

Chapter Five: *'All the islands in the ocean. All the heavens in the motion. Let me show you the world in my eyes'* Depeche Mode (Gore M, 1990)

In some ways the Mars mission was fortunate as the Schiaparelli was a former intra-Sol System cruiseliner, the Condor. She had been converted for military use when she retired from flying the rich around the inner planets, and transporting goods to the Moon settlement. The military had stripped down the interior to its usual bare, austere and functional style. Gone were the ballroom, bars, and pastiche cloth dressings and cushions, and in came bare and uncomfortable, spartan furnishings and fittings.

Hence, the elevators were fairly luxurious, smooth in operation and whisper quiet. They were also great for an ambush. Peppard preferred the many staircases, but he was late for another interminable lecture, so he made a strategic mistake. *Sloppy, you're getting slow, fucktard*, Peppard's critical voice asserted as three lifers entered the elevator after him. Peppard noted that all three were augmented, technology enhancing their minds and bodies for combat, like him, but they were younger, likely less experienced. One went to the back right corner, the other two in the front corners, guarding the controls and doors.

Best defence is attack, and attack first, considered Peppard. A series of words and numbers were instantly recalled, initiating his cybernetic circuitry and body upgrades. His right leg shot out into the rear guy's groin with a twist of his foot as it made contact, giving Peppard a second or two advantage with the two in the front. They were already adjusting their positions to a defensive posture, *big mistake*, Peppard's combat processors thought as his hands shot out and curled thumbs hit the pressure points below their jawlines in what seemed an instant. Both dropped like they had been hit by lightning, but Peppard was already pivoting to hit the rear guy again and drop him, but the man, on his knees holding his groin weakly exclaimed, 'Peppard, stop, for fuck's sake, stop!', and at the same time he held up his right hand in a joint sign of surrender and for Peppard to halt his attack.

The combat processors took in the information they were seeing and hearing through Peppard's eyes and ears, decoding and then responding to the plaintive shout and hand signal. Peppard's right hand halted mid arc and his cybernetics stood down to a wary monitoring level. The stricken man on his knees exhaled audibly, and looked up at Peppard, standing like he was sculptured in an attack pose. 'Thanks, thanks. We had a message for you, not attacking,' he said weakly, starting to attempt to rise. Peppard's cybernetics monitored the man carefully, ready to continue with a knockout blow. 'Cavendish wants to see you, after shift time, forward observation deck,' the man continued standing, stooped, his groin throbbing.

Peppard took in the message with some surprise, 'What's Cavendish want with me?', he asked. 'We don't know, just the message. Three of us so you could see it was serious,' the man answered. The elevator gracefully came to a halt at Peppard's level, and as the doors slid open, he backed out watching the three men. The two front guys were still out cold, groin guy was looking at Peppard ruefully. He'd not forget Peppard, perhaps when the time and circumstances were right he'd go full berserker on the older lifer.

Still backing away, Peppard marched rapidly off to his lecture theatre in the former ballroom. Several hours of hydrodynamics in low gravity and weak atmospheres only made Peppard more edgy as he waited to get off shift and meet Cavendish. As had been the case for centuries there were always gang leaders in prisons, maintaining their power base and authority as they had in society. Sometimes it was difficult to know who really ran things. Cavendish was a particularly sadistic British criminal who was involved in all types of crimes on the outside, and on the inside, too. Peppard had heard Cavendish had people literally torn apart for relatively minor transgressions. *I can probably guess what he does want*, Peppard thought.

Peppard will have more than just a view on the observation deck in chapter six....