While George struggled with his situation, at the front desk of the Clinic Shallot and her two besties dropped off the rest of Alice's chocolate. Alice had died before she could eat the rest.

The woman smiled pleasantly, took the chocolate and told them George would get it.

Then it was quiet.

"I want to see him," Shallot insisted. "Now." Faced with a blank stare, she played the one card she had. "My grandmom's the Mayor. Call her."

"I'm not calling anyone," she replied. "Your friend is in isolation. "You *know* what that means. We do not believe he is contagious but the infection is unpredictable. Only staff sees him, for now."

Not now was forever. Shallot looked at the clerk, the clerk looked back. A nurse walking by paused, looking at the clerk, tilting her head to ask if all was okay. The clerk continued: "You will be contacted when the isolation is lifted."

"Has it ever been?" Shallot asked. 'Lifted?"

"Thank you for the candy. I'm sure he'll appreciate the sweets. He'll know they came from you."

"Can I give him a note?"

"No."

Shallot could either scream or leave, so she left, her besties with her. Standing outside, frustrated, worried, Shallot said, her voice now even more determined, "We have to do *something.* Something where we can not be stopped. Something that will affect the whole colony." She looked at her besties. "We can't change anything *here*. How about in ***Mars and Me***?"

Mars and Me. The computer game played by almost every colonist under 30. Instant agreement. They went straight to Shallot's bedroom—her parents were out—opened her notebook and entered their shared saved game. Farha and Alliyah took out their notebooks and soon they were together, in mind, soul, the game.

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Mars and Me was an open ended, free game created thirty years ago by a team led by Shallot's great grandfather. Colonists needed a realistic diversion after the collapse of the water filtration system. It perfectly mimicked living on Mars, in the colony, populated by NPGs, including those of real colonists, and avatars for players. Each player had a corresponding NPG, who reacted as the player did to events in the colony, in real time.

Real events influenced the game.

Constantly updated, ***Mars and Me*** invited community engagement, including allowing players to create new rules, at least for their saved games. Players could add new information to their saved game, and could forward it to anyone playing.

Mars and Me was a constantly evolving experience. Yet the fundamental problems—polluted air, failing dome, bursting water pipes, poor crops—remained, as in real life they had not been solved. Players could not change those basics, even in a saved game: they had to deal with the difficulties to succeed.

Shallot told her besties she would input the truth about the colony—the reality about the water, the dome, the weird microbes, the Smelter exhaust and the crops. The game would accept and incorporate those changes, in their saved game. They all stared at the *options: new additions* screen. "Let's do this for George," Shallot said.

"Yeah," Farha said. "Start with the bug."

Shallot entered the screen. She could not delete that there was a bug, but she would change the information about the bug in the game and replaced it with:

The bug is a living Martian organism, not a disease. There is no information about the organism other than it is alive and drains the energy of its hosts. We ingest it when we drink Martian water. Colonists were infected starting thirty years ago, when the water filtration system failed. The Martian organisms draw energy from their hosts, who so far cannot tolerate the drain and die. Colony leaders have knowingly lied about this.

Aaliyah said, "Maybe the game can come up with something we can use. It's better at modelling than anything City Hall has."

"Dad says there's no help with the crops, our food," Farha told them. "We should

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talk about that. But first the pollution."

Shallot typed.

Aaliyah added, "NPGs should feel life sucks. No one should pretend to be happy anymore. Can we do that?"

"Let's find out." Shallot steadily typed. They watched the words appear on their screens.

"We need the NPGs to make it urgent," Shallot said, writing. "This has been in place six months. Plenty of time for the game to reflect the changes. They'll live in a bit of a different colony. And let's add what's realistic about the Smelter and the crops and the dome. And the water supply." After more typing, she hit enter. "Here goes nothing."

Absorbing amendments. Please be patient.

Have you exercised today?

It took ten minutes of the game incorporating the changes, an unusually long time. Finally the main screen reappeared and they were back in the game. They found their NPGs sitting in NPG Shallot's bedroom, playing the game. Shallot and her besties had mostly ignored their NPGs. They had never done this before. They asked their NPGs how they were. They all replied, worried.

Shallot sent her avatar to the street. Around her NPGs rushed, with purpose. Shallot stopped one, a stressed bald man wearing glasses. He looked like a man in the colony who worked in Water, an NPG version of him.

What's up? she asked.

"*Union meeting*," he replied.

Questions then appeared for Shallot to click on:

–Which union?

–I want to join you.

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–*You should be arrested.*

“Whoa,” Shallot said, reading. “Uh, what’s a union?”

Farha entered the saved game. “It worked. It’s all in there. The game colony has really changed. Everyone feels threatened.” She opened a box and hit a key. “I’m sending invites to our friends, to use this saved game instead of theirs.”

After gossiping with an NPG, Aaliyah said “The game says the dome has fifty years. By then, perhaps sooner, it will fail and flood us with solar radiation and Martian air and sand. We’ve really done something.”

“Yeah,” Farha said, “an NPG buying an Americano told me the pollution makes the dome worse, plus the cancer rate’s up. Unlike the colonists, they want to do something. I think the game still reflects the colony, so they can’t do anything. They’re frustrated.”

“And the water pipes are overdue for a major burst,” Shallot added.

They spent the next few hours playing the game, inviting their friends in, their friends inviting *their* friends in. Soon half the players on Mars were in the new version. Shallot, Aaliyah and Farha created an interactive town hall, where the real players could talk with each other—and with the NPGs. Shallot explained how they had altered the game’s parameters and why.

Most everyone knew George and was concerned about him, along with other friends who had never left the Clinic. No one was sure yet how to contact George. Did they even let him have a computer? Shallot’s NPG said she’d been trying. It was an eerie feeling for Shallot, chatting with her NPG. Before, the NPGs reflected colonists, but felt like only mirrors. She never sought out her NPG to see how it was doing. It was doing what she did. More, it was not alive. It was a computer generation.

Today, the NPGs in the town hall were alive, acting differently from their real life models. They had personality. Change, the desire to directly confront the colony’s problems, had arrived.

By late afternoon, Shallot knew what a union was.

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