So many felt unsettled. Something was wrong and thinking it was right was almost a crime. By that evening there were few people out, many staying home to play the game. Even colonists who never played computer games tried it—everyone said that, for the first time, the game was totally realistic about their lives.

Sally and Mike were with Madeline in her apartment that evening, standing near her as she looked out at the colony. The view from her apartment was not nearly as grand as from her City Hall office. ***Mars and Me*** went unmentioned–they were unaware of the changes, not being gamers, none having children, except Madeline, who was estranged from her daughter. They saw gaming as a waste of time.

“Talk to me,” she said, cane supporting her. She always rose to the challenge—challenges. To her the room smelled musky. She felt a need to unleash, to throw away the damn cane, to more than glance at Mike (Sally knew but some things were best left unspoken.) Although she was tiring of him. He was a useful toy. Had been useful. Lately, he was odd, stressed.

She did not want to deal with the stresses of a toy.

She needed a personal relationship which was not… transactional.

They spoke, she listened, leaning on the cane. Her first campaign rally—and those of her opponents–was tomorrow. Mike forecast low attendance—everyone knew her and what she would say. Polls showed her two opponents outpaced her significantly. Madeline was on track to lose, big. No surprise. She had seen it coming for weeks, months. Years. Problems increasing. Colonists needing someone with new ideas. With a new approach. Throw out the old.

Madeline had always been a realist.

Sally added that colonists were not enamoured of her opponents either—they wanted real change. They yearned for someone different to improve the colony, deal honestly with its problems–the pollution, the bug, the tedious work of their plodding days. They could not go out and everything in was old, beyond a fresh coat of paint.

Newman was the clear leader. They believed him when he said he would make Mars great again. No one else claimed to do that. She also said that Mike pushing him as leader was destructive. Mike looked at her and shrugged.

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Mike noted that isolation from Earth was an increasing concern. Tourists dried up years earlier, after the disease emerged. Promises that colonists could return to Earth were unkept and no longer believed. Colonists felt abandoned, starting after the Continental Wars and the death of the billionaire who funded the colony. The billionaire had been engrossed with the glory of humanity living on another planet—also, he saw promising commercial possibilities. He could sell refined or unrefined ore. Sell Mars rocks as souvenirs.

But the market collapsed and the enormous cost of transporting minerals from Mars killed those commercial possibilities. And Earth had its own problems, oddly similar to Mars—pollution, problems with holes in the ozone layer, people reluctant to have children, restless when not rebelling or retreating.

“Yeah, I know,” Madeline told them. “Enough for now. I can’t face any more until tomorrow. Thanks, Sally. Appreciate it. You can have what’s left of the evening off.” Sally smiled, nodding. Madeine saw Sally had already put her notebook into her backpack. “Right, thanks. Mike, a minute or two? About…something else?”

Sally left them, closing the door behind her firmly. She went to her apartment, for a quiet evening, understanding what was happening behind the closed door. Sally deeply respected Madeline. More than respect. She sighed and drank some synthowine.

Madeline and Mike said good-bye. He had not put his own notebook away. He walked up to Madeline and kissed her, taking her into his arms. Her taking him into her arms. Kissed her warm. Deep. Madeline kissed back, hungry, eager to lose herself.

“Mmmm, that’s better,” she purred. “All day no sugar. Mama wants her sugar.”

He kissed her more deeply. They stood hugging and fondling, kissing until their clothes lay on the floor and they lay on top of them. She told him what to do, when and how to do it–though he already knew.

She liked telling him.

After extended foreplay, fondling and kissing and licking, she held onto him as he entered her. “Hello,” she said, sighing with relief. She seemed happy but he knew something was wrong. She was getting ready to dump him. But first, this.

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Since Madeline had been in her teens, sex had been about pleasure, which she eventually saw as a consolation prize for the often dreary colonial life, the hard work and stress. A release.

Her daughter had been a…mistake. And Miranda always knew it. Their relationship was distant, even when she was a child. By then, Madeline was thoroughly engaged with politics and her career. She only really connected later, with her granddaughter and her father. Her relationships could be difficult, with her daughter an act.

At least she felt something real during sex.

She felt him move inside her and wrapped her legs around his pumping hips. He knew what she liked, gave it to her. After they came, close together (her first, as always), they lay naked on the floor, sweating. Fondling him, encouraging another erection, Madeline murmured, “Again.”

“Not just yet, hon.”

She smiled. “I thought you were full of it.”

“All the time. Just need a moment, eh?”

“Of course, all the time you need.” She stood and poured them two glasses of synthowine, then swayed naked to the bedroom. He sighed, followed. Her bed was more comfortable than the floor.

In *their* bedroom, Martina, Madeline’s daughter and Shallot’s mom, sipped cheaper synthowine. Small burning candles around the bed lit the room, set up by Antonio. She passed the glass to him. He sipped away the rest. A half bottle lay between them.

“Shall we?” Jim asked, fondling her right breast, the closest.

“I guess,” she replied. “Love you big boy. You want it, you get it.”

“You’re a goddess.” He climbed on top of her and she went through the motions. “Feels good,” he said, panting.

“Do you ever get tired of it?”

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“Never have yet. What’s up, hon? Am I doing something wrong?”

“Never. Go for it.” And she lay there and did her best, smiling while he pumped and moaned until he had an orgasm. Fairly quickly, thank God. Then he slumped, kissed her and rolled onto his side of the queen bed.

“Can we talk?” she asked quietly.

“’Bout what? Mmmm.”

“Jim, don’t you think we’re a little old to do it so much?”

“So much? Newman doesn’t think so. We talked about it during his visits to the Smelter.”

“You talk about us? With him? He’s going to visit Administration next week, my office.”

He looked at her. “It’s me, isn’t it?” She shook her head. “Then what? This come up at that women’s book group?”

“Not exactly.” She shook her head again. “It’s no one else.”

“Then what?”

“…I’m bored.”

“Different positions?”

“I want to make love. Not have sex. I rarely come. Doesn’t that bother you?”

“Sorry.” He smiled. “Look, sorry it didn’t work just now. Really. I should’ve warmed us up. We can fix this. Can I get you anything?”

“Three tickets to Earth. I don’t want Shally growing up here. Not anymore.”

He gave her a smile. “What choices do we really have? We’re stuck here and have to make the best of it, eh? We were born here. Know the place. And at least we don’t have the bug, like her friend George.”

On his bed in the Clinic, George felt he had to make the best of it.

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He sat at in his room, alone, looking at his glistening erect penis in his hands. He used to close his eyes, years ago, imagine things. Lately he did not bother, there was no need. He fondled and pumped, using the lube the Clinic conveniently provided. There was the camera in the ceiling. They would know. Maybe were watching.

George didn't care.

He pumped and fondled and felt it building, that great tingle, then he was spurting come. It shot up, hitting the ceiling, making a stain–joining the other stains on the ceiling. As he calmed down, he went from feeling lust to feeling gross. He slumped back, letting his hands fall away from his limp penis, wiping his hands and groin with a handy cloth. Panting, he looked at the ceiling. Third time today. Nothing else to do.

Pleasuring himself had become boring. The Clinic *had* given him a notebook.

He put it on his lap, over his damp penis, and powered up. The notebook could not send emails or connect to a social network—he *was* in isolation. However, it allowed him to play ***Mars and Me***. *That* was only a game.

When he opened the game, a box popped up, advising he was in a restricted situation and could not communicate with other players. He could not connect with Shallot, as he expected. He clicked *Ok*.

Another box popped up, inviting him into Shallot's new saved game. He entered it and was wowed it had changed so much. He quickly learned just where the real colony was at, talking with NPGs. He was excited for the first time that day.

Councillor Newman stood naked in *his* bedroom, alone, facing the full-length mirror on the wall, admiring how his body gleamed with oil as he fondled his chest and groin, admiring his erection. He had already come once but knew the second time was longer, less rushed, even better. He slid a hand up and down his erection, stroking his hard flesh. Newman lived alone, had no partner except his hands. He grunted. There was much to do, but he always made time for this. Otherwise, what was the point?

Councillor Marjorie lay on her bed, watching the news, drifting off to sleep. It had been a long day. She felt old, did not mind at all. Tomorrow would be a big day,

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her first rally. She had to be pumped. She would provide details about her major plank: building escape rockets back to Earth. Now was the time to rest.

“You back out of the clouds? Up for it again?” Aaliyah asked Charlie, pumping his wet penis gently.

“You were great,” he replied.

They lay on the bed naked, same age, had known each other since day care. They started screwing a few months ago. Neither was in control in the relationship, neither wanted control.

He suggested Fizz.

“Fizz?” Warren asked. “Thanks, we’ve had enough.”

“I’ve had enough,” Dan replied, spooning. “That was lovely. Peas in a pod.”

“Speaking of which, I have to pee,” Warren replied. “And I’ve had enough.”

“Thought you never had enough.”

Warren grinned. “Never enough of you.”

“You’re sweet. So whaddya wanna do?” Dan asked.

“Pee. You?”

“Get back on the dome and fix leaks. Can’t believe I said that.”

“We only got off shift a few hours ago. We ate and screwed. There’s more to life, buddy.” Warren tried, grinning.

“There won’t be life if we don’t seal the old cracks and stop new ones.”

Warren looked at him, sighing. He put out scissors, Dan rock. “Two out of three?”

“Let’s call in. By the way, I’ve gotten invites to join a new saved game on ***Mars and Me***. Supposed to be something else.”

“Let’s call in, take a look at the game, hit the shower, then suit up.”

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Shallot sat on her bed, alone, unsatisfied. Mom and Dad were in their bedroom. Everyone's door was closed. Since her friends left, she had sent all her time in the game. Talking with her NPG, talking with other NPGs, talking with player avatars. The changes were fascinating, some big, some small. The NPGs had developed a different connection with the colony. The game continued to duplicate current activities by players, changes in the colony. But the game also now anticipated these events. Unlike the colony, the NPGs had created unions, worker organizations to directly address colony issues.

The existing democratic structure was faltering more clearly than in the real colony.

It wasn't like talking with real people. Before they responded stiffly, the AI obvious. Now the NPGs were distracted, distant, always returning to their own issues. Well, perhaps it was like talking with real people.

Sitting here feeling sorry for herself was stupid. She had to climb out of this rut. She ran her fingers over the notebook's display. The new version of the game was her ladder up, starting on the bottom rung of this mess, climbing step by step into a better world. She would already start tomorrow up one rung and ready to climb.

She would work with the NPGs first. They were already steps ahead.

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