



the  
**MARTIANS**

K. E. Strokez

# 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 7<sup>th</sup> 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.

“Yours,” said someone who was automatically fired.

Lothar then composed himself.

“Now type,” he said to the secretary, who was trembling as she waited for the dictation “dear Mr. President, etc etc etc...”

“We regret to announce that all members of the Terra One crew have been-“

“Actually, sir,” the secretary said, clearing her throat.

“What?” he asked, realizing she could speak for the first time “did you just interrupt me?”

“I said,” she decided to speak louder this time “not all members of the crew were on the outer hull.”

“What do you mean?”

“Siobhan Tryptych, sir. She’s in the cockpit,” the secretary said, pointing at the screen behind him.

“Come in, Earth Command,” Siobhan repeated “can anyone hear me?”

“How did you get in the cockpit, Trip-shit?”

“It just let me in. sir. And it’s Tryptych.”

“So now the ship’s authorization is faulty too, just great,” Lothar growled.

“Actually, sir,” the secretary said “since the ship can’t communicate with any of the other members of the crew, Siobhan is now Captain by default: and Navigator.”

Lothar hated people who were right when he wasn’t. Especially when people were watching.

“You’re fired,” he said to the secretary, then turned back to face Siobhan.

“Now listen here, Trip-shit,” the man said “you probably don’t even know, but the ship’s been hit by a bio-hazard. I want you to find out what hit the ship and find out when you’re set to change your course.”

“Already sent you a report on it,” the girl replied “I’ve been waiting for a reply for 5 minutes.”

“WHO HAS THAT FUCKING REPORT?!” Lothar thundered at everyone present.

“You do.”

“What do you mean, I do? Do I look like a data analyst to you, you sorry piece of shit? Why’s it on *my* fucking tablet and not on *yours*, huh?”

“Cos you requested that all reports coming from the ship should go directly to you and no one else, sir.”

“YOU’RE FIRED!”

There was a pause in the shouting, and then-

“WHERE ARE YOU GOING? GET BACK HERE AND ANALYZE THE DATA FIRST, THEN LEAVE, YOU FUCKING IDIOT!”

It was a variant of Khilna-7: an Indian-originated bio-weapon that had been spawned in the rat and feces-infested sewers close to what was left of the nearly-dried-out river once called the Ganges. And then the door flew open and the Admiral of the Earth’s Space Program walked in, causing everyone to salute.

“What’s this I hear about a problem with Terra One?” she barked at Lothar.

He handed her his tablet. Her eyes roved over the letters and symbols.

“Who’s left?” she asked.

“Siobhan Trip-shit,” the man replied, sweat pouring down his face “custodian.”

“Alright listen up everyone,” the Admiral said, making everyone stiffen more than they had when she walked in “this event had been foreseen and adequately planned for. The Terra One’s outer hull was hit by a concentrated dose of Khilna-7. One crew member evaded impact by staying indoors.”

“Those of you who know anything about Khilna-7 know that it does not kill instantly. The fact that the crew were wearing space suits when they were hit means they might have a chance to survive.”

“The single unaffected member was selected for this mission because she is *immune* to several viruses, including Khilna-7.”

There was a collective gasp, then everyone stiffened again.

“Therefore,” she went on “our priority is to salvage what we can and make sure Terra One gets to Mars. None of you shall leave this compound or communicate with the outside world until that is accomplished.”

Lothar’s eyes were wide open now.

“Additionally,” she went on “because of their attack on Terra One, and because of their mutiny: Lunar Base has been declared a war zone. It is to be eliminated, ladies and gentlemen, so you have a new task on your hands now: designing and implementing a Second Lunar Base.”

*“We are so screwed,”* someone whispered at the back of the room.

“And it’s *TRYPTYCH*, Jurgensson. Now get to work, all of you.”

It became clear that the Admiral intended to stay and watch them work, pistol drawn.

--

Diana’s eyes were blinking. Her head felt like it had been pried open with a crowbar.

“Sleeping beauty awakes,” Siobhan said cheerfully.

“What the fuck...”

“You had some seriously nasty seizures,” Siobhan explained “I had to strap you down.”

“What the fuck...”

“Those are feeding tubes.”

“I know what feeding tubes are, you idiot.”

“Don’t try to sit up,” Siobhan pleaded “you won’t be able to-“

Diana threw up...into the bucket Siobhan had readily grav-posted to the side of her bed.

“Where’s everyone else? They left you here with me?”

“Everyone else is sick,” Siobhan replied “Khilna-7.”

“Why aren’t you in a quarantine suit, you idiot?!”

"I'm immune," Siobhan replied, taking the puke-filled bucket and dumping it into the bio-waste incinerator.

*"She knew to dump the whole bucket and not reuse it,"* Diana thought to herself *"someone else must be alright."*

"Who's helping you? Justus? Marco? June? Tanya?"

"Earth Command."

"Did you have any medical training back on earth?"

"Nope. Got everything from Earth Command."

"You learned to do all this in one day?"

"It was really hard the first day," Siobhan replied "but after 6 months, it's a cinch."

--

"So you can't see a thing, huh?" Lothar said sympathetically as Justus shook his head.

"Neither can Marco or June," the Captain replied "has it really been 6 months?"

"It has."

"We must be really off schedule," Justus said apologetically "but circum--"

"You're on schedule, kid. That custodian of yours has been navigating while you were in a coma," Lothar assured him.

"And taking care of the rest of you, and cleaning the ship, and decontaminating the outer hull... manually. And doing some repairs," the Admiral added proudly "all with minimal assistance from us, I might add."

"Well I've learned my lesson," Justus admitted "never will I underestimate a person ever again."

"With that in mind, Captain," the Admiral stated "you can't run the ship any more. You still have pride of place, of course: you will be the first person to walk on Mars. But you can't command the ship in your condition."

“I understand, Ma’am,” Justus sighed “Marco’s in worse shape than I am: I’d have chosen him to take over. My next choice would be Diana Fry, but we’re all just too weak to take charge of anything right now.”

“All that is, except one of you.”

“You’re right, Ma’am. I guess prejudice dies hard. Siobhan Tryptych should run the ship until Diana can.”

“Get some rest. You have a press appearance tomorrow.”

They had hired actors to play the parts of the members of the crew over the months they had been comatose. No member of the general public knew of the disaster. Then again, not that many members of the public knew that Lunar Base had been wiped out either.

The ‘crew’ of the Terra One had held monthly interviews with earthly media, answering scripted questions and faking on-board intrigue that suggested sexual tension. The audience *loved* sexual tension.

On earth, the Terra One was receiving increased coverage and online mentions due to their approach to Mars. Already they had gone deeper into space than any other living humans had before, and with more than half of their journey complete, they were gearing up to break the ultimate record of the time: making the first human footprints on Mars.

The wrangling had begun in the political circles. The extermination of the first Lunar Base had been an allied affair- all of whom were attempting to stamp their dominance on the new Lunar Base.

International treaties forbade mining of the moon, and also forbade construction of any structure that was not physically connected to the Lunar Base. So there could only be one settlement on the moon: but the country with the largest presence would have the largest claim on the base.

Besides, the more turf one controlled, the more likely one was to get a chance to trade with the Terra One, once it had come back laden with its first ever cargo.

China and the USNABC (United States of Northern America, Brazil, Chile and Colombia) had begun to take advantage of their large populations by sending more and more “workers” to the moon. These “workers” would need places to sleep, food to eat, and a police presence. The police would have to be

well equipped and numerous enough to control the people there. Courts would have to be established to deal with offenders. Laws would have to be voted on- democracy was beautifully suited to the task.

Any call by any country to limit the amount of immigrants from other countries would be considered xenophobic, and therefore highly unpopular. Every country wanted to assert itself, but no country wanted to be unpopular.

China wasn't represented by any member of the Terra One's crew. This made the other countries worry: China was far too important not to make their move. If they established a military presence on Lunar Base, they might even be able to seize the entire cargo for themselves.

So only police armaments were allowed on the moon. That is, until the assassination of the Chinese premiere when he went to visit Lunar Base for the first time.

It was ruled by the UN that China was justified in establishing a military presence on the Lunar Base. Once the first Chinese Marines landed on Lunar Base, the rest of the world would not have them stay up there alone. The arms race to Lunar Base began in earnest.

The major players in the game had another trick up their sleeve.

5 out of 6 members of the Terra One crew had struck secret deals with one government or the other to place national flags and secret probes on the Martian surface. They had established secret lines of communication with the spies at Earth Command, careful to keep their messages well coded and as inconspicuous as possible.

But the messages had stopped coming for 6 months. This had thrown the intelligence services into utter confusion- caused from either fear of discovery or of being ignored. Was the crew fomenting some kind of rebellion?

Siobhan had found the stashed silos when she had been making repairs to the ship. Out of instinct, she hadn't mentioned them to Earth Command. Her investigations had been done secretly, ensuring that she didn't put herself and the rest of Terra One in any further danger.

They were explosives silos, connected to the earth-controlled modules of Console, the on-board computer. She began to piece it together, slowly.

Firstly, the crew had struck deals with governments on earth, for different reasons. Secondly, the mission's protocols were to be followed strictly, without deviation. To make sure there weren't any deviations, the crew must be made to comply with any orders given. In case they didn't comply...the ship had a secret self-destruct mechanism. One that the crew couldn't control because they didn't know it existed.

Or did they?

Tanya had to be the only person on board who knew of the explosives silos. Why hadn't she spoken up about them? Could she control them? Did she plan to use them, possibly to make the crew give up the ship's cargo? Siobhan had also found a concealed pistol in Tanya's quarters: Military-grade.

She had found concealed pistols in everyone's quarters but her own: all of which were just as tough as Tanya's, even though they weren't of the same type.

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"Have you noticed," Tanya said as they gathered for their communal meal (which was about the only thing they had the strength to do) "that they don't give us any news about earth?"

"Unless they do but the *Captain* conceals it," Diana said jokingly, nudging Siobhan, who looked thoughtful.

"She's right," the girl admitted "I've never been given any news from earth. Did we ever get any?"

"Not since we took off," Justus admitted, sucking the food through his straw.

The straws had been Siobhan's idea: their teeth were not ready to chew anything, and she also knew they wouldn't stomach the indignity of being fed by spoon.

Bathroom breaks were the most embarrassing times, for them, even though she'd had to see to all of their hygiene for several months and had therefore seen them at their worst.

"Why's that?" Diana wondered "they said they'd give us updates on home when we were here. So why aren't they?"

"We can't exactly force them to comply," Justus reasoned.



“But they can force us to,” Siobhan thought to herself as she took a deep breath, reaching into her pocket.

Diana and Tanya leapt out of their seats when she placed the pistol on the table.

“What on earth-“

“Something wrong?” Justus asked, trying to figure out if he should run or duck.

“Where did you find that?” Diana asked “you know the armory is off bounds when we’re in flight, Siobhan, this is a huge breach of-“

“I didn’t find it in the armory,” Siobhan interrupted.

“What are you guys talking about-“

She took his fidgety hand and placed it on the object she had put before him.

“Oh,” he said “you found it.”

“You knew about this?” Diana asked, looking shocked.

“It’s my pistol,” Justus stated, sighing “I snuck it on board, hid it in the armory. Then I hid it in my room after Lunar Base, just in case you girls were planning a mutiny.”

“Us girls, huh?” Diana spat “what, and Marco wouldn’t?”

“Marco would have no reason to.”

“Marco’s was gonna be the 2<sup>nd</sup> person to walk on Mars, after you. Doncha think he’d want more than that?”

“He’s the navigator after all,” Siobhan added “if he locked himself in the cockpit and threatened to steer us the wrong way until we ran out of fuel, we’d have no way of stopping him.”

“You’re mad, all of you.”

“We never talked about Lunar Base,” said solemnly.

“There’s nothing to discuss.”

“Marco?”

Marco had been propped up at the table, listening to the conversation without eating.

“Lunar Base,” he croaked, making them all strain to listen “Lunar Base failed.”

“What do you mean?” Diana asked.

“My mission,” he said, swallowing hard as he did “my mission was to get a new crew on Lunar Base.”

“WHAT?!”

“Lothar didn’t mention that,” Tanya said, crossing her arms over her chest.

“This is a mission for Rome, not Earth Command,” Marco strained, eager to relieve himself of the burden he had been carrying.

“Let’s not interrupt him,” Siobhan suggested.

“There were replacements on Lunar Base. One man, 4 women. You were supposed to be drugged at the party and they were supposed to impersonate you.”

“What would have happened to us?”

“Anything they wanted to,” Marco replied “it wasn’t my concern.”

“You fucking-“

“And then,” he went on, interrupting Justus as he did so “I was supposed to navigate to Mars, and we were supposed to set up a secret mine. Pretend the Terra One had been lost in space. Use the ship to make secret shipments to earth.”

“How do we know you’re telling the truth?”

“Because something doesn’t feel right,” he wheezed “with me. I’m dying and I know I am. I just don’t wanna have this bullshit hanging over my death bed.”

--

“Now isn’t this ironic,” Tanya remarked as Siobhan slipped her helmet on “so the green buttons are for the inner doors...?”

“The yellow ones are for decontamination, orange ones for the air lock and the red ones are for the outer hull protection doors.”

Tanya looked skeptical.

“Try it,” Siobhan insisted “open this door right here.”

The remote proved itself by opening the door and shutting it, twice.

“Impressive,” the engineer praised.

“Wasn’t that hard to put together,” Siobhan said as she stepped into the series of doorways that led to the outer hull.

“I think I’ll focus on the simple stuff for now,” Tanya admitted, scratching her head.

A spasm ran through her hand, causing her to flex her fingers involuntarily and drop the remote. She bent over to pick it up, her bones feeling the strain of the action.

Taped to the back of the remote was a label.

*This is NOT the laundry remote.*

*“She must have seen the footage of us making fun of her when we were going out to clean the hull,”* Tanya thought, sighing.

*“We were such assholes.”*

*“Don’t be silly,”* her inner voice commanded her *“don’t forget your mission. This is your chance.”*

Marco’s confession had shaken the crew, immensely. They were all worried now: but not all of them worried for the same reason.

Tanya had a secret mission too: one that involved half the crew.

They were to land on Mars, and she was to eliminate Marco, Siobhan and June. Her training in the Marine Corps (which no one else knew about) involved space navigation and she had been taught to fly the ship they were in when it was still a prototype.

She, Justus and Diana were to plant the USNCAB flag on Mars, set up a mine and leave the Red Planet with as much ore as their first transport could carry. And then their ship would go missing, to those on earth.

To those in space who knew where to look, they were to pilot the ship to the secret space station established on an asteroid. The loss of the Terra One would be blamed on Chinese hostility, and World War 4 would inevitably begin on earth. Meanwhile, the materials needed to run that war would have to come from space: and only the USNCAB would have the rights to it. Any vessel approaching Mars that wasn't approved would therefore be blasted out of the sky.

Marco's confession was too similar to her mission. If in fact he was dying, which she believed he was, then it wouldn't be hard to get rid of him. Siobhan had become a threat now, due to the fact that she had had 6 months to sneak around the ship on her own. Justus had named her Captain, which meant she had exclusive rights to the cockpit. There wasn't supposed to be another Navigator on board...at least, not to anyone else's knowledge.

Justus was aware that someone on board was tasked with helping him on his secret mission: he just didn't know who it was. It had been kept a secret from him so that he wouldn't try to double-cross his superiors. When he had discovered the pistol in Marco's belongings on their first day in space, he had made the assumption that his partner was Marco. He still clung to that assumption, reasoning that the confession he had given to the crew had just been a smoke-screen to hide the real mission.

Tanya watched as Siobhan inspected the outer hull, putting her space suit on as she did.

*"Get out there, cut the tether and let her drift off," she told herself "in fact: shoot her first."*

Remote in hand, she walked to the first door, the pistol feeling heavy in her weakened hand. She knew she had to do this, but wondered if she would manage it.

Her thumb resisted, refusing to press the green button and open the door to set her on the journey to her first ever kill.

*"No one ever came to see you," she realized as she was talking to Siobhan's image on the screen.*

"Hey Siobhan," she said, taking her helmet off "I was wondering."

"Yeah?" the girl replied, hopping along the surface of the hull.

“How come no one came to see you when we were on earth?”

“No one wanted to, I suppose.”

“You didn’t say farewell to anyone either.”

“No one to say goodbye to.”

The statements resonated, causing tears to fall down Tanya’s cheeks.

*“And all this time...”*

--

*“Space,” Justus had announced when Siobhan had ducked into the bathroom once “is for earth’s best people, you know? Not the rejects. But hey, rejects are people too.”*

*“And someone has to do the dishes. Even if they can’t do them,” Marco had joked. They had all laughed.*

--

Tanya’s confession made Justus’ jaw drop. She knew if he still had eye balls that his blue eyes would be staring at her right now.

Khilna-7’s effect on the eyes was very painful and very infectious. Blindness was permanent, and to stop the patient from spreading the virus through the fluids continuously leaking from them, the patient’s eyeballs were removed. Infected eyes were 100% lethal if left to rot in one’s skull.

“Does *anyone else* have any secrets we should know about?” Diana asked, feeling betrayed “any secret missions involving someone’s death and the fucking minerals on Mars? Anyone?”

“I gave myself a mission,” Siobhan admitted “while you were all in your comas.”

--

The first sign of rebellion was the Mars landing.

The ship landed safely on the Martian surface, but instead of propping Marco up in the cockpit and acting like he was doing the work, they had chosen to have Tanya land the ship.

And then there was the First Step.

--

“A historic event has happened today,” the newsreader announced to all those who were glued to their screens “after one year and 6 days, the Terra One has landed on Mars. We’ve received confirmation from Earth Command that very soon we’ll see live footage of the first steps being taken by humanity of a foreign planet.”

“Never before have so many pairs of human eyes and ears been so focused on a single event. Never before has the ingenuity and cooperation of humanity manifested itself so perfectly than with the Terra One mission. And now...yes, I see it! The underside hatch is opening. I repeat: the underside hatch is opening.”

“Ready?” someone on the ship asked.

--

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” the newsreader said, astonished “it appears as if...we don’t know if this was planned or not, but...”

The world watched, astonished, as 6 people in space suits descended from the ship, holding hands. They landed at the exact same moment.

--

Tanya and Justus didn’t report success of their mission to their secret controllers. Neither did Marco. In fact, nothing was heard from the Terra One for one week after it landed on Mars.

--

And then the demands came from the sponsors.

“Hand us the cargo, Terra One, or we shall destroy the ship and you with it.”

“We claim Mars,” Siobhan said, unfazed “for Mars.”

--

The first armada of attack crafts approached the Martian atmosphere one year later. They were vaporized.

“What was that you said about their not being able to handle us?”

“I say we nuke ‘em.”

“We already tried that, remember?”

“Well I say we try it again!”

“They’re just a bunch of kids on a planet,” the advisers said when it became clear that Earth would have to respect the Martians “they can’t sustain themselves.”

“That's where you’re wrong. They have farms there. Water generation, an artificial, breathable atmosphere. A fucking shield around the whole fucking planet. And they won’t let us anywhere near it.”

“Khilna-7 makes men infertile,” someone observed “I say we build up a bigger, stronger fleet and-“

“Wait for Justus Paton to die of old age? And what about those girls, huh? They barely even 30 years old. Do you think earth can wait 70 years for resources, you dumb fuck?”

“They’ll die out eventually. And they’ll need our help, eventually.”

--

Marco died in his 3<sup>rd</sup> year in space.

Justus died in his 10<sup>th</sup>.

Meanwhile Diana Fry, Tanya Grogan and Siobhan Tryptych perfected the technique of exclusively female reproduction, with ova extracted from June, who insisted upon it.

Earth suffered a nuclear war: one which forced several refugees out into space with the faint hope of finding somewhere to settle.

And Mars had come to its aid, 30 years after it had stood up to Earth’s oppression. But there was one condition to those rescued.

***No male humans are allowed here.***