In the Mayor's office there was no room for wavering about life or feeling alone. There was only reality. Which occasionally included wavering about life and feeling alone. Responsible, isolated.

Madeline leaned back in the plush chair, kicked off her heels and grunted, tired. Her leg ached, arthritis, but she refused to use her cane in public. Her EA, Sally, and her Communications Director, Mike, settled into chairs facing her. She sat behind the large, simulwood desk, they next to her, facing her, the desk not between them.

Madeline crossed her legs, rubbing her calf. No one smiled. "Takes?"

"Self-selected," Sally said. "It was publicized as a demonstration of concern. Most weren't about to show you any support."

"Not the best turnout," Mike added. "Says something. They may not support you, but they don't like Marjorie either. They want someone different. Newman has built steady support. I talk with him occasionally, see what I can pick up."

"No one different has stepped forward," Madeline said to him. "I can only be me. Most people are pissed. Not only with me, with everything. Can't blame them. We've done a lot of this all wrong. In hindsight."

The Mayor's office was large, well lit, a penthouse on the second storey of City Hall, windows for outside walls allowing a view of the entire city. City Hall was one of the first public buildings built and occupied after the dome was completed and pressurized. She saw the square in front of City Hall was now empty. Overhead, always, the dome. Beyond, an orange/brown sky partly obscured by wind-driven dust. The tiny moon Phobos was barely visible. A storm was approaching. She saw warning lights around the dome's perimeter flash on.

She opened a bottle on her desk and popped a pill, for the arthritis.

"Easier sitting right now," she said, shifting in the plush chair which at the moment was not plush enough. She looked at the workers at the top of the dome, hanging by ropes, apply sealants to cracks. "How's maintenance?"

"New cracks every day," Sally told her.

She looked at the clock on her desk, an old-fashioned wind-up with a little spaceship

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that rocked back and forth. “It’s time. Time to return to Earth.” They moved closer. The large monitor on her desk flashed a series of numbers and codes, then Arnold appeared.

An older man, balding, wearing a crisp dark suit, paper rose in his lapel. Arnold smiled but they knew instantly the news was bad. As usual. A mandated call—it had been a long established practice–because Earth should communicate with Mars, at least once a month.

“Hello again Mars, Madeline and staff,” he said, off the cuff, not reading from a teleprompter. “Not much news, apart from what you’ve already received. The water wars continue, the cancer rate’s up and birth rate down. We’re still dealing with the aftermath of the Continental Wars.

“Tourist voyages to Mars remain not feasible, currently. No tourist interest, not with the solar radiation and your dome problems. More than that, the disease. No one from Earth wants to visit us and risk it. More to the point, all the Governments on Earth would refuse to accept them back, for fear of contamination. No tourist wants a visit to Mars for two weeks which could last the rest of their lives.

“We’re not selling tickets. Even though we put casinos in the transit ships. Those ships are making a profit, going to the Moon. Economically, we have to fill the ship for it to launch. You must fix your problems first.

“We wish we had the resources to help you. But our supplies are very limited, as they have been for years. Make do with what you have. We have every confidence you will!

“There remains no market for exporting your minerals, given the cost of transport back to Earth. Our economy is suffering, grants are not possible. The President’s working through his own problems. The attempt to improve the birth rate by making birth control illegal has backfired. Our population imbalance is much like yours. As are our pollution problems. But you know all that. I’ve been delivering the same report for over thirty years.

“That’s all for this week. Sorry it was not better. I doubt you have any questions.” He smiled, the screen froze and went to black.

Madeline stood, wincing, pushing herself up. “I’ll send a response later,” she said to

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her aides, “when I think of something except telling them to drop dead.” She looked at her cane. Never in public. She had to radiate strength. Well, she was in her damn office. She took her cane and leaned against it. She wanted to stand, just not for it to hurt.

There was a buzz. Madeline looked at the display on her monitor and told Sally, “My grand daughter. Show her in, please.”

The large front doors opened and a short older woman entered wearing a medical coat, large red cross over her heart. Madeline looked at her. “I was expecting someone else. Thanks for coming. Anything?”

“Your granddaughter’s outside. I didn’t have the time to wait any longer, Mayor.” The doctor shook her head. “Four new cases. The cause is clear enough. Martian microbes, disease germs, viruses, not filtered from the water. What they do inside the colonists remains under study. Blood tests remain normal. To date, no infected colonist has lived long enough for us to know anything. Death, after admission, averages two weeks. Of course, the disease is advanced by the time they are admitted.

“The new drugs are failures, they cause no remissions. We remain uncertain why some colonists are affected, most not. In short, no progress.” She paused, looked at Madeline, took a breath. “How’s the arthritis?”

“Still there.”

The doctor nodded and left.

Another buzz. “Must be Shallot,” Sally said.

Madeline asked them to leave and send her granddaughter in. “Family time,” she said, leaning on the cane. “She wants support, again. Poor kid. Tough, being sixteen. I’m the grandmom, she needs me.” She looked at them. “Wish I was her age.”

They left and Shallot walked in, closing the door behind her. “Hey, Nan. Love you.”

“Love you, onion.” Madeline smiled. “Saw you and my daughter and Antonio at the demonstration. What do you think? Am I going down in flames?”

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Shallot shook her head, then shrugged. “It isn’t that they don’t like you. They don’t like how things are. Too many questions, too few answers.”

Madeline nodded, leaning on her cane.

“All my friends have been assigned work,” Shallot said, looking at her. “Why not me?”

Madeline frowned. “Because you’re my granddaughter. There’s an election. They don’t want to offend anyone. We’ve talked about that.”

“A friend of mine, George, is infected. I was with him this morning. Nan, I’m tired of being in the dark. Not knowing what is happening or what I can do about it. Isn’t it time you told me what’s going on? We always skirt around it.”

She looked long at Shallot, considering her day so far. “Onion, I feel told and tired. And you’re right. I’ve always skirted around our problems. You’re old enough now. I’ll open the doors so you can see it all.

“Go underground. It starts with the water. Then the dome and Smelter.” She picked up her phone.

“Now?” Shallot blinked. “I thought we would just talk.”

“Time’s run out for chatting. I thought you wanted to act.”

“Now?” Shallot summoned her courage. This was what she wanted, right?

“Now is the best time,” her grandmother replied.

“Okay then. I’ll go for it.”

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