

# **Sins of Mars**

**By Nicholas Stillman**

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Mars only looked red from far away. From orbit it looked dirt-brown and blurry. Nonetheless, MacKay gazed at its rust-blown surface through the biggest porthole of *Heartbeat*, the orbiter spacecraft that cost Americans tens of billions of dollars. Everyday, he'd soak up what scenery he could even though the mission might get postponed for weeks more. Man had made this the first, last, and only visit to the fourth planet.

Ferdinand entered the little observatory, drifting in the microgravity. His pudginess, pointy hips, and pointier nose made him resemble a floating leprechaun in coveralls. He'd spin illusions and stories from Earth as it quickly degenerated. He joined MacKay by the porthole and gripped one of its steel handles to stabilize himself. The rocking never fully stopped, but after four months, it felt natural. In silence, they gazed at the big muddy rock. All of Earth only got to see 2D pictures and video sent back.

“Want a snack?” Ferdinand asked.

His free hand proffered a fistful of plastic-wrapped fortune cookies. MacKay wrested one from under Ferdinand's ring finger that kept the treat from drifting away. He opened the wrapper and stuffed the crinkly plastic in a Velcro-sealed pocket. Over the Martian week in orbit, that pocket had filled with other bits of refuse, some quite illegal, which needed careful sorting.

“Thanks,” MacKay said.

They both smiled genuinely, as the big planet reminded men to do sometimes. Ferdinand's friendship had helped ease the stress of this fucked-over and halted mission. As *Heartbeat's* radio frequency specialist, only Ferdinand deigned to talk to MacKay. Who else wanted to associate with the lowest man on the medical totem pole? Thus far, no one needed MacKay's skills as the spacecraft's massage therapist. Rumor bruited that he would probably break their weakening bones by accident.

“Sorry to badger,” MacKay said, “but any new word from the ol' homeworld?”

“Ah, nothing new,” Ferdinand said. “I don't know if I should sigh with relief or shiver.”

He zipped the remaining fortune cookies into a fanny pack strapped around his blue coveralls. Nearly everyone else on board wore medicine white. MacKay thought of the crew as pain tablets tossing around in a bottle, waiting for use. In terms of order and morality, some had already expired.

“The global economic collapse sounds real,” Ferdinand continued. “But anything related to us...ugh. You can't trust any of it. The propaganda has gotten too thick, too realistic. Any kid at his Mom's place can whip up a high-quality video. The pros can create evidence for whatever narrative they want. Maybe Mission Control had a good reason for stopping our Mars discoveries. Maybe they just cooked up a scheme to demand more emergency funding. Maybe those worldwide messages I get come from trolls and paranoid conspiracy theorists. You can't trust the scientific

community, either. They've jumped in bed with government. So they want to pull us back to Earth too to get grants for their own space programs, better and safer ones of course. I just know our bankrupt nation can't afford shit right now. No more space after this, partner."

"Unless we go private," MacKay said.

"Nope. Governments will shut all that down. Too many expensive satellites up there. We've got the last ride off Earth, and everyone wants a say in it."

"It sounds like animals fighting over a scrap of meat," MacKay said. "Can't really blame them. We've still got great ape brains."

"Eh, I won't make excuses for them," Ferdinand said. "I actually blame the collapse on easy-access technology in the hands of idiots. The advent of mobile communication means no one falls over and dies anymore. They all airdrop into the hospitals. Can you imagine how much money would get saved if just one stroke patient died? That would cut decades of care expenses. The medical luxuries cost trillions now, and everyone jumps in. Look at *Heartbeat*; do daring astronauts and explorers really need an exorbitant medical staff replete with surgeons? Fucking *surgeons*, MacKay. In the 1960s we made it to the Moon without one nurse on board."

"True," MacKay said. "But if everyone else gets medical care, so should we. They wouldn't let us up here otherwise. I know they blew millions building enough room to get me on board. Only a fool would turn down the offer, though."

They poured their wonder over the brown hump of Mars. A jagged ice cap sprawled there, filthy and still. MacKay bit into his fortune cookie, thankful that the customized chewy dough didn't snap into crumbs and drift around the observatory. He practically lived here, forcing planet gazers to acknowledge him.

A burst of jollity followed by hooting roared from down the hallway. MacKay wondered what interplanetary debauchery the crew invented this time. Ferdinand glanced behind him and smirked.

"It doesn't surprise me at all," Ferdinand said. That gleam of gossip polished his eyes again. Earth fed him its confessions daily, until his eavesdropper look became almost permanent. "Only the megadorks with the highest marks get a foot into space. The medical staff here have credentials up the ass and the competitiveness of warlords. Those battle cries will only get louder."

MacKay stuffed the rest of the fortune cookie in his mouth. He unfolded its little strip of paper and read it.

NEVER FORGET WHAT YOU DID. PAIN AND TORMENT AWAIT.

Vague, but meaningful. As the lowest man on the medical totem pole, MacKay saw his laughable predicament reflected by a cookie. Ferdinand didn't inquire about the message. He heard enough

misfortune this hour, this month.

“Lucky numbers: zero and go fuck yourself,” MacKay said, staring at his fortune.

“See you later, MacKay,” Ferdinand said. “I’ve got to get back to the updates.”

“Thanks again.”

MacKay waited until Ferdinand maneuvered out, then tore up his fortune. He balled up the bits of paper and swallowed them while watching Mars. Whenever *Heartbeat* returns home, authorities will examine every millimeter of trash on board, especially after the string of insubordinations. MacKay's fortune, probably the worst one, would only add to the gossip about his lowliest position here. Anyone reading it would spread the snickering to Earth.

MacKay stared until his eyeballs felt like copies of Mars. If his brown irises and white corneas switched colors, they'd somewhat resemble the planet with its one visible ice cap. An afterimage held, and it would ease the ostracism. The little smirks at him would glance off. He, at least, had time to gaze for hours at the reason they all came here.

The others found funner and fuller pastimes, apparently. Their shouts and whooping shotgunned up and down the vessel. To reach his destination in the operating room, MacKay had to pass through whatever spacecraft festivities they jury-rigged today.

As he swung open a circular door, MacKay locked himself in deadpan mode. It helped suppress all the enmity he had for these assholes. The look held, somehow, as a doctor in skintight white scrubs flew toward him riding a dead female pig. The huge animal, normally kept alive for potential organ harvesting, had died “mysteriously” yesterday. Now its drying tongue flopped about as the beast sailed through the hallway in constant free fall. The rider gripped one ear to hang on as his other arm made wild lasso motions.

Most of the medical crew lined the cluttered walls, flailing their arms just as much. They shrieked and laughed as the flying pig and its rider almost coasted through the opened door. The doctor collided with the wall above. He dropped his imaginary lasso and pushed off the door frame. MacKay ducked as the pig nearly struck him snout-first.