

Chapter Ten: ‘I’m a rocket ship on my way to Mars. On a collision course. I am a satellite. I’m out of control’ Queen (Mercury F, 1978)

A shot rang out, reverberating around the hangar, the echo bouncing off the walls like a metallic scream. Pandemonium broke out, some Lifers choosing to hunker down, others trying to make a break for it. A few more shots rang out, seemingly random, but having the effect of corralling the Lifers and crew members who had lost their heads. Suddenly, more marines, wearing insignia of the President’s Guards were pouring through the doors, taking a position to contain the heaving mass of desperate, panicked bodies.

Peppard had not actually moved, his sensors on full alert, combat processors ready to jump in to control for action in a microsecond. He was one of the few looking the other way, to the front, where the President and her Guard were. She was still standing, looking serene and unstressed, more of her marines taking up a protective phalanx. Closer to her he saw Cavendish surrounded by his dogs, ensuring he wasn’t even jostled in the melee. The British crime lord turned away from the front and his eyes locked on to Peppard with an inquisitive expression. Peppard answered with a shrug and a look to say your guess is good as mine. Cavendish nodded subtly and he faced the President’s position again.

A few more shots over the heads of all present, and the President stated loudly, ‘Gentlemen, gentlemen, please calm down, resume your positions and we’ll continue,’ and remarkably the manic scene calmed, Lifers and crew organising. Peppard’s sensors detected the pacifying infrasonic filling the hangar, his ears protected. He noted that the jackals and Cavendish were also in full control of themselves, also unaffected in some way. His respect for the gangster rose a bit more, and he smiled inwardly. While those present were fully reassembled, the President’s Guards stood stock still in their positions. *Well*, thought Peppard, *now we know who was in hangars two and three*.

That first shot, who fired and at whom? The President was in the least bit flustered, not even a hair out of place. Then the middle of the Lifers parted like the proverbial sea, the Captain’s body being taken out by some marines, a single hole in his forehead, blood and brains dripping from the back of his head leaving a trail. The Lifers zipped back together, avoiding the border made with the Captain’s brains and blood. Peppard was also noting that the marines who had accompanied them from Earth were absent. Whatever was planned, it was meticulous, and Peppard was sure that few might survive it.

‘The Captain was a traitor, one of a force working against the Earth and Confederated Planets. We’re in a new war. This mission is part of that war, a decisive blow to avoid the war breaking out across the solar system and a mass conflagration,’ the President outlined in earnest. The infrasound was ensuring compliance, but did not diminish cognition. Peppard caught sight of Anwar, porcelain white, profusely sweating, most likely with a laden nappy. The President continued, ‘You have all been preparing, and that preparation has not been useless. We are still landing on Mars, just earlier,’ and she paused again. A ripple of alarm, confusion, and worry passed along the Lifer lake like a minor wave in the hangar.

‘Our astrophysicists detected an anomaly just beyond Deimos, the smaller of the two Martian moons several months ago, and we have been investigating its nature. It appears to be one end of an Einstein-Rosenberg wormhole, and a navigable route. We will be exploiting this to travel before Mars lost its original atmosphere to prevent that loss. Five billion years ago!’ Peppard’s and Cavendish’s eyebrows rose, Anwar almost passed out in fear, and despite being tuned, the Lifers and crew became restive. *Jeez, the crazy cow is serious, goddam serious*, thought Peppard, locking eyes with Cavendish. Both men were incredulous but already running the numbers. **This was way beyond terraforming, this was engineering a planet five billion years ago...**

Keep that thought until **Season Two of Red Planet Lifers: *Beyond Deimos, Past Very Imperfect***