

Chapter Seven: *'He's a rebel and he'll never ever be any good. He's a rebel 'cause he never ever does what he should'* The Crystals (Pitney G, 1962)

Three hours passed, and the Lifers were restive, grumbling and cussing about being locked up while whatever was happening happened. Theories had swept the crowd of berths like competing infections, a favourite emerging that the mission was scrubbed and they were going to be airlocked. Needless to say the Lifers would not be given a suit when they were, which ordinarily is a prerequisite for floating in the vacuum of space. Peppard gave no credence to any of the wild conspiracies being promulgated, he had already come to the conclusion they must be picking up supplies, equipment, or perhaps even people.

He patiently lay back in his berth, keeping vigilant for any minute vibration or noise again. There was a time indicator at the head of the berth and three hours had passed before he felt the same sensation as before, highly suggestive of the other ship uncoupling and likely reversing out of the Schiaparelli's immediate orbit. Sufficient time for only some minor supplying, or small equipment, but plenty of time for personnel transfer. Peppard decided it was a transfer and wondered who had joined their merry band.

'All crew, all crew, stand down, prepare to recommence our original path. Passengers are now able to continue their agendas, you must continue your agendas!' The Lifers left their berths, grumbling and complaining, but all heading to their allotted classes and training. Peppard was purposely amongst the stranglers, biding his time, observing the prison staff, looking for any clues as to what just transpired. He reached the elevators, but headed on to the stairwell, *twice bitten, twice shy*. He could feel the thrumming of the ship's thrusters as the Schiaparelli was underway. Someone was approaching him, his sensors predicting them to be a minimal threat.

Cavendish gripped Peppard's right elbow in a firm, but directing way. 'Well, Peppard, one, is it a yes or no, and two, any thoughts as to what was being transferred from the transporter that just docked?', letting go of the other's arm as they reached the top of the stairwell. Both men halted, Cavendish's three jackals at a respectful, but ready distance. 'Well, it's a yes, *naturally*, and I would say it's more the question as to who, rather than what transferred,' Peppard responded. Cavendish nodded sagely, recognising both answers. 'Very good, we'll speak again soon, very soon, keep your nose clean, but your eyes and ears open, *Peppard*,' and he moved up the stairs, the jackals slinking after him, narrowed eyes directed at their embarrassing nemesis. *Talk so I listen*, Peppard thought, but Cavendish was neutralised, and though they hated him, the jackals did as Cavendish's bid, to look out for him. Until he was no longer required, that is.

He made his way down the stairwell, keeping wary, even though he had Cavendish and his gang on his side for the time being. *A few of the other boss Lifers may be pissed, but they would not do anything significant until after planet fall*, Peppard considered. As he started to leave the stairwell, he could hear the sound of a group of men coming up towards him from the lower levels, most likely the aft airlocks. Fortunately, there was enough shadow for him to hang back from the stairwell exit and still see who would be coming. A squad of marines that were not part of the ship's detachment and clearly augmented, moved stealthily and effectively past, with three people in their midst. Two suited men looked like administrative underlings, as their body language suggested no capability of threat other than with a stylus and a sneer. It was the third person that attracted Peppard's attention with significant surprise, his eyebrows arching. A middle aged woman in an executive suit, perfectly coiffured hair and cosmetics was walking briskly up the stairs. *Madame President of the Inner Planets, no less, and what the fuck was she doing here?* Peppard felt that the game they were all playing to and on Mars had suddenly ratcheted up. He turned and made his way to another boring lesson. Plenty of time to think this through.

So what was the President of the Inner Planets doing on the Schiaparelli? Look out for chapter eight soon!