

Chapter 3: *'For here am I sitting in a tin can. Far above the world. Planet Earth is blue. And there's nothing I can do'* David Bowie (Bowie D 1969)

Peppard and almost two hundred others were all strapped into the commercial orbital craft Ortega for the initial leg from Earth to the orbiting Mars transporter, Schiaparelli. Prisoners, the Lifers, were all in the aft seating, with the marines and prison staff ahead of them, technicians and scientists near the front. A wily Lifer had joked that they would at least cushion the impact for all those in front should the Ortega crash, to some muted hilarity. It had briefly lessened the tension they all felt. The countdown was ticking and the flight crew were doing their usual pre-launch checks, communicating with Flight Control, and initiating the plasma outflow and ion channels for increasing thrust for escape velocity beyond the atmosphere.

There was not much of a send off, just Government and an array of military types, no media, and certainly no nervous family and friends. They were bid a perfunctory good luck and farewell, reiterating the mission objectives. Peppard thought to himself that they could have reduced even that to a, *'Fuck off, get it done, and if you all die, that's just cost the resources, you're all expendable'* Looking around the Lifers it was a population curve from the timid, likely killed early, through to the sociopaths, who were more than likely to do a lot of the killing. He chuckled to himself seeing Anwar looking he would hurl onto his boots, and probably over adjacent boots, too. If there was an opportunity to square his account with that fat greaseball, Peppard would be sure to take it. Perhaps a maiming, leaving him somewhere remote to die.

For a number of Lifers, the marines, and some of the remaining, this was not their first off-planet journey, including for Peppard, and they were aware it was a far cry from those old chemical rockets. For those whose maiden voyage this was, most looked like they would eject at either end, or even both. Though there was an initial thrust by the engines to accelerate to escape velocity, it was more subdued than those astronauts strapped to a significant volume of unstable chemical explosives. There was a little aggravation a few rows up as a Lifer started to lose it, but he was subdued by a thumping fist to his jaw from one of the prison officers, being quicker than breaking out tranquilisers and disturbing the medics. Always efficient when needed, Peppard grinned to himself.

And they were off, an initial thrust pushing all into their chairs, the Lifers having the least padding, of course, and then more of a rising curve of thrust as the ion engines powered them into space to dock with the Schiaparelli. And then almost nine months of travel over more than 100 million kilometers to Mars orbit. This was the best solution for fuel efficiency, distance, time and hoping that the majority of the crew did not lose it and freak out. Unbeknownst to them all, Government figured they could lose 10 or even 15 per cent out the airlock before compromising the mission. Peppard relaxed back into his chair and let himself drift until they would dock with their Mars vessel.

He was standing in a ditch, the rain pelting down, his cybernetic AI combat assistant, BallAche, as he christened it, scanning the surrounding environment for immediate threats. There were a number of the fallen in and around the ditch, some his comrades, and some of the Neos, with scattered remnants of armour and machinery. Drones had cut both sides to pieces, it was always cat and mouse between the drone manufacturers and anti-drone technologies. The former won out this time. There was also the inevitable collateral damage, locals, who were caught in the action.

As Peppard had climbed out of the ditch, hitching his backpack and equipment, he could hear some of their cries for help. He was under no obligation, but it still pulled at his conscience, albeit nullified by cybernetic circuitry on the inside of his skull. As he cautiously moved forward with the remnants of his squad he came across a young woman, an obviously dead baby beside her. At some point she had been quite pretty, but she was covered in blood, ravaged by drone fire. Her eyes were pleading, willing him to end the pain. As he fired and she jerked once, a rough shaking woke him up. He was in a cold sweat.