



the
MARTIANS

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The Martians

by K.E. Strokez

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It had taken them months of preparation: 18 hours a day, 6 days a week. The 7th day was compulsory recuperation. Those who skipped out on recuperation to give themselves an edge over the others soon found themselves too fatigued to be of any use to The Program.

They lined up, waiting for the flurry they had been told to expect to begin. As a precaution, they had been ushered onto the stage before the press was let in, just in case any of them was waylaid by a microphone ninja.

The year was 2020: the approximate date was one week before The Earth Phase of The Program ended.

The Program was a joint effort by most world governments to effectively establish the first manned mission to Mars. This mission was to culminate in the formation of the First Martian Colony, whose main purpose would be to mine the planet and establish regular transport shipments to Earth.

There were 10 people on the stage: 4 administrators and 6 astronauts. All had been told to expect a flurry: this would be the first time any of them had met The Press. Ever. And this was to be their first ever unveiling to the world's public.

Justus Paton would lead the mission: named Captain by the administrators. They all agreed none could have chosen a more perfect person to lead the crew. He stood taller than the others, handsome, intelligent, and impatient.

"Heads up," the security guards warned, just as the doors opened and the surge of media personnel rushed into the room.

Justus winced: so this was what it was like to be famous.

They stood behind a screen which showed nothing but their silhouettes. Already the reporters were making speculations based on those same silhouettes.

"We can pick out 6 male and 4 female figures standing behind the screen," one was barking into his microphone "but from what we know, only 6 of these people will make the historic journey to Mars. The other 4 will take care of them when they're on their way. You heard it first, here on-"

Already the others around him were attempting to either steal or scramble his communication signal. And they were failing miserably.

"It's like watching a shark feeding-frenzy," Marco Gianni remarked.

Justus appreciated the observation.

“Kill the mics,” Lothar Jurgensson said into his earpiece.

The Chief Administrator of The Program was obeyed: every single microphone in the room not belonging to members of The Program was disabled.

“Members of The Press,” Lothar said “if you would kindly be seated.”

“I don’t think those guys can do anything kindly,” Marco remarked “I can swear I smell blood.”

“That’s probably me,” Siobhan Tryptych thought, wondering if anyone would notice.

They were all in dark black tunics: an advantage to some extent. The problem with the tunics was how tight they were.

They had to wear them as often as possible: to get used to the feeling of the new fabric. Apparently it could stay clean for 6 months at a time without needing to be cleaned. It was also fitted with bio-mechs to do everything from monitor the wearer’s life conditions to notify them where the nearest bathroom was.

Not like they’d ever forget where the bathrooms were on their ship.

“I have the pleasure,” the Chief Admin said when the press had sat down and stopped swearing at one another “to announce the members of the crew of earth’s first manned mission to Mars.”

Polite applause issued from the crowd. Justus reasoned that they must have been clapping so that they wouldn’t punch each other. The atmosphere in the room was highly charged: this was one of the biggest stories of the year, and whoever turned in the most data would earn the most money.

“I’ll begin by introducing the administrators of the program,” Lothar went on “just to be clear, the administrators will stay on earth.”

“As if they don’t already know that,” Diana Fry thought, rolling her eyes.

“Chief Technical Supervisor...”

There was polite applause. Administrators weren’t as important to those outside The Program. To those within it, the Admins were running the show.

“Chief Environmental Supervisor...”

“Lunar Base Liason...”

“...and myself, Chief Administrator Lothar Jurgensson.”

The astronauts knew that the admins were not visible to the media, who were furiously taking photos of them as the introductions went on and each was revealed.

“Now for the main event,” Lothar said, mocking a sports commentary “I present the crew of the space ship Terra One: Captain Justus Paton.”

There were hoots of exaltation as the cameras captured Justus’ photogenic appearance. It was clear that he was perfect celebrity material.

“Lieutenant Marco Gianni.”

“Sub-Lieutenant Diana Fry- Medical Officer.”

It was clear the media liked her appearance too. She could feel their eyes on her, and was disgusted.

“Expect a tabloid feature on you and Justus,” June October joked.

“Doctor June October, Geologist and Extraction expert.”

“Craft Engineer Tanya Grogan,” Lothar went on.

“And last but not least- Ship Custodian Siobhan Tryptych.”

Her lip was quivering as she smiled.

“You can stop now,” Tanya nudged.

“I think I’ve fucking stained my pants,”

Siobhan’s microphone, which she had forgot to switch off like the others had, captured and her remark and broadcast it to the whole room. An awkward silence permeated the gathering...before the laughter erupted.

“How’d she even get past the fucking training program,” Marco remarked as he and Justus floated around in the weightless simulation environment they were expected to sleep in at least twice a week.

“She’s just a glorified janitor anyway,” Diana scoffed “not like she’s in charge of anything.”

“Has she figured out the anti-grav toilet yet?” Justus asked, trying to be objective.

“Tanya’s working on a hack,” June explained “just so we won’t be stuck in zero gravity with shit flying around.”

“She’s modifying the ship?”

“Just one of the toilets,” June replied “she’ll let us know which one it is so we don’t go into it by accident.”

“Potty training isn’t gonna work, huh?” Marco sneered.

“Every mission has an affirmative action liability in the crew,” Diana shrugged “ain’t like this one’s gonna be any different.”

“First manned mission to Mars.”

“Terra One.”

“In one year and 6 days’ time.”

“History here we come,” Marco sighed triumphantly.

--

“Not only did you embarrass the entire Program,” Lothar was yelling in his office “but you FORGOT to turn your mic off! How do you expect to maintain the ship if you can’t even remember to turn your mic off?”

Siobhan was trembling, and her stomach hurt.

“You forgot to do it in the rehearsal as well. You don’t even know how to take a shit in the anti-grav toilet, for crying out loud! I know we have one week to go, Trypwick-”

“It’s Tryptych, sir.”

"It can be Trip-shit for all I care. You are FIRE-"

His AR specs vibrated: a call was coming in.

"Tell me you found someone," Lothar said to the mouthpiece extending from his glasses.

"They don't want to go," came the reply "we've tried all 27 guys who applied before. Some new applicants have expressed an interest, but there's just no way we could have them ready in 6 days."

"So what are you saying?"

"I'm saying we don't have a choice. The other members of the crew can't be expected to do custodial work, and no one else who's qualified wants to show up. We're gonna have to stick with Tripwick."

"*Tryptych*," Siobhan thought to herself, irritated.

"Alright listen here, Trip-shit," Lothar said, glaring at her "you stay out of everyone's way. And you use this- do you know what it is?"

"It's a notepad, sir."

"And this?"

"A pen, sir."

"You can write, can't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. WRITE DOWN EVERYTHING I SAY TO YOU FROM NOW ON, DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?"

--

The crew would spend their last day before take-off with their families. They weren't allowed off base, just in case someone kidnapped them and held The Program to ransom.

Siobhan spent that day in her room, trying to memorize the sequence to the AG toilet. After several repetitions of the procedure, she felt her eyelids grow heavy...

...she was awakened by the base crew, who had been sent to find her.

“Have you been asleep the whole fucking time?!” they yelled, yanking her off the bed.

“Easy, what the fuck are you-“

“YOU’RE GOING INTO SPACE IN AN HOUR, YOU DUMB BITCH!”

--

“I can strap myself in, Tanya,” Siobhan sighed as the Engineer checked the locks.

“Just making sure.”

Justus walked in with his management tablet.

“Did you check the filters?” he asked Tanya.

“Thrice. They’re working fine.”

“What about the gangway?”

“I got the squeak out of the screws,” she replied “just needed oil.”

“Good job.”

He left without acknowledging Siobhan, who then realized that everything he had asked about was the job of the ship's custodian.

“They got the ship ready without me...”

“Alright everyone,” came Marco’s voice over the ship’s public communication channel: the Publicom
“strap yourselves in. Blast off in 15 minutes.”

“Ladies and Gentlemen of Terra One,” came the voice of someone they deemed to be important “this is a historical moment for...”

Siobhan realized she’d left all her personal belongings in her room.

“Hey Tanya,” she said, hesitantly “I think I’ll have to borrow-“

“We got your bag on board,” the Engineer interrupted “if that’s what you’re talking about.”

Siobhan felt a surge of relief and appreciation. She turned off her mic: the first time she had successfully done so.

“You know,” she said, knowing no one else could hear her “you guys might be assholes, but you’re the kindest people I know.”

--

None of them had been in space before: this would be their first mission off earth. Their first task would be to deliver a shipment to Lunar Base and dock there for 2 days before proceeding onward to Mars itself.

“*They’ll probably leave me there,*” Siobhan thought as she floated to the maintenance hub in the rear of the ship to check the fuel rods “*there’s got to be someone on the moon who’d trade places.*”

Lothar had the same idea. Back on earth, he was conducting an interview with a man on Lunar Base who was better qualified for the mission.

“It’d be good to have 3 men on board,” Lothar went on “even out the odds, you know?”

Henry Penry agreed.

“Can’t have that many women on board, especially in charge of important tasks. Dooms the mission from the get-go, know what I mean?” Henry added.

Lothar nodded.

“I don’t envy those guys up there when their periods synchronize,” he said.

“But they’re going to be balls-deep in them by the time they’re half way to Mars anyway. It gets lonely in space, you know?” Henry quipped, grinning slyly.

Lothar shook his head. This man might be better qualified, but he was definitely not suitable for the mission.

“There has to be *someone* on Lunar Base who can mop a fucking floor without raping someone,” Lothar groaned, exhausted.

--

Siobhan hated Lunar Base. She and the other girls on the crew were the only women on the moon: a fact that they realized was not to their benefit when they had their introductory dinner.

Justus and Marco attributed their voting to stay on the ship to PMSing: a fact they didn't appreciate.

And then the incident happened.

Justus and Marco, who hadn't had the special blend of lunar alcohol, were knocked out cold by the draft they were given. 70 lunar base members attempted to storm the ship.

Their attempt remained just that: and it had failed miserably. They had stuck the invaders to the ship's outer hull, lifted off their docking pad, magnetized their suits to stick to the pad itself and waited for each of them to fall off.

Then they had docked the ship again, squashing any of them who hadn't died in the fall. The other members of the base melted away after that: frightened to death.

Tanya and June set out to get Marco and Justus back. By the time both men had recovered, the Terra One had set a course to Mars.

--

"They did WHAT?!"

"70 good, honest men," the Lunar Base Commander thundered at Lothar "smashed to a pulp on a docking pad. We have footage."

"They wouldn't attack without reason to. And by your accounts, Paton and Gianni were on Lunar Base when this happened, am I correct?"

"You are correct."

On the Terra One, Justus and Marco were getting their first dressing-down from Earth Command.

"There's a pending investigation," Lothar went on "and a warrant out for the possible arrest of the rest of the crew if they're found guilty of whatever the hell went on up there."

"I understand, sir."

"Keep them out of the Nav center, you hear?"

“Yes, sir.”

“And halve their rations for the week. Stupid bitches wanna act crazy, they can do it on empty stomachs.”

“We should have told them what really happened,” Marco said to Justus once the link was severed.

“And have them find out we were drugged? Are you crazy?”

“Those Lunar Base guys were gonna storm the ship. The girls were acting in self defense.”

“Like fuck they were. They had this planned from the beginning.”

“I’ll go talk to them about-“

“No you won’t.”

“Jesus, Paton. We gotta hear their side of this too. They got us off the base, after all.”

It had been another thing Justus wasn’t willing to even think about: the fact that Tanya and June had slumped both men over their shoulders and carried them back on to the ship was even more embarrassing than getting roofied on the moon.

“This mission has to be perfect,” Justus growled “you know what those techies are like down there. This is just the kinda bullshit they’d sell to the media. So what if they’d get caught doing it? All that’d happen to them is they’d get fired. What about us, huh? Do you wanna be the guy who fucked up the most important mission in history when you get back to earth?”

Marco didn’t.

“Or do you wanna be the guy who successfully Navigated us to Mars and back?”

Marco did.

“Second guy to walk on another planet.”

Marco definitely did.

“Let those bitches screw themselves over. If they get worse we can handle ‘em. But they gotta know we don’t owe them anything. This is our ship, you remember that. Our mission. They’re just along for the ride.”

--

Lunar Base Command issued its decision not to pursue the matter regarding the docking pad massacre: and then they realized that their only working space ship, the Lunar Five, had been damaged when Terra One had flown off.

This was the last straw.

The mutiny had began at 2 am, when they were sure the Commander was asleep in his room. They had hacked the door code, crept up to his bed and shot him right through the head.

The others had forced their way into the Comm tower, and announced that they had taken over the base. It took less than an hour to completely seize the base, and get rid of anyone who’d tell.

Then they had focused their bio-weapon missiles on the coordinates they had tortured the Chief Navigator to obtain...and waited for a range to be set.

--

“This isn’t enough,” Siobhan complained at the table.

They had established a rule to eat communally: this way they’d feel less like they were pioneers and more like they were in a college dorm back on earth. A college dorm that served too little food.

“We have to cut down our rations,’ Justus said without looking at her “we didn’t exactly get a chance to get more food on Lunar Base.”

“Yes we did,” Siobhan surprised everyone by saying “I went to the procurement office soon as we got there.”

They had thought she’d stumbled off to find a bathroom.

“That can’t be right,” Tanya said, shaking her head “I went to the procurement office before we left.”

Diana rolled her eyes, tired of Siobhan’s childish attempts to appear important.

“You can’t both have gone,” she said acidly “and we all saw Tanya going.”

“Check the cameras,” Siobhan challenged.

And sure enough: she was right. So was Tanya.

“So that means we have extra supplies,” Siobhan pushed “which means we can have full rations.”

“No we can’t,” Justus replied sternly, looking at her for the first time “we’re in space now. There isn’t a shopping mall round every corner and an online shopping app that will deliver to our front door, is there?”

“And we don’t have support from Lunar Base any more, remember?” Marco chimed in.

“We were all told this would happen,” Justus went on “it was part of our training. The crew shouldn’t compromise on any essential decision just because *one member* isn’t up to it.”

“I’ve done eating,” Diana said, pointedly to Siobhan.

“Good for you,” Siobhan replied.

“Clear the plate, Trip-shit.”

“Tryptych,” Siobhan said, picking Diana’s plate up and leaving the table.

“And since you’re done too,” Justus said when Siobhan had got to the sink “we can’t waste all this food now, can we?”

She watched as he pulled her plate over to him, splitting her ration between himself and Marco. They covered it in salt before they ate it.

--

Their first outer hull maintenance happened a week later: and since Siobhan couldn’t handle the sight of blood and gore, she would have to stay indoors while the rest of the crew were outside.

“You’ll probably forget to clip your tether and float off anyway,” Diana remarked as she slid her helmet on “and who’d do the dishes if we lost you?”

“Remember what we practiced yesterday,” Justus said, tapping her on the shoulder.

Siobhan turned to face him, He handed her the controller.

“The blue one’s for the air lock. The yellow ones are for doors 1 to 5. The green ones are for doors 6 to 12.”

“And the red ones?”

“Emergency doors 1 to 25.”

“Good. Which one do you hit when we’re tethered?”

She showed it to him.

“Which one’s for the air hose?”

She got that right too.

“Everyone ready?” Justus asked the rest of the crew. They were.

“We’re counting on you,” he said as the doors shut behind them “this is really important, Siobhan.”

She was touched.

“You guys have fun out there, k?” she said, waving them off.

They knew she couldn’t hear them in the air lock.

Diana burst out laughing. So did Marco and June.

“What’s so funny?” Tanya asked, puzzled.

“That’s the fucking *laundry remote* she’s holding,” June guffawed.

“Shit, you guys,” Tanya said, shaking her head.

“Did you think I was gonna trust her with the REAL one?” Justus snorted.

“The ship’s auto-functions are in charge while we’re out here,” June explained “we don’t need the remote for anything right now.”

“Then shouldn’t she be out here with us?” Tanya asked “we could use all the help we can get. And she *is* the custodian and everything.”

“Do you wanna spend your first space walk babysitting the ship’s janitor?” Marco quipped.

“Good point,” Diana agreed “as you said, we’ve got a lot of work to do out here. Last thing we need is another incident.”

“We shoulda let her out so she could shit,” Justus added, guffawing “she’ll be used to turds floating around her head by now.”

Tanya didn’t mention the fact that Siobhan’s designated bathroom was the cleanest on board. They had banned the custodian from going into any other.

The outer door opened, and June remembered that the air lock on this particular ship had speakers in it. Their conversation had been broadcast to the cockpit. Siobhan was banned from there too, so it made no difference.

But why did she suddenly care what Siobhan heard?

--

She had just hung up the last mop when the alarms went off.

“WARNING: BIOHAZARD APPROACHING SHIP. INITIALIZE SAFETY PROTOCOL BY ENTERING CLEARANCE PASSWORD.”

Siobhan rushed to the table, where she’d placed the remote they’d handed her. She fiddled inside her pocket, pulling out the scrap of paper where she had written the password Justus had given her.

“Console,” she said, remembering the proper function call “create object Admin as new Override.”

“WARNING: BIOHAZARD APPROACHING SHIP. INITILIAZE SAFETY PROTOCOL BY ENTERING CLEARANCE PASSWORD. TO ENTER PASSWORD, CREATE NECESSARY DATA STRUCTURES BY COMMUNICATING VIA ADMIN REMOTE.”

“Console,” Siobhan said, her voice getting shrill “create object...no, cancel.”

She ran over to the console wall panel.

“Console,” she said, her heart thudding in her chest “check remote status of hardware item...” she turned the remote over to read the serial number “#529046A.”

“Laundry remote is at 100% efficiency and 99.45% battery life.”

“Laundry remote?!”

“Console!” Siobhan barked as the warning alarm sounded again “open communication link to crew members on hull!”

“Communication link granted for 5 minutes,” console acquiesced.

“JUSTUS!” Siobhan yelled.

No reply came.

--

The crew on the hull was panicking.

“It’s not opening the door!”

“Get Siobhan to-“

“THE SHIP DOESN’T OPEN WHEN HAZARDS APPROACH!” Marco yelled, clawing frantically at the door.

“Is there a way to talk to her?” Diana asked Tanya.

Justus and Marco were hammering at the door.

“Idiots,” the Engineer thought, as the hulls’ electric defenses activated and zapped them backwards.

“BIOHAZARD MAKING CONTACT IN 10...9...”

“Guess this is it,” Tanya said, shutting her eyes.

Those who’d kept their eyes open saw nothing but darkness afterwards.

--

Earth Command was beside itself.

“Whose idea was it to have them ALL on the fucking outer hull at the same time?!” Lothar was screaming.

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