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Running

Newman turned on his TV and in a moment there he was, in his face–Shallot's great grandfather smiling grimly into the camera. Newman knew of this morning's broadcast. The entire colony had heard about it. Almost everyone was watching. Anyone still remotely close to Newman texted and phoned, urging him to check out the broadcast. His sources informed him Madeline's father had a copy of Newman's original medical report, showing he had three plants inside him. Newman knew there was a rat. It no longer mattered who it was. This broadcast was the start of Newman's endgame.

His enemies were on the cusp of finishing him. The old fart on the TV cleared his throat, said he needed no introduction, then introduced himself. Idiot.

"You all have an idea who I am. I have never made a public address before. I have always avoided, shall we say, the limelight. However, we now face an emergency. I have obtained vital information on our current situation. I can no longer be quiet. None of us can be quiet.

"I am here today about former Councillor Newman. This is not about politics. It is about the wave of sexual interest spreading throughout our colony. You know what I talk about. It is damaging our production, damaging our souls. Damaging our sense of who we are and want to be.

"I hold here," he continued, holding up some papers, "and it is on the colony website for you to read yourselves, Councillor Newman's medical report. Not the public one. The real one. It states that he has three plants growing inside him. Three. And that he appears to be seriously…disturbed. Not from the plants. From his personality. Having plants inside him is not the problem, although his acquiring their powers is the issue we must confront.

"The psychiatry report states he has a significant personality disorder. And has very violent tendencies. Police surveillance footage shows him being around colonists who then became infected. Too much footage to be a coincidence. With this new information I provided, the police are now preparing to arrest him.

"I know this is shocking. I do know other colonists who have Martian plants growing

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inside them. None of them have acted as Newman has. None of them have done what he has done. Which is to influence us. Bend us, to his will. The evidence shows he has created the sudden wave of lust many of us have felt. There is a referendum tonight, to vote on drugging our water, to stop this insidious influence. If it is caused by telepathy, I do not believe drugs will help. I believe the referendum is truly about Mr. Newman, and what the colony must do to protect itself.

“I believe we must all take action. The referendum is not a solution. He will simply infect us, in some other way. Please consider this information and consider acting on it. Thank you.”

He smiled and stopped. Just stopped, looking at the camera. Then the TV broadcast reverted to several pundits in a studio, reviewing that had just been said.

Newman, lying on his bed, stared at the TV the pundits expressed anger and concern. Newman turned the TV off. He had seen enough. He enjoyed watching TV about him, and that bad news was often good news, but this was endgame.

He pushed himself off the bed, had a quick shower, dressed. Today was supposed to be a good day. Why had he written off that old man as no threat? Jim phoned as he finished getting dressed. Jim was alarmed. He told Jim to come over. There was a very long pause, Jim struggled, then said “No.”

“No? I beg your pardon?” he said, stiffening.

“I, uh, can’t. Lot of people angry. With you. A mob of them are in my office right now. Crowding all around me. Can’t talk. Apologies.”

Disconnect.

Newman looked at the phone in his hand, then slipped it into a pocket and went to the kitchen, to make a quick breakfast. He was hungry. Increasingly nervous. As he ate some bread, he looked out the kitchen window. More than twenty people stood outside his house, staring at it. Angry. Disturbed. Talking with each other.

A mob.

Or becoming a mob.

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Newman swallowed. Thinking. Feeling physically threatened. And the police would arrive soon. To arrest him. There were only so many people he could handle at one time, three at best. One if they were very emotional. Maybe none.

He was outnumbered, cornered, soon to be made a scapegoat for their problems. This was hardly his fault. He only had followed his instincts. To make Mars and himself great. Greater.

He had to leave. Now. It was not safe, would only grow worse. He looked around, there was nothing he needed. He thought of his computer. It had been a while since he'd entered the game, spoken with his NPG. But his NPG surely faced the same situation. And if he entered the game to ask his NPG, that would be monitored by the police. Their surveillance was beyond his reach. He had to grab his toothbrush and flee.

He could think of only one place to flee. Before the mob grew worse. Before the police arrived. Anywhere else, he had no chance at all. At least there, he believed he had a possibility of help.

He strode to the front door, stopped a moment to prepare, then, shaky, opened the door and faced them. They glared back. The lynch mob. A man two feet away shouted in his face, "What about it? Making Mars great again? By messing with out minds?"

"Are you a Martian, out for yourself?" another angrily added.

"You poisoned our minds. Why? Because you weren't getting enough yourself? Dick!"

He tried influencing the closest. Their anger made it impossible. Too many, too angry. "Yes. It's true. I have Martian plants growing inside me. I did hide it. Wouldn't you?" Sneers. "It was embarrassing. I don't know what these plants want. I've done my best to control them because, for a time, they controlled me."

"Bull!"

He was going nowhere, standing there confronting them. He walked into the crowd.

They parted, stepping back from him, wary.

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He reached his garage, only to see the door open and his cart's tires slashed. Windows broken. The cart was useless. He heard distant sirens. Police sirens.

He had one choice left. Surprising them, he turned and strode away as quickly as he could.

They watched him go, almost running now. His running away confused them—and then amused them. Several colonists yelled at him that the police were coming to arrest him. He would not get far, another shouted.

Newman heard the distant sirens grow less distant. As he turned the corner, leaving the mob at his house behind, he heard his kitchen windows shattering. They were probably kicking in his front door to have a good time trashing his home.

He walked faster entering a quiet side street, rushing. Gasping. Starting to pant, he was forced to slow down. He hated the weakness of his body. He settled into a swift walk, until he could run again. Or walk faster.

What now? He could only walk so fast. His goal was across the colony, it would take him hours, way too long. Could he avoid being spotted? Everyone knew him. Sweating now, he had to preserve his energy. And power. Until he was cornered. He passed people quickly on the street, ignoring their curses as he kept going. Some grabbed his arm, he shrugged them off. Others took out their cell phones and made calls. To the police, ratting him out. His former supporters.

He picked up his pace, best he could. Maybe he should have exercised after all. It always seemed such a waste of time. Stupid treadmills! Pushing yourself into pain! He made videos as a Councillor encouraging their use but his own treadmill in his office had never been plugged in. The sirens drew closer. He was sweating more. Now way he'd ever get there before being caught. He was on foot, chased by police in carts.

He needed more.

More arrived when he saw a colonist park her cart in front of him and open the door. As she got out, he grabbed her shoulder and yanked her the rest of the way out, throwing her to the sidewalk as she cried out. He got in the driver's seat, started the engine, put his foot on the power pedal and floored it.

It shot forward, tires squealing. Too bad the maximum speed of all carts was so

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limited, given they only drove limited distances and had small batteries. Her battery had plenty of charge. He slowed as he turned corners, taking side streets. The sirens grew distant as he left them behind.

Then they increased. More of them. Closer.

Damn phone calls!

Enough! Screw them. He had to take risks, get to his goal faster. He steered onto the closest main street, the most direct route. Four lanes, two each way. He was still sweating. He looked in the rearview mirror. No police, yet. No sirens, yet. He again floored the cart, making great time on the broad main road, speeding around the carts in front of him, some forced off the road. Sirens. Increasingly loud sirens.

He groaned with relief as the Farm appeared, distant, then rapidly closer and closer, the police minutes away, probably less.

The main gates were closed, two guards standing behind them. They stared at him, holding cell phones. Newman drove straight through, knocking the gate down, driving over it into the Farm, ignoring their shouts to stop. He headed straight for the locked barn, the two guards on their phones. He braked at the front of the locked barn.

People he knew and feared stood in front of the door.

Madeline, her father, Shallot. Farah, Katie. Marjorie.

Jim.

Newman pushed himself up, stepping out of the cart. “You going to stop me?”

“Not at all,” Shallot’s great grandfather told him.

“You need help,” Jim said.

“Step inside,” Madeline told him.

Newman looked at them. “What kind of trap is this?”

“No kind,” Shallot replied. “Go on. George is inside, waiting.”

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Puzzled, Newman rushed past them, sweating, grabbed the doorknob. Unlocked. He entered, closing the door behind him. He locked the deadbolt, took a long breath, finally wiping the sweat from his face. He looked forward. Wooden palettes blocked the view, but he saw leaves beyond them. And George, standing quietly, maybe fifty feet away, looking at him.

Newman strode forward purposefully. He saw George. Then he saw the plants.

He heard the deadbolt being unlocked, the front door opening. He turned to see Shallot entering. Screw her. Screw them all. He'd come here for the plants.

He walked up to them, to the soil they grew in, facing them, trembling despite himself. He no longer worried about projecting strength.

You avoided us.

Yes but I'm here now. They all hate me. Because of you, your seeds growing inside me.

The plants did not reply. He walked forward, only a foot away from the nearest plant. Its eyes followed him. As did the eyes of the other plants. Staring.

"Mr. Newman?"

He turned towards George. *Don't get all twisted. I'm here to talk with the plants*, *I don't care about you* Newman told him. George stepped back, Newman returned to the plants. *The colonists hate me. They'll kill me. Or worse, put me in isolation forever. I need your help. I have avoided you, yes. I know you thought I might be capable of harming others. But I haven't really hurt anyone, have I?*

Yes.

Can you help?

Take off your shoes and socks.

Frowning, Newman took off his shoes and socks, hiding his worries about the smell. His feet had smelled pretty bad the last few weeks. He again wiped his face with his sleeve. The Martian soil felt cool as he stood barefoot, crunching the soil between his toes.

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That feels better. Thanks.

Why do they hate you? Why are you being pursued?

I had great plans. I abused my power, yes. But it was for good.

No. It was for you.

Newman felt mild pain in his feet. He looked down and saw orange-brown roots had sprouted all over his feet, mostly from his soles, surging out of his flesh, burying themselves into the soil. Deep and then deeper into the soil.

What the hell? He could not move his feet.

Your seedlings have grown enough. They no longer need a host and they do not like you as a host. They are returning to us. As are you. You will remain with us. You have much to learn. Perhaps you will, now that you can no longer move.

George walked up–fascinated. Shallot now stood behind him, shocked. "George?"

"He's becoming a plant, I think. Didn't know the seeds could do that. Amazing."

Newman tried to say something but his whole body had stiffened, including his open mouth. He could no longer close it. His arms spread out, growing leaves. His roots grew further, further into the soil. *Stop! Don't! I don't deserve this! I only sought safety here. That you would protect me.*

We are. The colonists will see you as safe, now. With us. A plant. No threat to them. Many will see it as appropriate.

Shallot touched George's arm, unable to hear the telepathic messages. "What's going on? What have they done to him?"

"He did it to himself. This was their best solution," George said out loud, without taking his eyes off Newman. "They never told me they would do this. Never thought the seeds could grow outside us."

Broad leaves sprouted from his fingers. He felt branches growing from his sides, pushing against his clothes, piercing through them. He could not look down to see, could not move at all, but he did feel additional branches grow from his sides, more

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from his thighs.

Will I never have another orgasm?

He felt eyes growing in his armpits. He could think but not move, trapped in an increasingly plant body. He felt his telepathic powers rapidly shrink, returning to the plants inside him. Now more plant than human.

I can't move. I can't talk.

You can talk to us.

His skin was now rough, wooden, orangey brown, just like the plants'. Much of his face remained, mouth frozen open, eyes staring. Unblinking but he could move them. He still wore his clothing, though much of it had been ripped apart by the growing branches. Eyes appeared in each join of branch to stalk, and in his armpits. He saw through his new eyes now. Somehow their vision remained separate and merged into one. He saw a narrow field of vision, and saw everything.

Shallot walked up to George as they watched the transformation become complete. Shallot said, quietly. "My God. He's turned into a scarecrow. Can he think?"

"He's still Newman, inside. Jerk. We should put a hat on his head, then he'd be a real scarecrow. Scaring away plants and humans."

His coolness was upsetting.

By then, Cary and the others outside were now inside, followed by police and a TV news crew. The TV crew began recording as everyone walked close—not too close—to the plants, staring at what Newman had become.

His eyes turned to look at them. No sound came from his frozen, open mouth.

"What on Earth?" Cary asked no one.

"The plants inside him made a sacrifice," George calmly told them all. "They so loved being able to move. And when he masturbated. Such a unique experience.

"But. They agreed with the rest of the plants that Newman was a danger to the

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colony. His plants wanted no part of him, were embarrassed he was their host. They suggested growing roots here, the community agreed. They encouraged him to flee here, as his only choice. Now, he's one of them. Forever.

"He cannot move and has only limited powers. He cannot talk with us, only with them."

Cary said, "Looking at Newman like that makes me feel good, frankly. Agree about the hat."

"He looks like a scarecrow," Farha said to him. To Shallot, "Keep his clothes on. Reminders."

They all looked at Newman among the plants a long time until, eventually, everyone left but George and Shallot. As he stood looking at Newman, maybe talking with him or the other plants, she took his hand gently and held it. Squeezed. Still looking at the plants, he blinked and turned to her.

"They think I'm ignoring you," he said to Shallot.

"They're right," she replied.

They walked to his room, hand in hand, each wondering what tomorrow would bring to life on Mars. For now they had the evening, and for Shallot that was enough. One day at a time. Project. The road to this moment had been rocky, full of potholes, but she knew in her heart the rest of the road would be as smooth as the ice covering the dome.

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