mum. ‘I hope you’re going to give up that violent game, now you’ve experienced the reality.’

‘You must be joking!’ said Zak. ‘I wanna play it more than ever. It’s so much simpler than real life. You have a gun, you shoot the enemy. No complications!’

In the dimness, Zak could see Mum shaking her head. The pod accelerated and decelerated, and Zak felt his body turning over.

‘Zak,’ continued Mum, ‘however you feel about moving to Mars, and remember it’s not something I would have chosen, we are starting a new life there. You must grasp that, and not spend your time looking back.’

‘Yes Mum,’ said Zak. He didn’t want to argue about it now. He wasn’t sure if she could ever come round to his point of view, but at some point he would make the effort to explain it, to try and make her understand.

The pod emerged from the tunnel, and into a windowed chute, not unlike the one they arrived in. At the end of the chute was the space station, similar but smaller to Earth One. The big difference was the view. Ahead of them loomed a giant orange globe – Mars.

Over the past few weeks he had seen many sights the likes of which he had not seen before. But this one topped them all. The difference with Earth could not be more striking. There were no clouds, no blue water and no green land. The ashen orange surface could be seen unbroken. It looked every bit the barren wasteland he had once condemned.

‘It’s amazing,’ he said involuntarily. His words were met with a chorus of agreement.

He scanned for the cities, but couldn’t spot any sign of development, because by the scale of the planet it was still so small. The environment looked pristine from up here. Yet down on that surface, dramas were being played out that had culminated in the attack on the Colossus.

Despite all he had experienced in recent months, Zak was bursting with fear and excitement.

‘This is one hell of a planet!’ he declared.