

Chapter Four: *'Mars ain't the kind of place to raise your kids. In fact, it's cold as hell. And there's no one there to raise them if you did. And all the science, I don't understand'* Elton John (Taupin B, John E, 1973)

Nine months, Peppard thought. He'd have got less for assaulting a guard, if he could have, but the limiter on his cybernetics ensured he could only kick the shit out of fellow prisoners. And cockroaches. Well, they were in space, not in the penitentiary, and being on Mars *could* lead to opportunities. *But*. There were a couple hundred of 'fellow prisoners' and hangers on, marines, scientists, and so on, any number who will be considering their options, too. Peppard suspected few, if any, would coincide with him surviving, certainly benefitting from their new situation. He had a wry smile on his face when Anwar, 'The Fat Controller' as he was called (linked to an ancient children's animation), waddled past with his entourage.

'Catching you smiling, Peppard, gives me the creeps, what are you thinking about, huh?', he spat in the prisoner's direction. 'Nothing, nothing, *Administrator*, only how you'll find Mars so much more comfortable, gravity being about a third of Earth's, an' all....', and Anwar flushed and clearly was containing his anger at the insult. He and his group walked on, but he gave Peppard a backwards glance as he passed, venom in his eyes.

Peppard put Anwar out of his mind, he'd get his moment on the planet. He had to attend the first of the training sessions as part of the multidisciplinary training programme. Created to ensure their survival on the Red Planet, as well as to initiate construction, terraforming and security of the group, the 'days' would be long, and the 'nights' short. Just as they would be on Mars. They were at least fortunate that a day on Mars (1 sol) was only 45 minutes or so longer than Earth's, albeit the year was almost twice that of his home planet, and the seasons were not comparable, especially nearer the poles. Mars tilted similarly to Earth, but it was smaller and had an odd orbital path around the sun compared to its 'sister planet'.

It will be cold, dusty (to say the least) and take a lungful of thin Martian air, well, *adios muchachos*, Next to no oxygen and 96% carbon dioxide, and only 1% the atmospheric pressure of Earth's. Your blood would boil away in the rarefied atmosphere as you suffocated. *Painful, but relatively quick*, Peppard thought, again with a smile to himself. He refocused on the speaker, droning on about, *the great mission, history in the making, blah, blah, opportunity to ensure the future expansion of our species, blah,blah, all expendable, will all likely die a grisly death, blah, blah, blah*, or so Peppard translated in his head from the speaker's actual words. The speaker was the Lead Scientist, Tavistock, quite a bear of a man, and clearly bright, if not a little pompous. Peppard thought the queer Bear Club prisoners would likely shag that pomposity out of Tavistock given the opportunity, and his smile widened.

Anwar had observed correctly, Peppard was smiling, much more than he had in an age. Perhaps this new challenge with a rather open ended future, shall we say, was reinvigorating. He had noted a few of the other Lifers had come out of their shell a little. Meanwhile, some were clearly going to loon out and breathe in some of that Martian air, that was evident already. They had neither the physical strength, the survival instinct, nor the skills, and found life in the penitentiary hard enough. They'd be the first to go, and the group would be organised ostensibly as Government had ordered, but really would be a survival of the fittest tribal fight melee. And Peppard had every intention of being among the winners. Sizing up the group after launch, he was already picking out potential rivals, possible allies (at least while he needed them), but definitely no friends. He didn't do friends, he let no one close, ever.

His thoughts suddenly pivoted to that young mother he had euthanised, but he pulled them back to his current situation just as rapidly. Tavistock was finishing his droning and about to handover to the survival guys who would teach everyone how not to die on Mars, or at least not too soon. *Nine fucking months*, Peppard thought. There was no smile now.