

LONGING FOR MARS

By M.G. Soikkeli

10.

Quiet. The ship had landed, and the door had opened onto a new planet. The instruments reported that much about the travelers. But the cameras transmitted no images, and the microphones conveyed no sound. The space capsule perched on its legs as if it had always been a part of the windswept Martian landscape.

At that moment, seven billion people waited breathlessly to witness mankind's first contact with a new world. They leaned in closer to their receivers to hear the whisper from the other side of space. Was it interference, or the vast distance, causing the silence? Had the alien Martian landscape rendered the representatives of humanity speechless?

All the anxieties that had built up during the journey welled to the surface in a rush of terror, horror at the lifeless blackness through which the heroic trio had passed on behalf of the human race. How long would it take for messages to reach home from the travelers? Surely not months?

A moment later the direct connection to Mars was severed.

The first official news broadcast was curt, careful, as if expecting the report of a death. The ship had indeed landed on Mars according to plan, the news reported, and its three-man crew had been verifiably alive after completing the pre-descent checklist.

But after the descent, not a peep had been heard from the ship and there was no information on the status of the crew. They had chosen silence and failed to return to the ship. They had gotten themselves as far away as possible from humankind.

9.

The boat had berths for four. The five passengers did not feel cramped however, because two were always on duty above deck and three off duty below.

Coke and Cathrin Stevenson and Mike Mitchell were off duty. They were sitting in the cabin around a digital sea chart plotting out possible routes to Hawaii given the winds. The most frequent voice heard was the clam-shaped radio attached to the ceiling. Through a satellite connection, the device relayed not only phone calls but every available radio channel as well. The connection was clear and audible. When the news broadcast began, the off-duty group interrupted their Hawaii planning.

"Today, the 21st of April, exactly fifty years have passed since mankind first set foot on Lunar soil," the radio said.

Coke and Cathrin took each other by the hand. The restless motion of the ocean made them feel their age and their bodies. The direct broadcast from Houston felt like it was coming from a distant planet.

"Today is also a glorious day for mankind's boldest endeavor of all time. Compared to it, the Apollo moon flights were trips to the corner store. Today our expedition to Mars is at the half-way point on its journey..."

The cabin rocked. It was lit by two porthole windows. Suddenly the clamshell cut off the radio transmission, connecting a call from one of the few phone numbers that was allowed to disturb them on their trip.

"Hello? Stevenson?"

"Coke here," one of the men replied. "Cathrin and Mike Mitchell are here next to me."

"Hi, Cathrin," said the voice in the clamshell. "Where are you now?"

"I can't tell you that, Mr. President," Coke answered. A moment of silence. The waves lapped at the windows.

"OK, I understand your feelings, Coke. I just wanted to say that...I mean, that I never had a chance to say before how sorry I am for what happened."

"Thank you, Mr. President."

"Damn it, Coke! You don't have to be so formal. I know how you feel. I've been there." The couple and Mike exchanged glances over the map. They had come to the cabin to rest. For a moment they had felt camaraderie with the three men whose fates they had been following on the news broadcasts.

No one could know how they felt most of the time. Every day spent on this journey was bitter. Each one of these days could have been the high point of their lives and careers. Today, as on most days, they let Mike Mitchell steer them past the shoals and monsters. Mike was then and always their captain.

"You must have had a reason for calling, Mr. President," Mike said.

"In a way," the clamshell replied. "Do you think the Chinese have come up with the same solution as Cathrin?"

The men smiled. Cathrin didn't return their smiles, just looking out the window. They were near their destination. Soon they would be on the far side of the island paradise of Hawaii. With them they were carrying the national secret of what the Mars program could have been.

"No worries, Mr. President," Captain Mitchell said reassuringly. "If the news reports are accurate, the whole thing hasn't even crossed their minds. Who knows, maybe they don't even have the same problem as people like us."

"People like us? You mean Americans?" came the cautious question.

"Yeah, Americans," Mitchell lied, switching off the clamshell.

The chart in front of them updated with green dashed lines. The storm was moving out of Hawaiian waters. But did they still want to stop there? Not even a little. The Stevensons kissed each other for making such a good decision. Then they kissed their captain.

8.

The compensation in the Mars program was substantial to say the least. Mike Mitchell had the means to fulfill his old dream and buy an ocean-worthy sailboat. To man it, he hired two Hawaiian sailors. They were willing to compromise on pay for the pleasure of accompanying the boat back to their home waters. Of course they recognized Mitchell.

There was no end of questions as Mike was loading supplies onto the boat. At first he was happy to answer, because the sailors, tattooed up to their necks, were asking practical questions, about fuel regulation and three point navigation. In the end the deck hands came back to the same question as all the others: what happened to the Mars program? Was it political shenanigans? Why was Captain Mike Mitchell on his way to Hawaii, not to Mars?

Mike gave them the official explanation, embellishing it with a few details. The Chinese effort was exposed at the last minute. Due to the launch window they had to

make some quick changes in both the ship and the crew. Without mentioning anything about the New Year's scandal, Mike described the superiority of the backup crew. Axmann had worked for years at the space station with Jodi and Keitel. They were a tight-knit team. They were able to work creatively under the kinds of conditions the acceleration in the schedule might cause during the two-year trip.

"Trips like that can come down to the tiniest details," he explained.

The Hawaiians glanced at each other. They remained respectfully silent about the Mars program scandal. However, the polite restraint was visible in their expressions. There was no escape from his reputation for Mitchell on this planet.

"And you're taking some passengers along to Hawaii?" the deck hands laughed. "Some of your friends?"

"A couple," said Mike. "We have some common acquaintances out west."

Mike ended the discussion and climbed down into the cabin. He screwed a clam-shaped satellite radio onto the roof of the cabin where it would always be close at hand.

The extra life vests were in the drop boxes next to the radio. "100 kg" he read on the side of the box. In his mind the numbers transformed into a pattern. Weight signifies gravity. Salvation is always below. Details disappear into the ether, but man's salvation is always in gravity.

Perhaps we'll celebrate our reunion on the bottom of the sea, Mike thought. The ocean is a perfect place to play at space. No one cares what you wear there. The details disappear.

7.

The car arrived at the airport early in the morning. Both the car and the jet were private. The pilot was helping out as a favor to his friends. The plan was for the plane to make its first stop in a port city on the west coast. After that the plane would take John and Hafin to an inconspicuous island kingdom on the far side of Hawaii.

They needed a refuge from the press, at least for the next seven months. Then the media would turn its attention from the crew scandal to mankind's triumph.

Mike exited the car first. Coke Stevenson was there to meet them. He hugged Mike and then stood with his hands on Mike's shoulders. They had been working together since the days when every shuttle flight was a billion-dollar drama. Coke didn't look like he was afraid of anything nowadays. Even long, heartfelt goodbyes. If they ever happened to meet again, they would know that together they had lost out on mankind's greatest adventure.

Mike extricated himself from his friend's embrace. Suddenly he felt like time was moving backwards and they had died before a single journey into space had even been contemplated. As if every attempt to break free from the pull of Earth's gravity signified the loss of something essential to life; essential to people in general and men in particular.

He turned to look at the airplane. John and Hafin were climbing aboard as if they were about to commandeer it. Determinedly.

"Apologize to them for me and Cathrin," Coke said. "There wasn't any other way for us to get through this. The TV program and the other publicity—we needed it for the audience and the funding. We didn't know what forces we were meddling with."

Mike couldn't help but laugh. "John and Hafin are A-OK. They aren't mad at you. They're more confused than anything else. They aren't quite sure what happened to them. Of course they're wondering what my part would have been if we had made it into space. What we would have gone through up there..."

In a moment the plane was speeding along the runway and then disappearing beyond the clouds. The sun was rising as if it were the first morning of creation.

6.

The Stevensons had visited the President on official business during the Mars program before. And this time, like all the others, they were received like any official representatives of NASA. There was no need to avoid the President's gaze. He gave no hint of their old acquaintance.

"Colonel and Mrs. Stevenson," the President said in introduction. "This is Press Secretary North."

There was also another man standing behind the long table, off to the side. The couple sat down far enough away that they didn't have to worry about which of the President's aides they should shake hands with first or whether that was even appropriate now. They sat on the opposite end of the table from the President, in the position of the accused.

The President introduced the stranger as a representative from the Department of Defense. Coke remembered seeing his face in meetings between NASA and DoD. The President began the discussion.

"This is an unofficial meeting in which you, Colonel Stevenson, as acting head of the project, must provide an explanation of what the hell your Mars team has gone and done. Then we'll tell you what official action will be taken. Whatever else happens, the project will be transferred from your control to joint oversight by NASA and DoD."

That much they had heard in advance. Coke reported briefly on what the mood had been at the Mars program training camp around Christmas after the winning team returned from the space station. Cathrin described the mood from a psychologist's perspective, as general optimism and suspicion, focusing on Mike Mitchell's team: three men opening up to each other and developing a unique bond of trust.

The team was assembled to withstand the isolation of the flight to Mars. Everything was proceeding according to plan.

"But perhaps a little too quickly," Cathrin admitted.

They had talked this over ahead of time, she and Coke.

They had to present events as neutrally as possible. If necessary, they would appeal to the psychological mechanism of the program, which the President had signed off on.

It didn't sound credible even to them. The events of New Year's seemed to conceal something *more personal*, something that even the papers and television hadn't been able to describe.

"An insignificant event has been blown up into a scandal in the media," Cathrin explained. "And only because we've been concealing the original choices made in the Mars program. I mean the psychosexual problems connected with the three-man equation."

Frigid, acid looks: *We don't want to know, woman.*

Cathrin closed her notes. It was better not to mention anything about the silent stand-off men end up in on long sea and space voyages. She had to continue based on what had happened, even though she knew she should warn them about what could happen to the other astronauts during the trip to Mars.

"So on New Year's, Mitchell's group was alone at the camp. All of the others, except the guards, were on Christmas vacation. We wanted to keep the Mitchell team separated from the rest of the world. Perhaps that was a mistake," Cathrin said. No one offered any support. She had to appeal to the men's feelings of isolation. "Hafin, John,

and Mike knew the world's attention was focused on them. They knew they had earned the top spots in the Mars program. They knew they were the best. And yet there they were, in the middle of nowhere Arizona, almost like in space without any radio equipment. And so they got this idea about the masquerade party. They'd seen an announcement in a newspaper someone left in the cafeteria. And when all was said and done the nearest city was virtually around the corner. It must have seemed only fair."

At this point the man from DoD couldn't help interrupting.

"Fair that they dressed up in space suits?"

"Maybe so," Coke said defensively. "They just wanted to have some fun—it was supposed to be their last party on Earth after all. So they put on the suits and took one of the camp jeeps. If you're used to working in a suit, it's not too much of a trick. A practice suit only weighs fifty kilos and looks just like the real thing right down to the helmet. They were quite a sight when they arrived at the masquerade party."

"Quite a team," the press secretary said in affirmation. "And you, Mrs. Stevenson, you chose them all by yourself?"

The accusation had come sooner than Cathrin was prepared for. She didn't remember what answer she was supposed to give. She started to explain that NASA's own psychologists had supported their plan.

It was the DoD's turn to interrupt again. They all knew that NASA had given its blessing and that Mike Mitchell's team made it to the final on real merit. Despite the fact that the competition had been a TV drama they were scripted to win. And despite what some psychologist fancied she saw in them.

Coke didn't want to hear any more accusations aimed at his wife, especially not with the President's tacit approval. He described the New Year's Eve party as a carnival of excess and increasingly wild stunts all around. He reminded them that Mike's team received a heroes' welcome. After removing their helmets they were the center of attention. The venue, a multistory restaurant, had filled with curious townsfolk, and the media followed the crowd.

"And at some point the attention... went to their heads?"

Coke could see the scene vividly in his mind. He had also heard Mike, Hafin, and John's version of what had happened, which hadn't differed significantly from the eye-witness accounts. Or what could be seen in the press pictures.

Three astronauts undressing each other. Heroes kissing in the bathroom.

"Mr. President, they weren't trying to do anything but get away to take off their heavy suits in peace," Coke tried. "They were hot as hell, and they'd had more than a few glasses of whiskey. In the press pictures it might have looked like something else."

The President gave a signal to his press secretary. He stood up and announced that the official meeting was over. The official instructions were that the Stevensons would remain silent from then on about everything connected to the Mars program. As the President was leaving, these instructions were made into an order. They were no longer responsible for the Mars program. They weren't even a part of it.

5.

There were two shuttles and a rocket shining like a tin arrow docked with the International Space Station. The station was working non-stop. On its busy side the components of the Mars rocket were being assembled. They had been brought to the station long before the general public had even heard about the crew selection phase of the project.

On the other side of the station the project's final competitors were floating, shooting for a place on the rocket. Three teams were left out of ten. No one seemed

surprised at Mike Mitchell's team's success. They came out of the routine task simulations in the water tank with average scores. Mike's group wasn't the fastest, but for some reason they were the favorites. In viewer voting they had received all of the "style points".

Of the three members of the team, Mike was the one who got to bear the burden of being the early favorite. It didn't show in their teamwork. He hid his feelings, and what Cathrin had told him. He was afraid that knowing so much would make him sloppy. If the results of the viewer voting had been determined ahead of time, was it also inevitable they would win the final?

There seemed to be many levels of initiation into the secrets of the project. But if the three of them got to Mars, they would be initiated into something that would exclude the rest of humanity.

This was expensive theater.

At least the mood had improved from what it was back on Earth in the camp built around the TV studio. The International Space Station was familiar to all of them. In addition to Mitchell's group, the final round included a team led by Arthur Axmann and a team sponsored by DHL.

"We can't help but win," said Axmann, by "we" meaning America. The rumors about the Mars program felt irrelevant here. The feeling of solidarity was strong, despite the competition, or perhaps because of it. Only two of them had received their training outside of NASA: Hafin Al-Khaar and DHL's Brazilian astronaut.

Mike was confused about why he didn't feel the same as Axmann even though they were from the same generation of astronauts. Behind their backs they were called the "godfathers" of the Mars program. Really that title should have gone to the Stevensons, Mike thought.

The challenges during the final week were performed in the rocket, under real conditions and with real equipment. The competition was a secondary concern, since they all felt like they were preparing for a real mission. Because they were professionals, they were used to the idea that the backup crew is just as important as the ones who see real action. Every one of them would be privileged to be on the second or third string team.

Only the remote-controlled cameras seemed to drive them on to compete in a contest that was already over. You don't get used to the presence of a camera.

On the last day, when everything was supposed to be ready in the rocket, one of the cameras in the command cabin broke loose from its fasteners. The camera floated there for the teams to inspect. They took it along with them.

After returning to the space station crew quarters, the teams disassembled the camera. It wasn't surprising that the fasteners had failed; the camera was just installed as a temporary recording device. But they didn't find any recording apparatus in the camera, either digital or analog. It was just a box decorated with a lens. A prop.

The teams traded opinions about the real purpose of the decoration. The discussion became heated. The situation was not calmed in the least by the TV broadcast back on Earth announcing the final results of the competition.

"This is a scam!" yelled the DHL team's Brazilian. "This contest is as real as professional wrestling."

"...and in second place NASA's 'All American Heroes' team," the television said, "Axmann, Jodi, and Keitel."

A few days later the teams were in the shuttle on their way back to Earth. They were under a forced media blackout until Christmas. Afterwards Mitchell's winning team was left alone at the camp, and the others got to go home to celebrate the holidays.

No word of the strange camera leaked to the media. A silent solidarity had formed within the Mars project. Like a premonition of what was to come.

4.

Mike arrived at the studio as late as possible. He despised the building, the darkness of the arched hall intended to imitate space. It was pointless to offer any explanation to the other participants in the competition.

“A pilot with claustrophobia?” laughed one of the young pilots when he made the mistake of sharing his opinion during the first round of competition.

Mike didn’t bother explaining that it wasn’t the studio he hated, it was how it was being used—how he felt when ten space-suited teams were trying to accomplish a task intended for one. It was easy for him to hold back the cross retort intended for the aspiring pilot. He knew something that gave him both the right and the responsibility to hold his tongue in from of these younger men.

After doing his own part, Mike peeled off his suit effortlessly. He put on his white sweats and climbed up to the catwalk hanging from the ceiling. Viewed from up there the water tank was downright seductive. It was clearer and deeper than an Olympic-sized pool. Even from the ceiling he could make out the space capsule built on the bottom. Arthur Axmann’s group was on deck. Mike watched their dive, the slow, moluscular futility of their work.

Steps clanked along the catwalk.

“Cathrin?”

Mike was about to walk to meet her, but she put her finger to her lips and pointed down. Filming was starting because Axmann’s group had come back to the surface. The pilots sitting at the edge of the pool clapped politely. They were all dressed in the same warm, white sweat suits with NASA’s round logo printed on the back. Axmann’s team’s time was unbeatable.

“And up come the final contenders on *Mars Adventure*! OK, folks, in just a moment we’ll have a word with the men who now hold the lead in the most incredible, the most extraordinary sporting competition of all time. This will determine who gets to represent humanity on a unique two-year expedition into the storms of the red planet!”

The host was a young Hollywood starlet. Cathrin had explained to them how the starlet’s celebrity status was based on four science fiction movies. Today her outfit revealed more, but more discretely, than any of her movie characters- getups.

“And you, the audience, a billion TV viewers from around the world, you will choose the three teams that make it to the final round. That’s right, the International Space Station! You will help decide who gets to represent all of humanity on the longest, most challenging expedition of all time!”

Cathrin sat down next to Mike.

“You should be down there with your team,” Cathrin whispered.

“I am, in spirit,” Mike answered.

“How is Hafin doing?”

“Good with me,” Mike laughed. “Not so well with all the others.”

“So, no hope that the third could be someone other than John Morton?”

Mitchell took a list written on a piece of notepaper out of his pocket.

“Here are a few I’ve been keeping an eye on. But I wouldn’t go making any bets on anyone but John. Unless you improve Hafin’s own standing.”

“How?”

“Tell the truth,” Mike said. “Make public why we’re going to win this competition even though we lost down there in that tank.”

“Are you crazy? Coke would never sign off on going public. There’s only six months left until launch, and if the truth leaks to the press then we... we... what kind of horrible things could NASA do to us anyway, Mike? You know their tricks better than I do.”

The last team was taking off their space suits at the edge of the pool. As the TV host read off their names they nodded briefly in the direction of the cameras. The host was waiting to get the men’s take on the team’s mood.

“They can’t do anything terrible to us,” Mike said. “Compared to how those guys are being treated.”

The cameras and the host turned away considerately as Axmann’s team traded the final layers of their space suits for sweats. Nothing looks so dead as a naked astronaut under the electric gaze of the television.

3.

Under the authority given him by the President, Coke Stevenson took Hafin straight to the heart of his kingdom, the NASA training camp in Arizona. Hafin didn’t have time to see any more of North American than airports and cloud-covered mountains. The necessary papers, the work permit and temporary citizenship, were transferred with electric speed through the bureaucracies.

The compound was like a temporary refugee camp. The entire terrestrial Mars program staff was being housed there. The camp’s largest building was the TV studio, where the brave pilots would compete for supremacy as masters of the heavens.

On the very first night Hafin got to meet the other Mars flight candidates. He was the last astronaut selected for the project. That might have helped the others’ attitudes toward him. When his wheelchair was pushed into the studio hangar, everyone turned to look.

Stevenson sized up the situation from behind the wheelchair. The group of thirty pilots was so large and diverse that Hafin was able to move smoothly between teams. This was the only celebration that brought all of the Mars pilots together. After this they would have to find their motivation within their own small groups. Cameras secretly followed every conversation.

The atmosphere was as relaxed and informal as thirty uniformed men can pull off. In addition to the team sponsored by DHL, two semi-official teams, representing the ESA and Japan were invited to participate in the competition. The other seven teams, Stevenson explained, were formed based on personality profiles drawn up by the psychologists. By the time Hafin arrived to meet the other volunteers, he was already such a bona fide American citizen that he could be entrusted with every detail of the Mars flight.

After making the rounds for an hour with the pilots, Stevenson saw Hafin talking with John Morton and Mike Mitchell. Stevenson quickly looked away. He waited until his breathing leveled off before venturing closer to the trio. It felt like he was walking up to a miracle.

2.

Coke Stevenson had merged his life and his career with Cathrin. It was because of Cathrin that they had gotten funding for the Mars program and made it this far. It had been more than a year since they met with the President, and the project had been proceeding slower on Earth than in space.

“I might have one more candidate,” Cathrin said. “Do you want to hear?”

They were sitting at a later supper. It was after midnight, and there was a candle burning on the table between the file folders. Colonel Stevenson rubbed his tired eyes. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Let 'er rip, Cathrin. Hopefully it's a woman."

"No women, I'm afraid. I would need at least thirty good female astronauts to choose from, and a critical mass like that doesn't exist yet. And you know what would probably happen if one of the three was a woman. I can demonstrate it to you with mouse tests any time, Coke."

"No need. I believe a good man is hard to find. Especially with your criteria."

"First I'll tell you why he is not a fit for your program. First of all," Cathrin began.

"Wait a sec. The hamburger technique is better. First think of some good news to wrap around the bad beef. How is this candidate better than any of the other candidates?"

His wife smiled across the table. "Because his deficiencies are to his advantage. He if anyone is an unusual astronaut. This is a damn perfect bunch."

"Quality makes up for quantity," Stevenson said. "It's hard to find guys like John Morton, for example."

Cathrin blew out the candle. The table, food, and folders disappeared.

"Cathrin?"

"This is the situation they're going to be in out in space," she answered. "They will be traveling in extreme darkness. On Mars they will be dependent on a few basic senses. Yes, you'll pack them into machines that will correct some of their errors. But if you want to send anything there besides machines, the Mars team will have to be able to act both independently and together. No machine can make up for the mistakes they might make together. And that's why we aren't looking for three pilots who act the same way. We're looking for pilots who want to *complement* each other. And a little more."

The colonel found his cigarettes. First he lit one, and then he lit the candle.

"You've earned your pay, babe. Now let's get back to this candidate."

"Aren't you going to finish your food? This will take all night if I'm going to start talking up his failings."

"Forget the hamburger technique."

"Right. First, he's in a wheelchair."

"An astronaut in a wheelchair? OK, for the sake of argument, let's say that isn't an insurmountable obstacle in a weightless environment. What next?"

"Second, he's an Arab. A Saudi. His name is Hafin Al-Khaar."

The colonel stared at his wife. "Where did you find this guy? A Saudi? Did you really say he's an astronaut?"

"He has astronaut training. Watch the ash—it's getting in your potatoes. He completed a virtual course developed by the French while he was recovering from a car accident. He's the undisputed number one pilot the ESA has trained, although he can't complete all the physical tests using prostheses."

"OK, so a one-legged Arab, but the head of his correspondence school class. Why haven't I heard of him?"

"That's exactly why. Who at NASA would dare recommend an Arab? To pilot an American ship? His name isn't on any of the candidate lists. And that's why Hafin Al-Khaar is our wild card."

Stevenson blew tobacco smoke toward the ceiling. It was a balmy March evening. Exactly one year later the departure window for the Mars flight would open.

Up until now he hadn't found a single astronaut he could trust immediately. "You talked me into it, Cathrin."

"Good. Send the papers to Mike Mitchell."

"'Gym Boy' Mitchell?" the colonel said, taken aback. "You think he's ready to come out of retirement to train a crippled Arab?"

"I've met him. He isn't that old, Coke."

"To be a trainer?"

"To be a space ship pilot. To be a lover."

Colonel Stevenson sucked in the smoke he'd been blowing out and started to cough. After recovering his breath, he didn't know what to say. He couldn't tell the President any of the details, and talking with Cathrin he felt like he was part of a secret conspiracy, the victims of which would be every man on the planet.

1.

The old part of the cemetery was close to the airport. The rumble of the jets taking off made the headstones vibrate and drowned out the words of the priest pronouncing the blessing. Cathrin was thankful for this, and Mitchell seemed to be too. They had last seen each other twenty years before at a dance, and it was hard for her to say how much Mike Mitchell had changed. They said goodbye to the priest at the cemetery gate and shared a cab over to the airport coffee shop. It was a secluded, intimate spot. Cathrin was having a hard time concealing her excitement. After reading Mitchell's file in her husband's study, she had been convinced that Mitchell could be enticed into competing with the younger astronauts.

Still, now here he was looking at her with suspicion. Cathrin felt like she was an angel hailing the old pilot.

"Thank you for being here, Cat," Mitchell said. "It would have been a shame if I had been the only person there for Mom. Now admit that this meeting is more than just a coincidence."

"I admit it. This is everything but a coincidence," said Cathrin. "I confess I've been waiting for half a year for the right moment to talk to you."

"Uh-oh... I don't know what to say. Why couldn't you just pick up the phone and call? I mean, I don't know you nearly as well as I know Coke, but a fifty-year-old retiree is pretty easy to convince to sit down for a cup of coffee."

Cathrin smiled. "You have time on your hands?"

"I have all the time in the world."

Cathrin opened her handbag and lifted a digitally sealed document reader onto the table. Mitchell didn't ask any questions. He turned the screen toward himself and started to read. Now and then Cathrin went to refresh his coffee.

"Seven billion TV viewers and a live broadcast?" Mike sighed after finishing reading. "It sounds so nonsensical that it can't be anything but true, Cathrin. If it's this easy, then why haven't we done this before? Apparently we've had the technology for years."

"The rocket technology, sure. But if NASA wanted to do something smarter and more impressive than just shooting silver bullets at Mars, they needed a completely new type of technology for keeping the crew alive. And that's when they found me."

"Found you? You and Coke must be about ten years younger than me. I thought all the options had been considered back in my time. Even sending monkeys to Mars instead of humans. But that wouldn't look too good next to the Stars and Stripes."

"I'd be OK with it," Cathrin laughed. "But something has changed. No more monkeys or robots. As you saw, we've been given authority to anything or anyone

money can buy, and the President is behind us. We have a project ready to go. All we have to do is sell it to the American public.”

Mitchell raised his clear pilot eyes.

“Yeah? So you want me to be the poster boy for your project? Are you sure you know enough about me? The media might dig up something that would bring your wonderful project crashing to the ground.”

Cathrin leaned her cheeks on her palms. “Now it’s my turn to be ashamed. I don’t know how to say this. I’ve already had the CIA vet you, Mike. You’re squeaky clean. Even just to play the straight-shooting cowboy type you’re better than anyone else I can imagine. But the reason I want you to be a part of the project is because I think I know something more than the CIA. And right now, for example because of your mother’s departure, some publicity about your private life might not feel as bad as it could have before.”

Mitchell blushed in vexation. “God damn it, Cathrin, this is the West Coast and the twenty-first century...”

“But it isn’t out there!” Cathrin exclaimed. “*Out there* they’re still living the inquisition when it comes to gender and relationships. *Out there* we need men who are open about their feelings.”

The pilot’s brow furrowed. “Where out there?”

“In space, you dolt. Out where men are still men.”

0.

The President lit a cigar. He guarded his vices and only bragged about his virtues within his family circle, but at this moment the Stevensons were just as close to him as family.

“You said the plan has the sanction of NASA’s experts?”

“Yes. They recommended that Cathrin and I act as the leaders of the Mars program. That is despite disqualifying ourselves for family reasons.”

“Garbage, Coke. You’re the best men for the job. Sorry, Cathrin. I mean that you’re the best Americans to lead the Mars program. And besides, I’m going to give you my full support. Whatever you want, whoever you need to convince, just ask me. I just want to know one thing: have all the options been weighed? Putting them to sleep for the trip and such?”

“We don’t have the technology, Mr. President,” Stevenson said calmly. “The problem isn’t the endurance of the ship, it’s the crew. As you know, Cathrin has researched the working environments of both space shuttles and submarines. Isolated group psychology, as it’s called.”

“Group psychology is one of the last academic disciplines whose theories are not always considered science,” Cathrin interrupted. “However, our calculations hold for predicting the operation of closed biospheres.”

“We have to trust her, Mr. President,” Stevenson said. “The United States will only be able to send a manned spaceflight to Mars using her plans.”

The President rolled the cigar between his fingers. Colonel Stevenson forced himself to look the chief executive in the eyes to prevent himself staring at the hypnotically fading cigar tip.

“What do you think personally, Coke? About what Cathrin writes about men? Are we really like this? So...” The President searched for an appropriate phrase.

“So quiet?” Stevenson suggested.

“Yeah, quiet. Is that what it’s about? Cathrin writes in that *secret* report that if we send three normal American men to Mars, they won’t have anything to say to each other. And that would make them somehow turn the backs on all of us. If I understand

correctly, Cathrin wants to use our spacecraft as a sort of human laboratory for her to combine the temperaments of these poor men like... like something out of an alchemist's cookbook. And all just so they won't be too quiet. Damn it, we're all like that, us men I mean. We don't have to explain every little thing to get along as a group, okay? So what is it about? Why couldn't we survive two years on a spaceship?"

Colonel Stevenson couldn't meet the President's gaze anymore. He repeated his wife's words like a prayer.

"Because we can't love each other."

Translation by Owen F. Witesman