

## **Forever Village**

Everyone wants to live forever, and that's just what the Forever Corporation is promising, if you can afford to buy your way into the Forever Village on Mars. Martian Engineer Johnny Danforth smells a rat, however, and the corporation does what it takes to keep him from spilling the beans.

The floor to ceiling windows surrounding three sides of the Forever Corporation's showroom lounge are dynamically tinted to let in the right amount of light. Enough to drape the room in pleasant shadows as the sun descends towards the ocean's edge. Plush velvet furniture in royal blue and burgundy are deliberately positioned so each client can see others eager to buy into the Forever lifestyle.

Lady Beatrice Garibaldi crosses her legs and sips sherry from a crystal clipper, absently listening to young Allison reiterate the benefits of joining the Forever Village on Mars. She'd made up her mind long ago about "coming on board", as they say in their brochures, but she's too polite to interrupt the young woman's overly earnest sales pitch.

"Just to recap, then, quickly, once the funds have been transferred and the paperwork is complete, and, oh my, there's a lot of it," Allison smiles and lets small giggle escape her lips.

"Well," she continues, "after all that, you'll be transported in cryo sleep for the journey to Mars, so you're fresh on arrival. When you get there, you'll be ushered into your living unit, acclimated and moved to the Village."

Lady Garibaldi tunes her out. She's already read, with her lawyers in tow, and in great detail, about the units, the reduced gravity on Mars, about the special air mixture needed for Forever living, and how you will be sealed into the Village — *forever*. Nothing about the *forever* bit is concerning — immortality is fine, death is the real problem. That's probably why most people sign up for the Forever plan — well, those who can afford to hand over their billion-dollar fortunes.

"So, Lady Garibaldi, can we sign you up today?"

"Of course we can, dear. That's the very reason I'm here."

#

Johnny Danforth, Chief Installation Engineer for Forever Village on Mars, and Angus Carmichael, Installation Technician, wait patiently for Unit 1029 to be wheeled into position in the Gamma Sector. The red dust swells up under the oversize, balloon tires, tinting the sky a deeper hue of red. They ready the crane to lift it into position on level three.

Danforth checks the manifest on his wrist computer and reads off the nameplate information. Carmichael walks beside the lumbering unit as it nears the lift station.

"1029," says Danforth.

"Check," replies Carmichael.

"Ivanov, Sasha."

“Check.”

“200 square meters.”

“Check.”

“Whiskey, November, Victor, three, Papa”

“Standby. Damn dust.”

Carmichael reaches up and swipes at the nameplate.

“Say again.”

“Whiskey, November, Victor, three, Papa”

“Check.”

“This is the one, Carmichael, old Sasha Ivanov. Hope he enjoys his forever time.”

The carriage locks itself into the hoist. Danforth transmits the authorization number, and the unit is lifted and positioned in the correct location in the Village. The two men ride along. The installation, utility hookups, and unlocking of connecting passageways is automatic. Danforth issues the final authorization when the last connection completes.

Back at ground level, Carmichael programs the carriage to send it back to the construction area, while Danforth returns to the buggy. The exposed end of a cable catches his eye. He pulls at it until it's free of the dust.

“What do you make of this, Carmichael?”

“Comm cables, looks like.”

“What I thought. Seems like it's been broken for a while, don't you think.”

Carmichael nods.

“So, tell me this, Angus, how can we communicate with the Village if the cables broken? I watch a live feed from here every day.”

“Really? You watch the live feed?”

“Yeah, what of it? Better than losing all my money in Jensen's rigged poker games.”

Carmichael, shrugs. “To each his own, I guess. Look, there's a lot of cables running out here, a lot of redundancy. Maintenance is probably in no hurry to fix this one.”

“Yeah, maybe. I'll report it anyway.”

Danforth drops the end of the cable, and they walk to their buggy.

“Every day?”

“Uh-huh.”

“You are something else, Danforth.”

#

Leroy Sandford’s office isn’t nearly up to the posh standards of the showroom lounge, but it aligns well with his position as manager of Martian Technical Resources. His window looks down at the central fountain, its spray highlighted by the corporate colours. From here he can see employees strolling around the hills and dales of the small parkland separating the working campus from the showrooms and sales offices.

Siobhan McGinnis appears at his door and knocks lightly.

“Come in, Siobhan. What’s up?”

“Danforth signed up for another tour, Sir.”

“What? How many is that?”

“This will be number five. Should we force him out.”

“From what I know, we’d have to drag him out, kicking and screaming, no doubt. What’s his health status?”

“Everything checks out. He’s lost a tiny bit of muscle mass, but way less than you’d expect after four back-to-back tours. There’s nothing wrong with him, except it’s weird he’d want to stay on Mars for that long.”

“Mental state?”

“Same. Everything seems to be fine.”

“Is that someone’s opinion, or has he had a psych eval?”

“Latter. Nothing out of normal, at least by Mars’ standards.”

“Not much we can do. I’ll authorize the tour, but tell him this is the last one, even if we have to get a court order.”

Siobhan taps at her slate.

“It’s on your console now, Sir.”

Sanford presses his thumb to the screen and hits the approve button.

“Is that everything?”

“Yes Sir.”

She leaves Sandford’s office, and he turns his attention back to the strollers in the park.

#

The Engineers Lounge in the Forever Corporation Employee’s complex is small, with uniformly grey walls and floors. The only colour provided by the knick-knacks and art engineers leave behind when they return to Earth. It’s usually deserted, except when a new recruit gets lost and wanders in by accident.

Johnny loves the solitude, though. He gave up on the bar scene long ago, and, after Jensen forced out all the other card games, gambling became too serious for him. He comes here after every duty cycle and kicks back. His favourite activity is watching live streaming of the residents’ lounges from the Village. It’s like watching a slow-moving soap opera slash reality TV show, except you only see three rooms. Each has a different theme, but they’re all big, super posh and outfitted in things very rich people — very, very, very rich people, the ones that drop a billion-plus to live here forever — covet.

One of the rooms usually has a game of pool or snooker happening. There’s more action on the snooker table, but the women play more pool, so Johnny’s torn. Everyone in the Village is old, but they’re well maintained, and the women flirt like mad. Tonight, the one he’s called Carmen is playing Victor, the Melon Head. Victor’s losing, badly, of course — everyone loses to Carmen.

Johnny sits up and pays special attention after Carmen makes a spectacularly outstanding shot, curving the cue ball wide around the eleven ball and nudging her five into the corner pocket. An amazing shot, but he’s seen this exact shot before. In fact, although he can’t be sure, he thinks he’s seen the very same table layout before, too, ball-for-ball — as best as he can remember, anyway.

“Nah,” he mumbles, “can’t be. Just my imagination.”

#

Danforth and Carmichael wrap up another installation in the Gamma Sector and return to their buggy. Danforth notices the cable he reported to maintenance is still broken.

“Still not fixed. What gives?” he asks.

“Dunno, Chief. If I recall, I did say it’s redundant — no point in fixing it.”

“Yeah. Maybe. You’d think something would have popped up when I sent in the maintenance request, though.”

Carmichael shrugs.

“Maintenance runs by their own clock,” he says.

“Uh-huh, you’re probably right.”

The buggy trip back to the engineering complex takes a little under an hour if you let it self-drive. Way faster if you take control — fun the first couple of times, but the novelty wears off quickly. Danforth punches the Return-Home button.

“How’s your soap opera coming along?” Carmichael asks.

“It’s got its moments. Right now, I’m watching a love triangle unfold between a crazy Russian, an Asian woman and some dopey looking old man. Hard to tell when you only see the lounges, but I can tell — the signs are there.”

“Man, you’re too into this.”

“I suppose.”

Both men fall silent.

“Need to pass something by you,” Danforth says, finally.

“Sure. Shoot.”

“Maybe I’ve been watching this soap for too long, or maybe I’ve just been on this dusty, red rock past my best before date —”

“Yup!” Carmichael interrupts.

“— But I noticed something strange on the lounge feeds. Some things, not everything, repeat, exactly, like a glitch in the matrix.”

“What are you saying, man? That we’re living in an artificial world, that nothing we see or do is real?”

“No, not at all. What I’m saying is that the Village, the people inside it, may not be real?”

“You’re joking, right?”

“Uh-uh.”

Danforth describes the pool shots he’s seen. How different people have been making the same amazing, impossible shot over the past several months — no variations.

“I must have seen it five times already.”

“So, what do you think happened to the people inside the Village, then?”

“I don’t know what to think. What would you make of it?”

“Nothing. Just a glitch in the feed that AI patches over. I’d forget the whole thing. Just sit back and enjoy the soap, especially that love triangle you’re watching.”

#

Dieter Wagner, head of Mars Station security, contemplates the promotion waiting for him on his return to Earth in a mere five months, providing there are no major incidents on his watch. Nothing so far, and he intends to keep it that way. He sips his latte, scanning the multiscreen for signs of anything remotely interesting. A knock rouses him.

“Yes?”

“Carmichael, Sir.”

“Carmichael, come in. You haven’t dropped by in quite some time? Just visiting, or do you have a minor incident to report, perhaps?”

“Ah, no. Not exactly. It might be more serious than that.”

Dieter sits up, puts his coffee aside, turns on the recorder, and nods to Carmichael.

“Go ahead.”

“Carmichael, Angus, Mars Station Security, badge number nine-oh-eight.”

He pauses and takes a deep breath.

“It might be nothing, Sir, but Chief Installation Engineer John Danforth has been voicing suspicions about the viability, er, feasibility, perhaps, of the Forever Village.”

“Go on.”

“A couple of things. He keeps questioning why a broken cable at the Village is never fixed. I explained that it was likely redundant and no one’s going to waste their time on it. More pertinent, though, is his belief that AI is generating everything he’s seeing on the live feeds.”

“You don’t say. He’s serious about this. You’re sure he’s not pulling your leg?”

“He sure seems serious, Sir.”

Dieter turns off the recorder, and types into his notebook.

“Thank you, Carmichael. I’ll look into this. Maybe he’s just got *Mars Fever*. He’s been here for four terms and has signed up for a fifth. Still, don’t want unfounded aspersions cast on Forever Corp. Convince Danforth to keep these thoughts to himself, if you can.”

“Yes Sir. How should I do that, Sir?”

“You’ll think of something. Dismissed.”

Carmichael leaves while Dieter is composing a message to Headquarters. No use taking chances.

#

Ping Chong re-reads the original message from Dieter, and the follow-up reply, just to make sure she understands what’s going on up there. She brings up Danforth’s service records, then calls Sanford’s office. Siobhan confirms Danforth’s tours, approval for a fifth tour, and his current mental state. All that is of no consequence now — he has to come off the base, one way or another.

Ping steeple her fingers and watches the silvery clouds languidly drifting along where the ocean meets the sky. Something will definitely have to be done. She unlocks her safe and pulls out a plain, letter-size envelope, slices it open and removes a square, white card, with a phone number and further instructions. She studies it, turns it over, and contemplates her next, irrevocable move. The clouds roll on.

She dials the number.

“Hello.”

Reading from the card, Ping says, “I understand you’re a decorator.”

She hears the faint clicks and buzz telling her they’re switching to a secure, encrypted line.

“Number?”

She sits down, nervous, and reads the next line from the Card.

“Six-one”

A few brief clicks.

“Confirmed, Forever Corporation. What is your order?”

“A single room, only” she says.

“Palate?” they ask.

“Subdued, discreet and timely.”

“Remote?” they ask.

“Yes.”

“Authorize payment now.”

A request for payment, with instructions, appears on her tablet. She types in the authorization using the codes on the card, then fills in the travel documents.

“Transportation authorization and travel vouchers to leave earth are being transmitted now. In the name of Egbo Akinyemito, per instructions.”

The line goes dead.

Ping closes the call, then pats beads of sweat from her forehead.

#

Egbo Akinyemi exits the Mars Station arrivals bay, clear headed and agile. He’s been booked to Mars as Installation Engineer, Second Class under his current alias. Before leaving Earth, he memorized the station layout and is able to proceed directly to his assigned berth. The room is cramped and depressingly grey. He checks his watch, then sits on the edge of the bed. An hour until Danforth is off shift, another one or two until he’s in the lounge. The intel’s imprecise, but people are imprecise.

After three hours, Egbo makes his way to the Engineer’s Lounge. It’s empty except for the dark-haired Danforth, lounging on the sofa, eyes glued to the live feed from the Village. He sits in the armchair closest to Danforth’s head.

“Hello,” he says.

Danforth cranes his neck to look at the new arrival.

“Yo. You must be new here. Only newbies wind up in this lounge.”

“Yup. New. Soap opera?” Egbo asks, nodding his head towards the screen.

“Yeah. More like old-style reality TV, but way slower and unscripted.”

“Mind if I watch?”

“Nah.”

#

Egbo queues at the departure’s terminal, inching forward as each passenger checks in.

“Medical and transit, please,” says the guard.

Egbo passes him his clearances.

“That was short,” he says, double checking the passes. “Just come for visit, or did that suicide scare you off?”

Egbo smiles and says, “No. Decided Mars isn’t for me. Suicide, you say. I imagine you get a lot of those up here.”

“Nah. Pretty rare. One of your buddies, I suppose, Chief Installation Engineer, offed himself. Know him?”

“No. Wasn’t here long enough to know anybody, really. This is the longest conversation I’ve had on Mars.”

The guard laughs as he hands Egbo his passes.

“Rumour says he had a bad case of cabin fever. Idiot was on his fifth tour, so I can well imagine. Most people barely make it through one without going down a dark hole.

“Have a good trip, Mr. Akinyemi.”