

Chapter Nine: *'You can't deny the prize, it may never fulfill you. It longs to kill you
Are you ready to die?'* Chris Cornell (Cornell CJ & Arnold CJ, 2006)

The Schiaparelli was altering trajectory, its long, sleek form like a metal spear with its engine at one end driving the ship forward. Limited artificial intelligence was managing the whole manoeuvre, but the commands were from humans (advanced AI was regulated and then banned twenty-five years prior). There was an imperceptible sensation for those occupying the Schiaparelli, few noting it, one being Peppard, as his experience and the fine sensor arrays were considerably more capable than human. A few other augments noted it too, but he was the only one who made two plus two make a feeling of recognition, unease, and a lack of surprise. Madame President comes aboard and their destination is altered. Only questions are where, why and what the implications may be.

In a rest period Peppard was quietly discussing it with Cavendish. He had twigged he was under surveillance, expected it, so he had just embarrassed one of the jackal trio by walking up to him and asking for an appointment with the boss. Now, while he and the boss were chatting, the jackals looked even more embarrassed, pissed off, and angry at their continual antagonist. 'Okay, Peppard, possible rationales for a course correction, or change, bearing in mind recent events?', the British gangster prompted the other Lifer. 'Well, one, Madame President has commandeered this ship, two, why and where, and so on, is in her head, and three, there may be a distinct possibility that our original mission has changed, or it was not really true,' Peppard mused, flexing his arms with his hands linked.

Cavendish nodded affirmatively. 'Yes, that all makes sense. So, we no doubt will learn in due course where, and then why, but more than likely it will not be anything we would have signed up for, not that we did for the mission in the first place!'. Their conversation was then rudely interrupted, 'All crew, Lifers, and military personnel, all crew, Lifers, and military personnel. Assemble in main hangar one, main hangar one by ten minutes. Immediate assembly!', was announced by the Ex-O. All present looked at others of their fellow Lifers, and there were the inevitable waves of speech rushing back and forth through the rec room. 'Cavendish smiled with some mirth and some suspicion, 'Well we're going to likely find out even sooner, and that was the Ex-O, not the Captain of this tug. No doubt preparing for our little assembly.' And he gave a look at the jackal trio, his dogs were already looking expectantly as if for a treat each. 'I'll see you up there, going to hang back a little to watch what moves happen as the announcement starts,' and Peppard lingered there. The foursome, boss and dogs, were soon in the throng of Lifers moving through the exit, a hushed chatter following, like clerical members of the old Vatican going into a conclave.

As the group thinned out Peppard joined the stragglers. Hearing the whispering he picked up mostly banal ideas, all negative. Reaching the stairwell he took the stairs quickly down several levels to the main hangar. He held back again near the exit, waiting to see if anyone would enter the hangar from the rear, but there was no one. Marines ensured the doors could close, and Peppard observed curiously that they were members of the President's guard. It was becoming clear who was now in charge of all of them.

The main hangar, enormous in volume, was filled with nearly everyone aboard, and a few vehicles for Mars. There were no attack or drop ships for this mission, although it was not clear what was in hangars two and three. He could see the Captain and bridge crew out front next to a lectern. Ranged around it were more Presidential marines. He could also see the swarthy face of Anwar, looking worried, sweaty, with his furtive eyes darting this way and that. Now that worried Peppard, he'd have thought Anwar would be like a pig in shit. Something was definitely up. Then the marines and crew stood to attention as Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum escorted Madame President to the lectern. There was a hushed silence and then a ripple as recognition spread. The President of the Inner Planets stood and took a breath....

Will Peppard, Cavendish and all on the Schiaparelli find their new fate in the final episode of this season?