

Chapter Six: 'Hideaway by the way. You gotta pay Cavendish. From thenceforth riddled'
 Stephen the Storyteller (Palovcak S, 2025)

Just as Peppard assumed, the three goons from the elevator were loitering within hearing distance of Cavendish, looking peeved and like three jackals waiting to pick over his carcass. Cavendish was ignoring them, his gaze fixed on Peppard as he arrived at the observation deck. The British lifer was standing erect with a stiff spine, closely cropped hair, and a short, trimmed moustache. He had his hands behind his back, and his lifer suit looked as if it had been tailored to fit (it had). He was nevertheless attempting to look nonchalant, a smile quivering at the corners of his mouth. His eyes were a steely grey and blue, and they weren't in the same mood as his mouth.

Peppard waved by wiggling his fingers on an upheld hand at the three jackals, smiling, but his eyes were certainly not warm either. The jackals were clearly unimpressed, bodies flexing as if ready to pounce. 'Now you will throw your *dogs* a few treats while we're talking, Mister Cavendish, sir?', Peppard said in jest, keeping an eye on all four, while scanning his flank in the reflections off the observation glass. His combat circuitry was surveilling and on standby, merely a thought trigger away. 'Mister Peppard, welcome, and one, I'll be the talking, and two, my dogs are well *educated* and even potty trained, *thank you*. Please, take a seat,' and he pointed to one of the many sets of chairs lining the outer glass walls. His accent was cultivated and suited his exterior persona, a somewhat eccentric Englishman 'gentleman'.

Sitting down, Peppard faced Cavendish as he sat in the next chair, both seats devoid of their original comfort, while making sure he could see in front, to the side and behind him. He didn't relax. 'So, Mr Peppard, still a ways from this Mars caper, but no doubt you, unlike the majority here with the intelligence of a salad bar, are getting, shall we say, *prepared*. And, of course, so am I,' and Cavendish leaned in a little towards Peppard, conspiratorially. 'So, my fellow, you strike me as particularly *capable*, hence I want to ensure you're playing for the right team, *naturally*'.

'*Naturally*,' replied Peppard, the hint of irony in his inflection ignored by Cavendish, 'and what game is your team playing, may I ask?' To which Cavendish's smile broadened, 'yes, you can ask. *Domination*. I want Mars, all of it, and I aim to keep it when I have it. Hence, I need a team I can rely on, handpicked, no shirkers, and let's say always remaining grateful in my employ.' And with that he leaned in further, gripping Peppard's left shoulder momentarily. Cavendish could sense a lot from such a gesture, far more than a customary handshake, and he could feel the strength and readiness of this lifer, and certainly that he could not wholly trust him. As Cavendish leaned back, Peppard rubbed his chin and retorted, 'well, me being a simple guy, *Mister* Cavendish, that sounds like a mighty nice offer,' in his best country folk impression. Cavendish once again ignored this, but he was keeping count.

'Okay, Mister Peppard, you're smart, perhaps a little over confident, but can I count on you to be in my team?' Cavendish asked as if he was in a school playground and pulling other kids into his gang. Before Peppard could say anything, the emergency klaxons sounded, red lights flashing over all doors and exits. 'Will all crew and passengers return to their appointed berths and strap in, lively!', barked the command. All five present on the observation deck were momentarily off guard. 'Well, Mister Cavendish, you're good, but not this good. I don't think you organised this, so let's pick up after whatever emergency is over, assuming there's not a big gaping hole in the ship now,' and before Cavendish and the jackals could move a muscle, Peppard was already sprinting to the exit.

Just as he arrived at his berth alongside other lifers, with some already strapped in, there was a vibration through the floor and a slight shuddering. Peppard halted for a moment, feeling the sensation and thought, *someone is docking with the ship, what the fuck now?*. He jumped in, strapping in partially like he'd been trained all those years back. Just in case.