

## **Chapter 9: A New Regime**

### **The 2080s**

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## Chapter 9 : A new regime

*2.30pm SST Sunday 13 January 2085*

Zak logged in using the key.

He was already familiar with the crew interface from watching Ragboy's demonstration. He worked his way through the pages and found that he had full access for snooping on Krushkov's men. But he didn't want to let Geremi down, so resisted the temptation to watch anyone else.

He brought up the passenger roster, and found the cabin numbers for the men he and Ragboy had previously identified.

He cycled through CCTV footage of each cabin. The first two were empty, but the third contained a group of men, sitting around on the chairs and beds. Zak recognised most of them.

'Krushkov, Fang, Ubogu, O'Neill, Khan,' said Zak quietly, checking each one's identity on the computer, and putting names to faces.

He listened to their chat. To his surprise it was trivial, and not at all suspicious. They were debating the merits of having a car within the confines of a small Martian city.

At first, Zak found it intriguing. But as the conversation dragged on, and the argument went round in circles, his attention wandered. He realised he could be in for a long day. As time went on his eyelids started to droop. Then, in a split-second, he hit the jackpot.

O'Neill, a big American who had argued it was unnecessary to have a car, stood up and reached to his waist. He pulled out a blaster and waved it around.

'Having one of these is more important than a car,' he declared.

They all laughed, except Krushkov.

'Put it away O'Neill,' he said with irritation. 'Now let's get back to our rethink, we haven't got forever.'

As O'Neill sat back down, Zak realised he must act immediately.

He called Geremi.

'Yes Zak?'

'I've found them already. They're sitting in a cabin, and they've got a gun.'

‘That was quick. I’ve only just got back to my desk. Well there’s no point in me doing anything. Call Herbet on the emergency line.’

‘Will he listen?’

‘He has to respond to an emergency call.’

Zak called Herbet as instructed, but made the connection audio only. The call went straight through to him.

‘Who’s this?’ snapped Herbet. ‘I’m in a meeting.’

‘It’s Zak. I know you don’t trust me, but believe me, this *is* important. I’ve just seen a couple of guys go into Cabin Y-13,’ he said, twisting the truth slightly. ‘They’ve got a gun. They’re the ones I’ve been following.’

‘Zak Carter,’ said Herbet, ‘You just don’t know when to give up, do you. Is this some kind of joke?’

‘No way. I’m absolutely serious. Send a guard down to check, but be careful, they’re armed.’

‘Damn. It’s the emergency line,’ said Herbet. ‘Do you realise the trouble you’ll be in if this is a false alarm Zak - I’ll lock you up for the rest of the trip. So if this is a prank, you’d better call it off now.’

‘I swear on my life,’ said Zak.

‘Okay,’ said Herbet, sighing. ‘I’ll send someone to investigate.’

Zak returned to the footage. To his alarm, the gun was nowhere to be seen, and the men were just sitting around talking again. He berated himself for not watching what O’Neill did with the gun. He feared that if the security officers did not search the cabin, he would soon be languishing in jail.

He waited for what seemed like an age, then a bell sounded in the cabin. The men suddenly stopped their conversation and froze.

‘Come on, look nervous,’ said Zak.

‘Who is it?’ shouted Krushkov.

‘Security,’ came the voice. ‘We’d like a word.’

The door opened and the men within the room stood up. There were two security guards in the doorway.

‘Good afternoon,’ said one of the guards. ‘We’re sorry to disturb you, but we’ve been asked to check out this cabin. Do you mind?’

The gang looked alarmed and puzzled.

‘Er... no,’ said Krushkov. ‘Go right ahead.’

The security guard entered the cabin nervously. He appeared unsure about what he was expected to find. First, he casually frisked the men.

‘What’s this?’ he asked O’Neill, pointing at something on his belt.

‘It’s a holder,’ said O’Neill.

‘What do you use it for?’ asked the guard.

‘To hold things?’ said O’Neill hopefully.

The guard eyed O’Neill with suspicion, but moved on. He ambled around the cabin, glancing at things, but not really searching. A chest of three drawers caught his attention. He pulled open the top drawer, had a little rummage around and closed it. Then, he opened the middle one. It contained underwear, and the guard shut it after only a cursory look.

The men exchanged nervous glances.

‘Come on, try the other drawer!’ said Zak.

The two guards looked at each other. The one at the door shrugged. It seemed as though they were about to leave, when the guard by the chest of drawers eyed O’Neill again, and appeared to decide on one further check.

‘Yes!’ said Zak.

The men started to move shiftily around, as if bracing themselves for something. The guard grabbed hold of the third drawer handle, and pulled it. No sooner had the drawer opened than Krushkov leapt forward and punched him across the back of the head. The guard at the door reached for his own gun, but Fang grabbed him and yanked him into the room, right into the fist of Ubogu.

Krushkov took their gun out of the drawer, stepped back and fired a blast at the guard on the floor in front of him. A pulse of light exploded on the prone body, followed by a wisp of smoke. Krushkov then turned and repeated his actions on the guard by the doorway.

‘Oh my god!’ said Zak.

Suddenly, all the lights dimmed, and an alarm sounded throughout the ship.

‘Damn!’ shouted Krushkov.

Khan knelt down and confiscated the gun from the guard by the doorway. He then checked the other, but found he had been unarmed.

‘Just one ES gun,’ said Khan.

Zak recognised the abbreviation. The guard had been equipped with an Electro Shock gun.

Krushkov handed the blaster back to O’Neill and put his hand to his ear.

‘Romero!’ he shouted. ‘Get your blaster and head for the Security Office. It’s kicked off!’

With the alarm still blaring, the men raced out of the cabin. Zak frantically followed them using the CCTV. He split the screen into two views, and searched for the rest of the gang at the same time. He found them all leaving another cabin, and recognised Romero as one of the men in the lifeboat room. All the men were heading out of the cabin area and towards the Security Office.

As Zak watched, he realised he had the best seat in the house. He set up a third view on the Security Office. There, Herbet opened a cabinet marked “Armoury”. Inside were two guns attached to a panel, with a space for a third. He took both of them. Suddenly two men burst into the room. One was in full uniform, while the other wore just the blazer over his plain clothes. Zak realised that most of the remaining security guards would be off duty.

‘Here!’ said Herbet, throwing them a gun each. ‘We’re under attack by an armed gang. Try and hold them off. Shoot to kill.’

Zak watched the battle unfold as if it was a V-Commando match. The gang had reached the Security Office, and were trying to force their way in. Zak realised that all they needed to do was eliminate the guards, and they would have control of the ship. A shootout had begun, and the two armed security guards were desperately trying to defend their position. It was a strange battle, as there were far fewer guns than participants. Only O’Neill with the blaster, and Khan with the ES gun were engaged in fighting the guards. The others stayed back. Almost immediately, one of the guards shot Khan in the chest, who collapsed with a bloodcurdling scream, and let the ES gun fall into the corridor.

Zak was gripped. The battle would hinge not on who had the most men, but on who had the most guns. The ES gun lay tantalisingly in the corridor. With O'Neill suppressed under fire from one guard, the other guard darted out to try and grab the dropped gun. But at the moment his hand reached down, Romero arrived with his men. Their blaster was in the hands of a man Zak identified as Forster. The security guard was shot dead.

Under a hail of fire, the remaining guard retreated back into the room and shut the door. But Zak realised that they had allowed the balance to swing critically in favour of the gang, who now had four guns to their one.

Zak threw up his hands in frustration, wondering if the Security team had any more weapons. If only he could get hold of a gun, he was certain he could make a difference.

'Herbet!' shouted Zak, making direct contact with him again.

'For God's sake!' shouted back Herbet.

'Have you got any more weapons on this ship?'

'No. These are all we have,' replied Herbet.

Zak shook his head at how vulnerable they had left themselves.

The gang appeared to realise this as well. O'Neill and Forster charged forward and burst into the room, rapidly aiming and firing. But Herbet and the security guard had shielded themselves well. The guard sprang up, taking the attackers by surprise and downing them both.

'Nice work,' said Zak, punching the air. He then reminded himself that these were real people, actually dying.

Zak suddenly saw a glimmer of hope. The guard lurched forward and tried to grab the two guns from the prone attackers, but Romero burst through the door and took advantage, shooting the fumbling guard. With the last guard down, Herbet was on his own and unarmed.

'I surrender!' he cried.

Romero marched over to where Herbet was hiding, gun raised. Krushkov appeared in the doorway.

'Stop!' he said. 'We need some of them alive.'

Romero halted and lowered his gun.

The battle had ended. The rest of the gang arrived in the room, but it took the alarm to be turned off before the tension eased. Herbert rose hesitantly as Krushkov walked up to him.

‘I don’t know why you put up a fight,’ he said. ‘You should have just surrendered in the first place and saved your men.’

Herbet just looked at him in disbelief.

‘We need somewhere to put everyone,’ said Krushkov, addressing his own men. ‘We’ll use the VM for now.’

Zak presumed he meant the Valles Marineris Restaurant.

Ubogu motioned Herbert out of the room with his gun.

‘Three men down, I don’t believe it,’ shouted Krushkov, clearly furious. ‘And time. What are we?’

A few of them checked their watches.

‘Thirty six hours early,’ said Romero.

Krushkov lifted his head and let out a big sigh.

‘Our plans are in tatters,’ he said.

‘But I think our plans are still in order boss,’ said Romero, with calm certainty. ‘Even if Herbert sent out an SOS, there’s no way the military could reach us before Sato’s rendezvous. We’re approaching halfway to Mars.’

‘Yes,’ said Krushkov, nodding in acknowledgement.

‘And now that the PSIs have been collected,’ said Romero, ‘we’ll be able to track everyone down. Our job has been made easier.’

Krushkov managed a smile, then slapped Romero on the shoulder.

‘Good man!’ he said, heartily.

Zak swallowed hard, thinking of his role in all this.

‘Okay,’ continued Krushkov. ‘Let’s get everyone into that restaurant.’

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*3.30pm SST Sunday 13 January 2085*

Krushkov’s voice boomed over the ship’s loudspeaker system.

‘Attention! Passengers and crew. Go to the Valles Marineris Restaurant immediately. Anyone not there within the next five minutes will be shot.’

After a pause, his voice took a gentler, but equally threatening tone.

‘Yes, the ship has been taken over. Now don’t be foolish and hide. We have your PSIs, so we can track every one of you.’

Zak felt sick that the security measures would now be used by the hijackers to reinforce their control. He quickly searched the ship’s computer and brought up the PSI signal map, a diagram of the entire ship with yellow dots indicating the location of each person. At first, the dots were spread all over the ship, but once Krushkov repeated his demand, the dots began to converge towards the restaurant at the front. His own dot became conspicuous as the one furthest away.

He realised there wasn’t time to do anything other than comply. He logged out of the computer, said goodbye to the dogs, and left the kennels. As he neared the restaurant, he caught up a growing trail of people. The mood grew more sombre by the second, as Krushkov continued to roar his instructions.

Within the restaurant, a huge number of people had gathered. Zak reckoned there must be hundreds. He hadn’t seen so many people in one place since the Acceleration Room. But due the disorderly manner of arrival, this crowd seemed much larger, filling the restaurant.

To Zak’s surprise, many were dressed in uniforms - stewards, chefs, waiters, cleaners, engineers. It seemed as though there were almost as many people employed on the ship as paying passengers.

The crowd appeared to swarm, with everyone winding their way around the tables trying to find those they knew. Zak hurriedly did the same. Some way off he saw Skye with Caviana, wandering and searching. He made his way towards them. As he neared, Caviana caught sight of her father. She spoke a few words to Skye, they gave a little wave to each other, and Caviana trotted off to meet him.

Zak ran through the crowd and called out to Skye.

‘Zak,’ she replied with hands on hips, ‘I’m sure you’ve got something to do with this. But I can’t imagine what.’

‘You’ve no idea,’ said Zak, sensing that Skye didn’t appreciate the magnitude of the crisis.

‘No. But I do know that you’ve blown it with Caviana,’ she said. ‘That is such a relief!’

Zak gulped.

‘What d’you mean? I didn’t do anything.’

‘No, you didn’t.’

The fallout from the Ragboy incident was worse than he feared.

They soon caught sight of Mum and Dad and ran to join them. As families and friends reunited, the crowd settled down.

‘Does anyone know what’s going on?’ asked Dad.

‘The ship’s been hijacked, I saw it all take place,’ said Zak. ‘I don’t know what the hijackers are after, but we should keep our heads down - they’ve killed people.’

Soon after, the hubbub of the crowd was brought swiftly to a halt, as the squeaky blast of Krushkov’s gun grabbed the attention. Everyone turned to look at the hijackers who had formed a line in front of the main entrance. Krushkov stood ahead of them, arm raised, blaster pointing at the ceiling.

Out of the crowd stepped the ship’s Captain. He marched up to Krushkov, and shook his finger at him.

‘This is an outrage!’ he roared. ‘It’s an act of piracy.’

Krushkov launched at the Captain, punching him with the butt of his gun. A cry of horror went up around the restaurant as the Captain crumpled to the floor.

‘Piracy eh?’ sneered Krushkov. ‘Well you’d better shut up, or I’ll make you walk the plank.’

A doctor cautiously crept forward to tend to the Captain.

‘Now. Let’s get things clear,’ said Krushkov, addressing everyone. His voice was directed through the loudspeaker, and it reached Zak almost unbearably loud.

‘Our purpose here is simple - robbery. There is a very valuable cargo on this ship, and we will be taking it. The rule of all robberies is that if the victims co-operate, they don’t come to harm. So if you all behave, you will survive this incident in one piece. Your Captain has already generously volunteered for my demonstration of violence.’

Krushkov smiled and opened his hand towards the prone Captain.

‘Don’t even consider trying to escape,’ he continued. ‘I have given the order to my men to shoot on sight. And if you are bold enough to think you’ll take that risk, remember that we have all your PSIs. We’ll be watching, and we’ll track you down.’

Everyone in the restaurant was transfixed on Krushkov.

‘Now, there are some key people whose services we require – all senior, security, engineering and tech staff. Come to the front. We have the crew roster so we know your names. Don’t make us read them out.’

Zak watched as the crew members made their way to the front. The Captain struggled to his feet. Herbert trudged forward, head bowed. Geremi emerged, head held high, staring at Krushkov with contempt. All were ushered out of the restaurant by two of the hijackers at gunpoint. Zak realised that these staff were the ones who knew the ship and how it functioned.

When they were gone, Krushkov continued his speech.

‘Now, thanks to the efforts of your excellent Security team, we’ve had to conduct this operation a little earlier than planned, which means you’re all going to have to spend the next few days in this restaurant.’

A few suppressed groans could be heard.

‘But there is some good news,’ he said jovially. ‘You’ll be eating here for free!’

Krushkov paused, as if expecting a grateful response. Instead, there was total silence.

Zak stared intensely at Krushkov, with growing anger about the whole situation. He was angry at the hijackers, and angry with Herbert who hadn’t taken him seriously. Herbert had allowed a small problem to become a big one.

If it really was a robbery, then maybe the safest course of action would be to co-operate. But he was certain there was more to this than Krushkov admitted. Romero had said in the lifeboat room that they couldn’t allow witnesses to escape. The MMM were blowing ships up to destroy evidence. Zak felt a responsibility, even a willingness, to act.

Maybe he could do something. He knew his way round the ship, better than the hijackers who had stayed within a limited area. He had to escape from the restaurant. It would be risky because he could be tracked via the PSIs. But he could lead the hijackers on a chase that would cause a major distraction.

He looked around the arc of the restaurant. The minor entrances were being sealed by Romero, who fiddled with the doors before dragging furniture in front of them. Ubogu had moved to stand in front of the passage to the kitchens. He scanned the ceiling but could see no opening. The toilets at the back of the restaurant were the only place left. Zak had visited them before, and combined with his knowledge of the maintenance zone, was certain there was no way out from there.

He noticed that among all the tables, in the centre of the restaurant, was a familiar-looking large bench. A thought occurred to him. The outer shell had a vent leading to reception. Could there be another vent under that bench? He could see a gap underneath the seats at one end which seemed to lead back. He decided that he must investigate the bench. Unfortunately, there were a number of people sitting on top of it.

Krushkov gathered the remaining four hijackers for a quick discussion. He and Ubogu then left the restaurant. Romero approached the front of the crowd and spoke via the loudspeaker.

‘Attention!’ he shouted. ‘We need to search you and check you off the rosters. So, everyone move down to the far side. Take your things with you. Go!’

Zak at first hoped for mass disobedience, but then realised that this was a chance to grab the bench.

It took some gun pointing to get people moving, but before long, everyone was herding into one corner of the restaurant, leaving the rest of it empty. Zak had a suspicion that this could be a trick, and that the hijackers were going to gun them down. But he realised that the blasters and ES guns did not fire quickly enough. If everyone rebelled, the hijackers could be overpowered. It was only the threat that was keeping them in control. But who would be willing to die in making the first move?

Brigard made a brief search of the cleared area under the tables and chairs, to make sure nothing was left behind. Fang brought out a deep crate from the kitchen, which he plonked next to a table.

Romero and Fang positioned themselves either side of the table. Zak guessed that Romero was second in-command. Apart from Krushkov, he was the only one to exude authority. Tanned and with big hair to go with his moustache, he wasn't a big man. But an intense look of determination made him look fearsome.

Fang was the other saboteur. His moustache appeared much larger given his short but unkempt black hair. Slouching as if he didn't care much, he didn't look quite so threatening. But Zak sensed it wouldn't be a good idea to get on his wrong side.

Romero gestured the first person forward. It was a middle aged man in a suit. Fang ordered him to empty his pockets onto the table, then frisked him. Romero rifled through his belongings, and confiscated his wallet and wristband, which he threw in the crate. The man was obviously seething, but said nothing. He picked up his valueless belongings and made to walk to the other side.

'Wait! The ring,' said Fang, pointing to the man's left hand.

'No!' said the man firmly.

Fang punched him in the stomach. The man yelled and doubled over, but didn't fall. Then Fang whacked him on the back, and down he went.

There was a chorus of cries from the crowd.

Fang crouched down and pulled the ring off the man's finger.

Romero addressed the crowd again.

'And it will be the same treatment for anyone who hides weapons or valuables. So get them ready to hand over,' he said.

Zak sensed the mood change. Whereas initially it was more frustration than anger, the prospect of being mugged made everyone an individual victim. He suddenly thought of Skye and Gran's ring. He looked at Skye to see a sight he had never seen before. On her face was a look of utter horror.

Brigard had returned to the main door, and stood guard. Romero and Fang called people forward one at a time, to search them and their belongings.

The other end of the restaurant began to fill with increasingly upset passengers and crew members. Thankfully for Zak, they all camped at the tables. He hadn't anticipated a rush to occupy the bench, because its hard seats didn't look particularly comfortable compared to the lush upholstery of the dining chairs. And it was not as practical a place to situate yourself for a few days than a table. But the tables near to the bench were becoming occupied, so Zak felt the need to grab it now. He whispered to his family.

'We need to grab that bench. Let's make our way forward next.'

'What?' whispered Mum. 'I don't want to sit there for three days.'

'No, it will be better. You'll see,' said Zak, unwilling to give any explanation.

He broke forward from the crowd, presenting himself to Romero and Fang. He had nothing of any sentimental value, but was still marked to lose his wristband and Mind Patch. After this, he wandered over to the bench and sat down.

Next in line was Skye. With tears in her eyes she slowly made her way forward.

Immediately Fang noticed the ring.

'Give!' he said, beckoning with his finger.

Skye lifted her hand. Fang grabbed it and yanked the ring off, tossing it in the crate. He searched her thoroughly, while Romero took items from her bag.

She shuffled forward to where Zak was sitting, and slumped down with her head in her hands.

Zak uncomfortably put his arm round her.

'Don't worry,' he whispered. 'I'll get it back for you.'

She lifted her head up and made an expression of gratitude, then rested her head on his shoulder. Zak had not meant that he would go on some foolish quest for the ring, but that he would try and rescue the entire situation, and in doing so, recover it.

Mum and Dad joined them on the bench, both looking equally devastated. Zak wasn't sure what he was going to do, but he had taken the first step in fighting back. He decided to wait until a more appropriate time before investigating his potential escape route.

It took some time for the hijackers to process everyone. By the time they had finished, Zak's backside was already numb.

'Why did you make us sit here Zak?' said Mum. 'It's so uncomfortable.'

'Sorry,' he said. He knew it didn't matter now, as all the tables were taken.

To his surprise, and that of everyone after their miserable experience, Krushkov and Ubogu appeared in the main entrance carrying duvets and blankets. From the brown zigzag pattern, Zak recognised them as cabin bedclothes.

'I apologise for your traumatic experience so far,' said Krushkov. 'That is an unfortunate consequence of being a victim of crime. However, we are not complete barbarians, so we're going to help you get comfortable for the next few days.' He smiled. 'Conditional of course, on good behaviour.'

Zak realised the true situation, that if conditions got desperate, it would incite a rebellion they wouldn't be able to contain. Krushkov was now conducting a strategy of pacifying everyone.

With Fang, Romero and Brigard standing guard, Krushkov and Ubogu made heavy work of fetching and distributing the bedding. Each time they returned, they emptied their pockets into the crate containing the wallets, jewellery and other valuables. Zak concluded that having raided all the cabins to get the bedding, they would naturally have pocketed any other goodies found within.

When they had finished, Krushkov gave a quiet word to Fang, who then picked up the crate with a grunt, and carried it outside. Krushkov and Ubogu entered the kitchens.

If being given bedding was surprising but welcome, their next act of altruism left people open-mouthed. Out of the kitchen strode Krushkov, followed by Ubogu pushing a trolley filled with trays of "solar squares". He wheeled it round handing the pastries to the bemused prisoners.

'I hate to give the game away,' announced Krushkov, 'but we didn't make these for you - we found them!'

Krushkov approached the chefs, who were sitting together in their white uniforms. He pointed at the one with the biggest hat.

‘You,’ he said. ‘Can you keep everyone fed?’

‘Yes,’ said the chef nervously.

‘Do it then!’ said Krushkov, motioning toward the kitchen. ‘And keep it simple. Remember, no-one’s paying.’

The chef hurried into the kitchen. Krushkov signalled to Ubogu to follow and watch him.

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*8pm SST Sunday 13 January 2085*

Zak ate the chef’s quickly rustled up food, which still topped the fare from the Red Planet Bar. With a further announcement that permission was not required to visit the toilet, it became clear to him that the forthcoming days imprisoned by the hijackers would be bearable.

Despite the early time, several people had begun to bed down on the thickly carpeted floor. After hours of sitting on the bench, Zak found the floor welcoming. The ceiling lights appeared to have been brightened, and this made him sleepy after the stress of the day.

There was general calm throughout the restaurant. Despite their ordeal, few people had witnessed the gunfight and seen the killings. Only hijackers and security staff had been killed, so the vast majority of people had not suffered the deaths of friends or family. They had no reason to be distraught.

Four of the hijackers – Romero, Fang, Brigard and Ubogu sat quietly but alert by the main entrance.

The gap under the bench directly faced the main entrance, so Zak had draped a blanket over the whole bench, in the hope that anyone who had noticed the gap would forget about it.

Dad lay on top of the bench, and was dozing off. Mum and Skye were resting on the floor in front, lying close together. Zak decided it was time to make a break for it.

He lay down on the floor next to the gap, then covered himself completely by a duvet. He waited a few minutes in case anyone's attention had been drawn, then carefully lifted the bottom of the blanket and pulled himself into the gap. It was a narrow tunnel, so he had to drag himself along.

There was a faint glow of light at the back, but having entered from a brightly lit room his eyes hadn't adjusted, and he couldn't make out the shape. As he put his head over it, he could more clearly see the expected blur of a spinning fan. He groped around, hoping there was a handle on top. His hands caught some kind of bar, which he grabbed and pulled up. The space was tight, so he had to put his hands underneath the fan, lift it open and push it back.

He slithered head first through the hole, and dropped down onto a bare metal floor. He recognised the peculiar sight of the outer shell curving up in one direction, but stretching flat into the distance in the other.

He reached up and pulled the fan shut. He had escaped.