Below them her bed, above them the dome, sealing in the colony from the reality of Mars. Completed in 2225, today–a hundred years later—still the sole colony. The reality of Mars intervened in plans for the future.

By now the clear dome had eroded to a light orange/brown, matching the endless barren landscape outside. Cracks required immediate sealing from deadly solar radiation, unbreathable atmosphere and subhuman temperatures (today, -117 (not including the wind chill factor) (and it was windy.)) The air was always stale, it never rained. Polluted smog from the Smelter hung over the city as the less than 400 colonists went about their daily lives—lives of endless work, to survive on a profoundly hostile planet, which clearly wanted them to die.

Naked, in bed with her, he touched her shoulder. “Let’s do it.” Facing her.

“Not yet,” she replied, avoiding looking at him.

“Something wrong? I thought we were good.”

“George–I’m a virgin.”

“I thought you were serious about…*what*? You’re a *what*?” He pushed himself up. “How could you be a virgin? I lost mine when I was fifteen. You’re sixteen!”

She looked through the window, to the huge dome covering the city, to the orange/brown sky. To the tiny moon Phobos, barely visible. Without a strong telescope, it was impossible to see the Earth. At the moment, everything felt millions of miles away. More than that, something was wrong with George.

“I want pleasure,” he insisted. “Nothing wrong with that, is there?” He paused. “Actually, Shallot, I don’t know what the hell I want. I…have problems inside. No idea what’s going on. I’m screwed. My life is over. Or will be, soon enough.” He sat up, lean, muscular, attractive but for the selfish gleam in his dark eyes.

“I’m sorry.” She sat up, pulling the sheet over her chest. “This was a mistake. I’m sorry. Yes, I am sixteen. Yes, I have feelings for you.”

“Feelings?”

“But I’d only do it because of pressure. Doesn’t that feel desperate?” She looked at him, gently. “Maybe you should go. I can see you’re upset.”

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“I am.” He looked back, stressed. “Maybe I should stay.”

“All you want to do is, well, to do it.”

They were now both sitting up, naked, Shallot covering herself with the sheet, George facing her, keeping his back from her.

“I’m sick of it. We’re dogs, led on a leash, running in circles, chasing our tails. Aren’t *you* sick of it? Hell with this. Let’s do some Fizz.” He reached to his pants.

“Fizz just gets me high,” she told him. Something was wrong with him. “I don’t want to take Fizz and feel high because without it I’d feel dead.”

She held the sheet to her neck with one hand, running her other hand through her long black hair. She got out of bed, pulling on a long, loose dress, covering herself.

He also stood, pulling on his pants, always facing her. He took a bottle from his pocket and popped a small red pill.

Suspicious now. “Are you *infected*?”

“Have to talk with you, yeah.” He walked to the windows, looking out.

Shallot avoided looking at his back.

She stood next to him at the window, the bed forgotten. The city sprawled many square miles before them, no building higher than two stories, lit by the relatively bright light from the solar dishes surrounding the city. She saw people walk on the streets, none with urgency.

“As soon as I was able to understand,” he told her, “life’s been grueling. Pointless. Day after day with no hope, living in this Martian coffin.”

She heard him grunt. “I agree,” she said. “And?”

He suppressed a shiver. “Okay. I’m ready. Look.”

He turned his back to her. She saw the purple boils. Suddenly she felt cold.

“Started a week ago.”

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Without thinking, Shallot picked up her phone and pressed the red button. A white check mark appeared over it. “Anyone know? The Clinic?”

He grunted again, holding his stomach. “Not even my parents. Especially not them.” He croaked a laugh. “Saved it for you.” He coughed.

“They’ll be here quick. They always come fast.”

“Ah yes. They always come fast. Lust, on Mars.” He straightened, facing her, panting, damp sweat covering his body. “Thanks. I knew I had to call in but couldn’t do it myself.” He swallowed, gulped, belched, looking dizzy. “Hope you would.”

“What does it feel like?”

“Things moving around inside me. Lumps. Two of them. Maybe three. Ohhh. Getting high from the Fizz. Feels better when I don’t care.” He smiled as his eyes rolled back. “Love the red pill.”

She saw a small lump move under the skin of his neck, around his Adam’s apple. He swallowed again, coughed, spat up blood. She heard sounds downstairs, footsteps approaching, then two medical officers entered, a man and a woman, clothed in white jackets and pants, large red crosses painted over their hearts.

“I’m why you’re here,” he told them, handing over his i.d. They looked at it, checked their tablets, then silently went over him with a tricorder. They examined the purpling boils, saw a small lump move in his neck.

“How long do I have?” he asked them.

“Plenty of time,” the woman told him. “Don’t worry. Plenty of time. Let’s get you to where you’ll be more comfortable.” Like her partner, she was in her early forties. “The new meds deliver lots of remissions. Come with us, please. *Now*.”

Shallot hugged him and could only watch as he left with the two medics. Preoccupied, he did not look back. She stood in the empty doorway, sighed, then took a long hot shower–to feel different.

It did not help.

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The purple boils, the moving lump under his skin, meant death. She felt sick for him.

After drying her hair, putting on underwear and the loose dress again, she went downstairs to see what the rest of her day would be like. She felt awful. Like yesterday, she did not look forward to today. And now she had gone from worrying about pressure to have sex from George to worrying about whether he would be alive in a week.

Her life on Mars.

She found her parents in the living room, exercising on treadmills with the TV on. During the week, they exercised at work, along with everyone else. On weekends, they exercised at home. Muscles had to be kept toned in Mars' weaker gravity. Her father looked at her, concerned, sweating a little. "We spoke with the medics when we let them in. Sorry about George. Nice kid."

"Yes, he is," her mother added. "So, honey. Did you finally do it?"

"*Mom*!" Her parents could be *so* clueless.

"Sorry. I'm just concerned about you. Sorry. Tell me about George. Are you going to visit, when it's allowed?" her mother asked, continuing to jog, running to nowhere, periodically checking the gauges to ensure her progress to nowhere was good.

"Sure. They don't allow visitors–I've tried with my friends who were infected. They let you leave candy. Never flowers. I'll go with some of my besties. First, I thought I'd see Nan this morning, after the rally. I want some answers about what's going on."

"Answers?" her mother asked. "To what? And, say hi to mom from me."

"Sure. And, answers to all our problems. What are you guys up to?"

"Well, there's the rally, the concerned colonists' protest at City Hall," her mom told her, starting to pant. "Pre-election, lots riding on it. I'm excited. Everyone else from Admin will be there."

"Yeah, Smelter workers will be there too. We feel unloved. And, this evening," her

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father added, “there’s the Marsball final for Region Three. Lots riding on it.”

They chatted some more, she wanted to be polite but cared little, then walked out, saying she’d see them at the demonstration. George being taken away–she had no stupid small talk in her. On the street, it was warm and sort of bright, even with the dome’s scarring caused by decades of exposure to storms, sand and solar radiation, and to the impact of pollution caused by the Smelter. The sun looked more distant and dimmer than it did when she was a child. Indeed, everything had faded and become worn as she grew.

She wished everything was…as she saw it as a child.

She walked down the residential street, lined by two storey side-by-side homes identical to hers, most built at the same time about one hundred years ago, replacing the original aging buildings. On the opposite side of the street, she saw a woman pushing a baby carriage while typing on her phone. Shallot took out her phone and called her bestie. Then her other bestie. They were all going to the demonstration and agreed to meet there.

“George. I have to tell you about George. He’s infected.” Gasps. “They took him this morning. He wanted to do it with me, and I wouldn’t, and then he showed me. The boils were totally gross.” Her besties agreed to visit the Clinic with candy later. Aaliyah said she had still had some chocolate, since last month with Alice. Farah said she’d look to see if she had anything.

Even walking slowly it did not take long to reach City Hall. Her parents drove by in a cart, she waved at them. They went towards the old side, Shallot gravitated to the young. Old was over sixty, by far the largest group in the colony. Young, under twenty-five, by far the smallest. In-betweens were in-between.

They all were concerned, most angry.

The demonstration had been called to express colonists’ concerns about problems plaguing the colony. The election campaign for Council started tomorrow. The colonists wanted the Councillors to clearly hear their message of discontent. Everyone wanted change–even if no one knew how.

After a few minutes, the Mayor came out from City hall, to stand on the front steps and face the crowd, the Councillors behind her. Shallot watched her address the

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crowd. Madeline, a tall woman of sixty-five with silver gray hair cut short, nicely cropping her head, waited for the crowd to settle. The Councillors remained behind her, happy to have her absorb the brunt of the colonists' anger.

The colonists held signs: *Elect Councilman Newman For Change. Vote Marjorie She Can Do It.* There were no signs supporting Madeline, the current Mayor.

One sign read *Elect Mickey–A Mouse Would Do Better*.

"I and the Councillors appreciate you are concerned," she began. "Welcome. It is good you are here. Today you shall hear from those Councillors who…were able to attend.

"Council *has* been working hard, in a difficult situation. The new energy conversion programme works," Madeline told the crowd. "The salt batteries should decrease pollution by helping store energy. It will be some time before the batteries can be built, of course. Solar radiation remains outside, the dome is secure, although it is aging and cracks are inevitable. We all want to remain safe. Speaking of that, the new medications have helped many of those with the bug. We are working on figuring out what this disease is, what the bug is that has infected a handful of colonists with such tragic results."

She looked at the crowd. They looked at her. No applause. Opposition signs pumped up and down. The air was still. And smoggy. Air quality, because of the Smelter's inadequate filters, was poor.

"What about the pensions?" a girl next to Shallot asked, loudly. "The taxes don't cover pensions. There are a lot of retired workers. Will I have to work forever to support them?"

Madeline nodded, grim. "A year ago, we had to increase retirement age to eighty. Yes, the money is no longer there to support pensions. But we do have a plan. To increase the birth rate."

"How?" someone asked.

"Also," she continued, evading the question, "tourism from Earth is still possible. Council has been working on improving relations. I will provide more details tomorrow, once the election officially begins."

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“Why not now?”

“Better tomorrow. It’s politics, part of my platform. This is not an election rally, and I respect that.” She knew they would not like her platform, felt it better to delay.

Silence. The Councillors behind her glanced at each other.

Madeline kept herself from sighing. “I appreciate your concerns. I am your Mayor, I live here, my daughter and grandchild live here. The colony’s problems are not secrets. That’s all I can say. I’ve nothing else today. Thank you.” She walked down the front steps of City Hall and began chatting with people in the crowd, shaking hands with those who would, slowly gravitating towards those holding the few campaign signs for her.

She knew everyone’s first name.

Aaliyah looked at Shallot. They were both sixteen. “Wanna do some Fizz?” Shallot shook her head. “Yeah, what’s the point? It isn’t real. George. That’s how many of our friends?”

“Too many. Maybe the dome lets through more radiation than they tell us. Maybe it isn’t a bug at all. I need to know the truth. About George. About everything.”

“The truth? Who knows?” Aaliyah told her. “We only live to survive on this rock. Make the best of it. What you doing now this is over?”

“Seeing my grandmom after she’s done shaking hands.”

Farha joined them. The rally fell apart. No one came forward to speak. Shallot, Farha and Aaliyha went to a nearby coffee shop. Aaliyah had her notebook, so for half an hour they played their saved game in ***Mars and Me***. The game was created years ago by a team led by Shallot’s great grandfather. It was a realistic version of the colony, with NPGs duplicating individual colonists.

One started a new game with dangerous cracks developing in the dome, the birth rate plummeting and the population increasingly unable to support itself, pollution killing the crops, water filtration problems ongoing. It duplicated the problems of the colony at that time, thirty years ago, just after a massive equipment failure left water unfiltered for months, then poorly filtered after. The bug developed about ten years after the water filtration system broke down.

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Shallot's team with Farha and Aaliyah had succeeded in creating tourist visits from Earth, and the dome was in good shape. Yet the population remained unhappy, the air bad, the water questionable. Building morale was difficult. There was little violence but avoiding suicides was really hard. As colonists aged, they lost hope. The population had begun dropping long ago. The colony in their saved game, despite her team's efforts, remained depressed and unstable.

The disease remained one issue they could do nothing about, given the programmers themselves had no idea it would exist when they created the game. They added the disease ten years ago, when it became unavoidable, but the cause was still a mystery.

As Shallot played, she believed her life needed to be more than it was. Her counterpart NPG in the game was doing no better, complaining to Shallot about her parents and no one offering her work. Just as Shallot had not been offered employment. When colonists turned sixteen they were assigned to career paths.

It's all so emo, her NPG told her. *Aren't you tired of it?*

Totally.

She could no longer sit on her butt. Too much was happening. George had triggered deep concerns. What to do, about everything, that *was* a question. She was sixteen. How much time did she have? Every time she played the game, she felt pressure to change the colony itself. The game would never play better until the colony was back on track. But how?

After she left her besties, who had new jobs to return to, Farha in the Smelter, Aaliyah with Marsball, outside Shallot again felt alone, sole, the only one—alone in this world she never asked to be born into. "Enough," she said to the world.

People walking around her gave her a wide birth, concerned at her abrupt outburst: another young teen.

They all seemed discontented.

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