

FINITY

A SHORT STORY OF MARS COLONIZATION

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FINITY

Raphaella Chang woke up with an advertisement tattooed on her face. She remembered orbiting the pop-up booth on the high street, the promise of free painkillers. She dragged herself to the bathroom, and knew she wasn't going in to work today. The advertisement was for a new model of smartphone. Her eyes were icons, her nose a scroll wheel, her

mouth a start menu. Her friends were not real friends. Everyone had let her down.

The cheque, she'd done it for the cheque. She fumbled for her own smartphone, accessed her bank account. She didn't have to go to work. Ever again. Sod the NHS.

She was supine on the bathroom floor, reaching for the Vicodin she'd taped under the sink, when reality encroached. The fee from the smartphone company, although large, was finite. *Everything was finite*. She rolled onto her back. Her brain felt like a mouth that had bitten off too large a chunk of an ice lolly. The clawed feet of the bath, scaled with greenish rust, bloated, knotty, looked like the roots of a chestnut tree. She got up on her knees and vomited into the toilet.

She used some of the money to get into London, where the news had said they were holding auditions for the Mars First expedition. The BBC had treated it like a joke, and she did see a few people in Star Trek uniforms, but most of the hopefuls looked normal, and there were thousands of them queueing outside the Gherkin in the sticky heat. *Thousands*. So sod the BBC. If they had any idea what reality was like, they wouldn't be surprised that so many people were competing to sign up for a one-way trip to Mars.

A sleek blonde with a European accent took one look at Raphaella and said, "Ms. Chang, are you depressed?"

"Me? What, you kidding? I just broke up with my boyfriend. That's why I got this done, to celebrate, innit. Plus I've quit my job. Wiping the arses of old dears on the vegetable ward, waiting for them to shuffle off. I went into nursing because I love people, I really do, but it gets you down. I mean, by the time they're in terminal care, they're not people any more, are they?" She added, self-indulgently, "Maybe I am depressed."

But the blonde was no longer listening. "Ms. Chang, did you say you are a registered nurse?"

In her evaluation file it said: *Outgoing, bubbly, adventurous. Opportunity for product placement deal with Samsung???*

Already by the third round of auditions, the Mars First YouTube channel topped the global rankings, and each live-streamed episode of the show (lightly edited for verisimilitude) attracted a global audience of millions. Advertising revenue was exceeding targets. This was an important source of mission funding, second only to the contributions of the Russian philanthropist who had founded Mars First. "Whatever the government can do, the private sector can do better, faster, and cheaper," he had said. "Of course safety will be our top concern."

The short-listed candidates endured months of training in an undisclosed location in the

Gobi desert. In addition to hab maintenance, systems diagnosis, and self-treatment in the event of a radiation overdose, they learnt to put on an EVA suit in twenty seconds flat, right a flipped rover, and find a pinhole leak in 2.5 kilometres of hydroponic irrigation tubing. They had to memorize a series of lengthy checklists known collectively as ‘The Script.’ The point was to reduce the future Martians to appendages of the onboard computer. Their role was to *react*, and look hot doing it.

The American government had announced the previous year that it planned to put a man on Mars by 2032, using the once-cancelled, now-resurrected Orion Multi-Purpose Crew Vehicle. This had provoked roars of mirth around the globe from the fraternity of billionaires and wonks who drove the conversation about manned spaceflight. However, the president’s declaration seemed to trip a switch in the zeitgeist. It was suddenly acceptable to throw money at what had been seen as a fringe obsession. Within a few months, no fewer than three other governments and eight independent consortia had announced technically serious, intellectually heterodox plans to put a man ... or a woman ... or several of each ... on the Red Planet.

Only the Mars First Project eschewed professional qualifications, selecting its ‘pioneers’ on fuzzier criteria. None of the crew ever did find out exactly what those criteria were. “At the end of the day,” Raphaella said, “everyone’s fumbling in the dark, aren’t they? Give us that joint, Deet.”

Deet, real name Dieter Arnaldson, was an improbably short Swede. A compulsive student of risk, he explained to the others that their ship, the *Roquentin*, was basically a gigantic flying bomb. All but two of the rivalrous Mars missions relied on the same nuclear propulsion technology pioneered by NASA in the 1950s. The proliferation of nuclear weapons around the world had broken the taboo on the development of fission engines, throwing open the route of least resistance to the solar system. Limited availability of plutonium-238 had set off a scramble for supplies, in which Mars First’s philanthropic Russian founder held a murky edge. So they had their fuel. But so did the Chinese, and so did the Mormons.

“Obviously we’ve got to beat the Chinese,” Raphaella said. She extended one leg straight out in a yoga pose that only looked easy. She had abs now, and her brain was no longer populated by lemming-hordes of panicky thoughts about dying alone. The doctor had told her she had a problem with her cortisol, and given her adrenal support meds. Just like that, what she had always thought of as her demons had vanished. She breathed in, breathed out, smelling the smell of socks that permeated even the most advanced Russian facilities.

Off-camera, the producer mentioned the fact that Raphaella’s own surname was

Chinese.

“Yeah, but I never met the cunt. Did a runner before I was born. My mother’s maiden name was Winston. She never divorced him. She was punishing him, see?”

After that episode went live, Raphaella got a Facebook message with the subject line *Hello! Raphaella! From Your Real Brother Ha ha! This Is Francis!* She deleted it unread.

The day before launch, her mother telephoned the facility and begged to speak to her. Raphaella relented.

“All right, Mum. Everything’s going to be fine, you’ll see.”

Her mother wept about their estrangement and how sorry she was that she’d “let Raphaella go.”

“You didn’t let me go. I went. Even you can see the difference, I expect. I’ve got to go, Mum, I’m being paged, but let’s Skype when we get there.” Raphaella laughed wildly. “We’re going to be connected, of course we are, wouldn’t be much of a reality show otherwise, would it?”

She was not being paged. It was just Deet, lumbering into the room with a new laminated pass around his neck. He announced that he had been named Field Producer, meaning that he would be responsible for organizing their video feeds from Mars. Raphaella congratulated him. She wouldn’t have wanted that job, but Deet saw it as an honor. More power to him.

The *Roquentin* took off on a fiery palm tree of exhaust. A conventional two-stage launch rocket carried the ship into orbit. The crew filmed themselves ping-ponging weightlessly around the cabin. Raphaella gawked at the famous sight of Earth floating in the darkness. Then they had to strap in again. The fission engine’s computer-controlled ignition countdown had begun. A message flashed up on Raphaella’s goggles from Sanjiv Kapoor, the former Bollywood stuntman and cut-up of the crew: *This is your captain speaking. All electronic devices must now be switched off ...*

They laughed on the *Roquentin*. They laughed on Earth. They laughed all the way to Mars. The joke, of course, was that they had no captain.

INT. HAB 1—DAY.

We PAN over grey inflatable couches littered with tools and crumpled ration packs. Imagine the office of a social media start-up, crammed into the galley of an Aeroflot 747. A large MONITOR is propped on stacks of computer equipment.

ON MONITOR— A pinkish sky bends to meet an icy brown plain, which is devoid of topographical interest, except for one low rise on the horizon. The sun is a pale blob a thumb's width above this feature. In the foreground stands the *Roquentin*, its silver radiation shielding badly abraded. Further away, a rover with an earthmover attachment stands idle beside a shallow scrape. Fastened to the rover by tow ropes, a mass of silver foil like a crumpled parachute rises and falls on the Martian wind. It is HAB 2, the twin of this one, in its deflated state.

DEET (V.O):

So, the towing idea didn't work. Sanjiv and Mary will just have to stay here with us. But I think the problem is they have ripped Hab 2. Later I will try to reinflate. Anyway, they could not detach the tow ropes from Rover 2, so they stole Rover 1. They have taken it towards Little Big Hill. Raphaella is checking now did they steal anything else.

The door unzips and Raphaella FALLS into the hab, catching herself on her hands and inadvertently somersaulting. She bangs her tailbone on the low table.

RAPHAELLA:

Ow.