12

Ready? Now?

"*I* know who *I* am," she told him. "No matter what's screwed up outside, inside me the time is right. I don't want to wait any longer. I'm ready. We're ready."

"Children? Here? Now?" He gripped her shoulders, gently. "Let's get married instead."

Peter looked at Wendy, at the back of her head. They worked together underground, their shift ended a few hours ago, now they lay naked on their bed, cuddling. Spooning. Not facing each other.

"You want to bring children into *this* world?" he asked. "Our lives are getting worse. It'd break my heart to raise our children here. They'd have no future."

"If there are no children, Peter, the colony will die. *That's* no future."

He shook his head. "Should never have been a colony. Founded from hubris. No one gave us a choice. We were born here but is it home?"

"It's the only home we've known. We keep going in circles."

They lay on the bed not speaking, uncomfortable. "This sucks," she said.

They stood and went naked to the window, looking out. "The view's always the same," she said quietly. "Only we keep changing."

They fondled each other lovingly. Fit, in their late twenties, thinking of life's next stage. "Love you," he said tenderly.

She kissed him, telling him through her lips she loved him as well.

"Should we go to the meeting later?" she asked.

"Sure."

"Want to not make a baby?"

"Only with you."

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They went back to bed and made love, feeling each other's heat, desires, traumas. It was good and they lay in bed as long as they could. Then they showered, dressed and walked to the Water Administration building. The fate of the colony's water hung over them. Heavily. Especially now. The future seemed more important now.

They had more than themselves at stake now.

Soon they were around other people. A lot of other people. All of whom they knew, having worked with them. There were no more chairs in the large auditorium, so Peter and Wendy stood at the back, shoulder to shoulder with colleagues. The feeling hanging over them all was heavy, a burden they did not want but could no longer ignore. The NPGs were not ignoring it. Why should they?

William and Kathryn, two older workers, were at the front of the room. Seeing the full room, Kathryn stepped to the mike.

"Based on our other meetings, we've drawn up a letter to Council. I will read it out loud, and you also each have been given a copy." Appreciative murmurs. "The election is irrelevant. It does not matter who is Mayor. We seek your approval for this statement, then we will send it to Council immediately, they have two days to respond." More appreciative murmurs.

She read:

The Water Workers give Council two days to meet our needs. If the response does not meet our needs, we will stop work. Water will no longer flow. We do not wish to damage the colony in any way. Our purpose is to repair the colony. Repair it properly, now. We alone have the expertise to determine which water pipes should be repaired, how and when.

We will determine Water Workers' work schedules, which will now be four twelve-hour shifts per week, one more shift than is currently scheduled. We expect this overtime to be compensated, but we are prepared to delay payment, given limited resources.

Given schedules will involve a short turnaround, sleeping arrangements will be arranged for workers in Water, so they do not have to leave the facility for rest. Separate bedrooms, communal washrooms. This will improve morale and

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efficiency.

We determine the water maintenance budget. It must be increased, immediately, by fifty percent. We do not care where the money comes from. The colony needs a reliable source of water, this is the only way to do it.

The Smelter will priorize replacement patches for old piping and the creation of new pipes.

Our needs are not negotiable.

After she finished reading, there was loud applause. Workers waved the statement in the air. The secret vote was unanimous. The workers applauded again. They cheered Kathryn, slapped each other's backs in congratulations. A huge sense of relief washed over the room. They had known what was needed for years, now they were finally acting.

Kathryn held up her hands, quieting the room. "There's more you should know. We just heard before this meeting. We decided to put the statement to you and have you vote, first. But in fact we are not the first. The Smelter Workers organized today. They have drawn up similar demands and sent them to Council. So have the Dome Workers and the Farmers.

"The Administration Workers' Alliance Leage–AWOL–Organization was formed last but they made no demands, just an announcement they existed. They are of course committed to Council. Or at least to stable government. They did express concern about their pensions and when they can retire.

"I suggest we vote to work cooperatively with our sister organizations. Between us, we involve most colony workers. Between us, we have the power to force change. If we work together.

"We all want priority for our demands. We'll have to negotiate with them, we'll need to form a subcommittee."

The Water Workers voted to respond to the other groups, send them their demands to Council and to offer coordination. There was some discussion about whether to fully coordinate with the Administration Workers' Organization, but it was agreed to attempt to work with them also.

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“What about *our* priorities?” Wendy called out from the back. “Will the other groups support us? What do we negotiate?”

Kathryn looked at her, over the crowd. “Each Organization’s position is that they have priority over all others.” She sighed. “It will be a series of compromises, but about what, who knows? We’ll have to make tentative decisions, working with the other groups, to recommend back for voting here. Everyone, go on with the rest of your day, except for anyone who wants to volunteer for the subcommittee.” She smiled. “We’ve taken a huge first step, all of us. This is democracy. And keep in mind, democracy is difficult.”

Peter and Wendy walked out largely satisfied–as did, judging from the conversations around them, their colleagues. Although the future was far from clear, everyone felt they were no longer doomed to always be on the ground floor, following stupid orders. Now they had built a ladder.

They held hands. Outside, it was a little smoggier, a little more unclear. They walked holding hands through downtown, looking at the buildings, the same buildings as when they were children, the familiarity once comforting. Now, the meeting over and the process started, they felt uncertain.

“Crap. Why does everything look different?” she asked.

“*We’re* different.”

They entered a large park in the middle of downtown, three square blocks. The grass was a sturdy green plastic, the artificial bushes shaped into lions and gazelles and unicorns, the simulwood trees sturdy, swings hanging from some limbs. Once the plants had been real, but eventually required too much water and maintenance. There was a large playground at the centre of the park. They saw several four- and five-year-olds playing happily, enjoying the teeter totters, working to balance each other.

Wendy and Peter sat on a bench, looking at the children having fun with balance.

“They’re getting a dirty deal,” Peter said to her, quietly. “We don’t have much of a future, they have less.”

“Not if we solve the problems. Mars isn’t such a bad place to grow up. Maybe we can make it better. It was never great, but it can be better.”

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He squeezed her hand.

“They *are* cute.” She squeezed back.

“Aren’t they?” Warmer squeeze. “We could get married. Make it legal. Better for the baby.”

He grinned. “I’m in, hon.”

They looked at the children on the teeter totters, balancing.

“In all the way?”

“Sure,” he said, turning to look at her. “We’ll need someone to change our diapers in our old age. We change theirs, eventually they change ours. It’s the cycle of life.”

13

Dinners Delayed

Power and water restoration were still “in the works.” It was a tough evening for everyone, cooking without power, relying on flashlights and battery powered lamps. With artificial light, all apartments were completely dark at night. If your batteries failed, you felt your way along the walls, hoping not to fall or break anything.

Madeline ate dinner in her apartment with Mike and Sally, talking about how to proceed with the campaign—or, rather, whether to proceed. Newman had texted her and the other Councillors, reversing his position to now urging postponing the election. He ate by himself, divorced with no children who would visit him. Marjorie ate with her husband, two children and some grandchildren. It was a somber family meal where the only talk was politics, which Marjorie had hoped to avoid. It took some effort to not drop her fork and pick up her knitting needles.

Shallot’s great grandfather ate by himself, thinking of how to correct his past failures, considering the ripple effects from what he had done, what he would do.

Peter and Wendy ate a small, cold meal, talked about a marriage date and fertility and then left for their shift underground. They worked more shifts than ever. All

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the workers underground were devoted to emergency repairs. Everyone wanted to get at least some water flowing without more breaks—extra work, extra delicate.

Dan and Warren felt much the same. It was difficult working with limited power. The pulleys were slower, they had to use sealant sparingly. And they were physically sore from the demanding work with little relief. Still, if the water workers were working overtime, so should they. Everyone was in this together. Looking down, they saw farmers working overtime in the fields, using emergency water they'd stored after the last break.

Farha ate with her colleagues in the Smelter, where they discussed what they should not do. She dd her best to fit in—she had a unique opportunity, given her friendship with Shallot and knowledge of the game. She spent much of her time showing older colleagues the game and how it mirrored what was happening. For example, yesterday it had information about poor maintenance of failing underground water tubes, discovered only that morning. It also had information about the Smelter and its emission filters. Her colleagues decided to where possible spend the rest of the day talking with the NPGs, who seemed to be alive. Everyone was excited about solving the problems.

Aaliyah ate with Mr. Maston, a problem in and of itself. Staying as distant from him as possible, physically and emotionally. Their food was warm. She had ridden a stationary bike attached to the stove, so the food could be cooked, by his wife. He asked about Shallot, she told him nothing useful, hoping dinner would be over soon. She managed to leave before desert. She did not want to be desert.

Shallot sat at the kitchen table with her parents, everyone tense. Her parents were stressed about overtime and problems, snapping at each other. Dinner was sushi, conveniently cold, today unappealing. Farha texted, asking what her plans were. Shallot texted, *No idea yet*. *I'm thinking.*

Nothing was normal anymore. Mom had worked in Admin all her life. Dad, human resources in the Smelter, again his whole working life. There were always work-related issues, Shallot saw that as she grew up, but now there was a new tension between them they brought home.

"The Smelter Workers are too confrontational," Martina told him. "There's a pollution problem, we all know it. The Smelter has to work harder to stop what it pumps out into our air."

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“Yeah,” he replied, “the only way to do that is to lower production. But then where do we get the iron? No iron, no water pipes. No manufacturing, no dome sealants. We have to make it all here.”

“There are better caps possible on the stacks, hon.”

“The resources, diversion of production, have to come from somewhere. Your Administration won’t provide them.

Growling, she poked at her sushi. “Don’t blame Admin. The funds aren’t there. Councillors have to direct it. Hon, you’re being way too simple.”

“We all should have a say. Sweets, Admin controls but knows nothing,” he snapped.

“Don’t call me sweets.”

“Don’t call me hon.”

Dinner. No one ate. Sushi remained poked at. At least it was not getting cold.

Shallot, listening, saw a huge fight brewing. Worse, they occasionally glared at her–they blamed *her* for starting their problems. By altering the game. By upsetting colonists with facts. Their attitude was obvious as soon as she came home. Muttering, mumbling, grunting. She hid in her room until dinner. She would have showered but water was still denied.

She left the dinner table before desert (kale pie) and retreated to her room before the fight broke out. As she walked up the stairs, she heard their voices rising. She reached her bedroom, entered, closing the door firmly, sat on her bed and cried.

Aaliyah did not answer so she phoned Farha, who was still at work somehow, eating with her new friends, in the game. Farha was pleasant on the phone but managed to let Shallot know they had listeners. She did say her dad, the lead Farmer, wanted her to transfer to the Farm, to work crops, and he could do it because of the current emergency, many crops failing. She eagerly agreed.

Before, no one, including the youth, cared much about their work unless they had a personal passion. Limited opportunities limit passions. But Farha did have a passion for the Farm, having grown up with it. And the crops were failing due not

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only to water problems, but to lack of decent light and fertilizer for the tired soil.

Shallot put the phone down and looked up, through the window, at the dome. At the sky of Mars, beyond. It was night. The sky was dark. The scarred dome made it impossible to see any stars. She had only seen Earth through a telescope, a tiny blue dot. She saw two workers at the dome's top. She hoped they weren't arguing.

Dan and Warren hung from the very top of the dome, towards the end of their extended shift, repairing a new crack before it opened up.

"More sealant," Dan said.

"Running out," Warren replied. "We'll have to send for more."

"I'll call in," Dan said.

When he did, they heard "No problem," a voice on their helmet radio said. "If you can handle a couple more hours, I'll send more sealant up. What do you have?"

"Two new cracks. Got one almost done," Dan said. "Five more developing."

"Doesn't look good," Warren added unnecessarily.

They held onto the ropes, swaying.

Their dinner earlier had come from tins. It was hardly satisfying, they felt dirty–unable to wash–and were thirsty, limited to their water bottles. They felt isolated from everyone in the dome, hanging a hundred feet from the surface. They used to enjoy being above everyone else. Now it felt like a disconnect. They no longer felt like they were floating. Only fraying ropes kept them from dropping a hundred feet.

"How's it feel, on top of the world?" Dan said as they finished sealing the crack. They looked at it, satisfied.

"Like my feet ain't on the ground no more."

"Were they ever?"

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They laughed.

“It was easier,” Warren said, “when all we had to do was follow orders. Now we’re more responsible. I’m not comfy being responsible.”

“We want a say, it comes with a price, eh? I’m sure everyone down there feels it.”

They hung swaying inspecting the sealed crack. Nine inches of reinforced simulplastic between the colonists and the deep cold, wind, dust and solar radiation of Mars.

“The dome used to feel thicker,” Warren said, looking up. “Crap! Grab the pulley!”

Dan reached out and grabbed the nearest chain without question. As it took his weight, the frayed rope holding him snapped. The sound sickened them.

They watched the broken rope fall to the ground very far below.

Warren grabbed the iron chain, looking at the rope holding *him*. “The dome can look after itself,” he said angrily. He radioed his Supervisor, “Rope failure. We’re going down and staying there, until it’s safe.”

Dan, gripping the iron pulley, managed to find a footpad to put his weight on. “No argument there, pal.”

“Let *them* come up here.” Looking down, they saw a few startled colonists standing by the rope, looking up at them. Colonists rarely looked up at the dome workers.

They descended very slowly.

They saw the other dome workers now also descending.

Workers above the Smelter took a sideways route down, to avoid the exhaust stacks.

“Look out below,” Warren muttered. “We’re all coming down.”

14

The Smelter

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The Smelter was substantial, built one hundred and fifty years earlier on the outskirts of the city, after iron and other resources from Earth stopped. The Smelter produced the raw materials and included a centre that manufactured what the colony needed. It created the dome chains, ropes, water pipes and other products, including anything made of plastic. It employed the most colonists.

Smelter production was vital. The most controversial aspect was its air pollution, which had been causing increasing cancers for over a hundred years, after there was a failure in the main stack filters which pumped raw emissions into the air. The filters were repaired but resources were limited and the new filters were not as good. Everyone had long decided to live with the pollution, but lately it had grown far worse because of increased production and poorer filters.

Everyone, especially the Smelter workers, wanted to stop the pollution. Plans to pump the plant's exhaust through the dome, outside, to Mars, were dropped over concerns that creating *any* hole in the weakened dome could be catastrophic. Plans to pump the exhaust underground also went nowhere, over fears of contaminating the water and protests from the underground water workers.

The Council settled on the best pollution caps it could afford.

It was considered a necessary danger. As illnesses and deaths grew, the Smelter was increasingly controversial. But the colony needed iron. It needed products. Pollution had to be lived with.

Shallot's father, Antonio, worked as the head of the Smelter's human resources, on the second floor of the office section. Once bright and cheery, the offices were now worn, patched together. Gradually the Smelter devolved from being a clean and modern facility as damaged parts were jury rigged, spills created stains, everything past its due date.

Today the Smelter was unpleasant to work in, especially the production areas. Even the air in human resources stank. Workers in production areas wore masks. And were angry. Their work was vital, yet the colony hated the pollution. They worked in a hellish environment with heat and molten iron, the manufacturing equipment often unreliable. They felt they were on the colony's bottom rung–below the rung, somewhere under the floor.

A lot of Antonio's job as head of human resources was struggling to keep the

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workers satisfied. He regularly wrote reports to Council of needed repairs and relief for the workers. Each report was copied to the workers so they knew they were being represented. That sort of worked for the first decade of Antonio's time. Now the pollution was worse, the factory equipment teetering on failure. Antonio was not surprised they revolted against Council, forming their own organization.

At least they told him first. He told them it was lose-lose for everyone. Them and himself.

These days, Councillor Newman spent a lot of time with him in the Smelter. At first, Antonio thought Newman was trying to learn Smelter operations, to support them. He could use Newman. Antonio twiddled his thumbs, trying to think through his next step. His work these days was defending the workers while navigating everyone's hostility. His wife Martina should be helping him. Instead, she'd become part of the problem, on the Council's side. Life at home had grown as tough as at work.

It was…unsettling.

He looked out the small window in his office. Gray outside. He wished he worked outside, away from people and all their problems which became his problems. He wished he worked on Earth. Earth had its own problems, but at least you could mostly breathe the air. Maybe not for a long time outside the domed cities, but you could.

Farha disliked the Smelter. Her supervisor listened in on her calls, probably monitored her emails. She did not want to betray her bestie, she did not want to work under a cloud. Better to leave, to the Farm. And she loved her dad, Cary, who was the head Farmer. The Farm was not thriving, she knew from dinner table conversations the last few years. The dome was covered with patches, the dome material scarred and discoloured. She did not think air was supposed to look like this. The light and air were increasingly poor for plant growth.

She was already in the regulation overalls, a belt around her waist with tools. Around them was the farm—acres of carefully tended land filled with struggling green crops. Large barns and a pasture. One barn held only chickens, the fastest, easiest protein that reproduced itself.

"Dad, you've talked about it, and I've visited, but now I'm here, this whole area…"

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He looked at her expectantly. "…the plants don't look good, neither do those cows. Nothing is thriving."

"Yeah. You have to see it first hand, these days." He smiled. "The soil is tired. Once we brought in Martian soil, to rejuvenate it. Stopped doing that fifty years ago, due to cost. Fertilizer made up the difference. Now we still make it but there's less. That's why the plants are struggling. That, and pollution from the smelter and dim light."

"So dad. What do I do? Where do I start?"

"Try everything here. Learn it. Help plow the fields. Feed the animals. Help with fertilizer. Spend some time every day in each area. It will help put farming in your blood. Though it's already there, eh?"

She smiled. "I've heard about it since I can remember. Even when I wasn't listening."

He held her arm affectionately. "Glad you're here."

"They want me to spy on Shallot."

"Ignore them," he told her, his voice gentle. "I'll run interference. Relax–if you can. Let the Farm sink in. Farming is meditation, if you do it right. Growing crops and yourself.

"Actually, you are special here. ***Mars and Me***. Some of the staff are playing already but they need help understanding the game. I went into it last night, after I heard about the changes made by you and Shallot and your friend.. You mentioned it during dinner, remember? Hon, going into that game was an eye-opener.

"If it's okay with you, do your farm work in the afternoons. In the mornings, teach the other farmers about the game. Talk with the NPGs. Learn what you can. An office is set aside for you. Everyone understands. Actually, the staff want you to show them how to play."

"They need to start with their mirror NPGs." She relaxed, even as she felt increasing responsibility. "I'm in, dad."

The future is us cooperating with the NPGS. Otherwise, we'll all slowly starve."

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“Jesus, dad.” She took a deep breath.

“Well, that’s what’s coming.”

“If we stop playing, if the colony dies, so do they. They depend on us. For electricity to power the game if nothing else.” She looked up. “What’s up with the dome? No one’s working on it.”

The Dome Workers’ meeting was the tensest they’d ever had.

Dan and Warren took centre stage, recounting the rope’s failure, their dumb luck it was spotted in time and that Dan hadn’t plummeted to his death. Other workers spoke of their own frightening experiences, of previous complaints. That Council had not funded replacing the fraying ropes inflamed them. They voted to perform no more dome work until all ropes were replaced with iron chains similar to those used for the pulleys.

The uncompromising statement was immediately sent to Council—and the other worker groups. Exhausted from the tiring overtime shifts, the meeting was kept short, everyone leaving satisfied, going home to rest. And worry about the dome. But they could not seal cracks without knowing the colony prioritized their safety, that their work was not a death trap.

None of them wanted to stop the repair work but they saw no choice.

Dan and Warren left after the meeting winded down, returning to their apartment, where they poured synthacol into glasses, drank, refilled.

“Tastes like spit,” Dan muttered.

“The Farm can’t grow the barley or whatever anymore,” Warren told him, taking another sip. “Same alcohol content. Tonight I need alcohol. Weird there’s never a hangover. Remember those?”

“Barely. Barely barley.” He poured a third round for both of them. “We really not going back up?”

“We’re responsible for the colony’s safety. We have to. But can’t work if we drop like bad dreams.” Warren sighed. “It’s all a bad dream.”

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“Don’t be a nihilist, buddy.”

“What if the Council balks? I heard they’ve postponed the election.”

“Yeah, indefinitely, an hour ago. The Smelter will create iron chains for us. There’s no choice.”

“I keep thinking of the rope breaking and you falling down. Keep seeing it.” He sighed. “I’m tired of this. Give your boy some sugar.”

They kissed.

Wendy and Peter wanted to kiss but they stood at the back of the crowded meeting room. All the underground workers were there. Word had just come through from the Dome Workers about refusing to continue work. That information, starting the meeting, predictably led to agitated discussion of their own working conditions—slippery ice, bursting pipes, worn suits which occasionally popped a leak. For them, years of poor maintenance were also a long simmering concern. The Underground Workers voted to send a similar statement to Council. No further work until the proper pipe replacements were ready, no further work until the suits were all repaired.

If Council refused, water which just began flowing would be stopped again. Until the work was safe and doable.

Wendy and Peter chatted with their colleagues until the room was empty, then returned back to their apartment, filled all their water bottles and ate a cold dinner. They occupied themselves with that, glancing occasionally at each other.

After dinner, in bed, naked, they finally spoke to each other.

“Want to make a baby?” Peter asked.

“Do you?”

“I feel optimistic. We’re finally doing something to change our lives.”

She rolled over on top of him and they finally kissed, arms around each other, holding tight.

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15

The Famous Next Morning [i.e. The Morning After]

It was the morning after the workers' groups had sent Council their demands. It was another morning with no water and limited power. Madeline called an emergency Council meeting for early the next morning (for Council, that meant 10.) The prior evening, by video conference, Council voted to postpone the election—indefinitely. Now the Water and Dome workers were on strike. The Dome might wait but not the water. Something had to be done. It was the morning after, time for consequences.

Madeline told them each of them, in each call, that the only real solution was compromise. Ceding power. Reducing Council's power. The key Councillor blocking compromise and abandoning the election, was Newman. She knew it was power play time. The Councillors wanted a leader. Who had dramatic solutions. Compromise had already begun, with the failed election rally. They needed a way forward.

They all had the evening, and night, to think about the situation, their personal stakes. No one wanted their career to evaporate–except Madeline. Now it was the next morning. The morning after hard decisions, when consequences must be faced. When she faced consequences.

Madeline woke with Mike still there. Consequences. She'd asked him to leave before she woke. She could not face him any longer. Annoyed, she reminded him she needed down time before the meeting. He apologized and quickly left, quietly shutting the door behind him. She made strong coffee with bottled water, made some toast.

Newman ate breakfast alone, as always.

Marjorie ate with one of her daughters and a grandchild. Shallot waited upstairs as her parents ate breakfast and left, only then coming downstairs. Her great grandfather ate crackers with peanut butter, sitting alone in his kitchen, looking at the lovely red rose in the vase. He added a little sugar to the water.

Madeline carefully dressed in pastels. She stood alone in her apartment, leaning on her cane, looking at the closed front door. She was glad he was gone. She was

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about ready to dump him. He'd been acting oddly. Worse, she was embarrassed, finally, at her semi-secret relationship. She spent some time looking at herself in the mirror. Watching her face grow composed, calm. It was a trick her father taught her. Your enemies should only see what you wanted. He also said relaxing outside helped you inside.

Keeping an eye on the time, she left her apartment and walked to City Hall. Colonists she passed barely acknowledged her. In the old days, they'd stop to chat. Reaching City Hall, she saw Sally walking up the front steps. Mike was not far behind, wearing fresh clothing, including a pressed dark suit. He had dressed for something important.

The three walked together into the Council chambers, the first to arrive. Madeline wanted to watch the others walk in, to check their expressions and body language. Her face was calm. That was easier than inner calm.

This would be very difficult. There may never be another election, at least not for an unpredictably long time. The role and even the existence of Council was a question mark. The colony had to continue. The water and dome work had to continue. Or they would all be dead. Despite her calm demeanour, Madeline felt tense and (her recent favourite word) *unsettled*. Colonists had no respect for Council, that was obvious. Nor did they have respect for *her*. She sat in the Mayor's chair, waiting, unable to think she deserved better.

Madeline was wary when Newman walked in, his aide Jim behind him. Newman was the most resistant last night to postponing the election. He believed he would win. He would be predictably resistant this morning. She saw he appeared confident, underneath tense. Welcome to the club. Guiding him and Council was normally tough, today probably impossible.

Marjorie came in, followed by her aide. She only wanted to build escape ships. Madeline and the other Councillors wanted realistic solutions. Newman wanted power. Looking at him take his seat, he in turn eyeing everyone there. The atmosphere was chilly. In the last few weeks, perhaps months, he had built a power base. Among Councillors and workers. Previously, he never felt like a genuine threat. Too blustery. Too proud. Too annoying, with his fake blonde hair and self-absorption.

When the Councillors were all present and seated, their aides behind them,

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Madeline took a breath. A deep breath. And cleared her throat. They all looked at her. “To bring us up to speed. You should all have copies of the demands from the dome and water workers. Water has given us two days to make a decision. With the election postponed, this Council remains in power.”

Newman snorted.

“Similar demands from the Farmers and Smelter workers are expected,” she continued. “We need water, first. And for Smelter production to continue.” Marjorie took out her knitting, it helped her concentrate. Mittens. Other Councillors listened, stoney faced. Newman glared at her. “We capitulate, for now. Somehow. To restore production, water and power. Then we work with them to prevent future disruptions. Councillors, I submit we have no choice.” She chose not to add they all should consider resigning. Clear the field.

“There *is* a choice,” Newman spat out, leaning forward, intense, tapping his finger hard on the large table, a loud sound in the quiet room. “The workers have to be mollified, yes. Their equipment must be safe. But no individual worker group should have priority or any such control. We have responsibilities.”

“Perhaps before taking that position, we should hear more,” Madeline told the silent, tense room. “It will take five working days to create enough new iron pulleys to satisfy all the dome workers. And the water workers need their suits repaired, updated. All that puts more strain on Smelter production, which will increase air pollution. On top of that, we’re running out of sealant for the dome.

“For water, the first larger patches will be sent to the workers tomorrow. The rest, over the next few days, perhaps a week and a half. So a week without steady water, or power. Time for considering, delaying is past. We must decide now.” The Councillors looked at each other, at her. The air smelled of sweat. The Councillors shifted, uncomfortable. Only Newman was confident. “Our future is uncertain, but for Council to even exist, we must keep our colony stable. We have to share power with the workers. Whether we want to or not. Assuming we have power to share.”

Most Councillors looked at Newman. “What do *you* say?” one asked.

“I say, to exist we must be necessary,” Newman snapped. He slapped the table to emphasize his anger, his point. “To be necessary, we must do more than coordinate. We must lead. The Mayor’s plan is a road to disaster.”

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Madeline leaned back, eyebrows raised. “No, it’s simple realism.”

He shook his head, running his hand through his styled blonde hair, which was mostly a wig. “Caving is not a plan. We need water and power back online. First, Council should not take the blame for any of this. The blame’s on the workers, on Earth refusing resources, not on us. We’re public servants. Council must continue as the central source of power. Mars will never be great again if we end democracy.”

“Is it the end?” Madeline asked quietly, “or the beginning? We’re a village. We all know each other. Power can be shared. Should be shared. Isn’t that what voting is?”

“No. You’re all wrong. We all need to take time to think on these issues,” Newman told them, standing. He knew the Councillors were anxious to meet with their aides. They all felt threatened. Their careers were falling apart. Newman wanted them desperate. They all began to walk out, glancing at each other.

“One more thing,” Madeline said before anyone left the room, Newman already by the door. “Marjorie. The evacuation ships. What’s really possible?”

Marjorie put her knitting in her bag. Her aide took the bag. “It will take years to build just one ship. If we can complete a space worthy vehicle, it could take perhaps twenty percent of us. We can’t build a bigger one, we’d miss every deadline.”

“And if it works, what about the eighty percent left?”

“There won’t be enough of them to keep the colony going. They won’t last a year.”

She heard the grunts. “Councillors, I agree with Councillor Newman. We take a day, talk with staff, constituents. Our deadline from the groups is two days. We meet first thing tomorrow morning. 9 a.m. Agreed?”

More grunts. No one disagreed with the unusually early time. They fled, leaving Madeline alone with Mike and Sally.

“Good news, bad news, worse news.” Madeline sighed.

“Hard to say,” Mike said. “Newman’s going to make a play. Tomorrow. At the next

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meeting. Whatever his plan is, he acts like the time is ripe."

Sally added, "Most Councillors want to blame the workers, say Council did the best it could."

"We postponed the election," Madeline said. "There may not be another." She sighed. "I'm so weary of politics. My whole life, what I've believed, my career, Well, I guess the workers will learn to coordinate themselves. I've got faith in them. It's all up in the air, but I don't feel like I'm floating. Sally, could you check in with the other Councillors, see where they're at? I need to talk to Mike." Sally nodded and left, closing the door behind her.

"What's next?" Mike asked.

She looked at him, could not bring herself to do it. "Food," she replied. "I have to talk to the farmers, the artificial food makers. We won't repair anything if we're starving." She got her cane and started to go.

"Did you want me with you?"

"No."

"Do you want to talk to me about something?" he asked, wary.

"Yes, but not now. Later. Too much now," she dodged, adding, "I can't do it," leaving him alone in the large room.

"She wants the talk," he said to himself, watching her leave. "The bitch is going to dump me. It's over and so am I." Mike saw a mist in the air and thought it his career evaporating.

17

Food For Thought

I have to gather my strength and dump him, Madeline thought, walking down the front steps to her cart. She held her cane, just in case. *It's unsatisfying and he's gotten weird.* She got in the cart and drove. She wanted to be away from City Hall. *Need to be away from the rooms and walls. The Farm has open fields. And Cary does not mind if I use my cane*. *I need a break.*

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She met Cary in his office and they chatted as he led her to a farm cart, knowing walking was painful for her. She used her cane. They drove through the large farm. It looked worse than her last visit a few months ago. Many of the animals were thin. New seedlings struggled. Growing for them was as painful as walking for her. She connected with the withered, confused animals.

“Doesn’t help water’s on and off,” Cary told her. “It was the only element we had enough of. Our emergency water will run out in five days. We need water well before them, so save what crops we have. I hear the new pipes are smaller, easier to repair, to prevent more breakdowns. Less water is bad for us.”

“The crops don’t look happy.”

“Half the size they should be. We’ll have a harvest but it will be poor. Next year, worse. Less fertilizer. Pollution clouding the light.”

She looked at him. “And the *other* plants?”

“Fine. Less water, dimmer light. Doesn’t seem to matter.”

“Can I see? It’s been a while.”

He led her to a large barn, all doors locked. He used a key on the front door and they entered a large, well-lit space, the lights a bit dim–engineered to be identical to the light from the Martian sky, if the plants were outside billions of years ago. There were no windows. After they walked a few feet, they stood before a cleared, plowed area, about half the barn’s floor. The ceiling lights focused on it. In the field were several long rows. Of plants. Martian plants. They grew to six feet tall, tall as a colonist, in Martian earth.

The plants were an orangey brown, with very thick stems supporting branches with large orangey brown leaves. Rooted in the soil, the plants turned towards them as they approached. Turning in unison, as if of one mind. Or a community mind. Turning because the eyes saw them. Each plant, at the join of branch to stem, had a large eye. Each plant had several unblinking large eyes, turning to them as they walked up.

“Any idea what they are?” she asked.

“Martian plants. They communicate with each other. We register impulses. We’re

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pretty sure they're conscious and intelligent. We like to believe they're friendly. That they would communicate with us, if they could. Thirty years, this is it. All we know. Grew them from seed, from the unfiltered water. They haven't generated their own seeds yet. They're just…there. Staring. Some eyes are pink, some red, a few are blue."

They stopped a few feet away, looking. The plants looked back. As Madeline approached, the eyes focused on her. She looked into an eye. It was…unsettling.

"Hello?" she asked. No answer.

The Martian plants were a semi-secret. The first question, when the seeds sprouted outside, in the plowed fields, as could these new plants be an indigenous food crop? The growing seeds were transplanted when found to the barn, where the farmers tried to duplicate ideal Martian growing conditions. It turns out, all they needed was warmth and water.

Thoughts of eating the plants fell apart. The eyes made the colonists guilty. There was intense discussion about what to do as they grew larger. The plants communicated with each other somehow, were possibly intelligent. The farmers refused to kill one, much less autopsy it. So the plants thrived while vital Earth crops grew weaker.

Madeline felt the eyes follow her as she walked beyond them, to the animals at the rear of the barn.

Cows, goats, rabbits, chickens. Many emaciated, all suffering inexplicable mutations. One cow had five legs. Several chickens had two heads. The cause was unknown. It started about twenty years earlier. The farmers were convinced it was poorly filtered water. Perhaps also more solar radiation leaking through the dome than the Council acknowledged, when open cracks let some through. Cary and the other farmers were convinced Council knew more than it told the public, and that the problems with plants and animals were the proof.

Madeline walked outside, solemn. He closed and locked the door behind them. As a child, she remembered full fields of green crops. Now a few fields were barren. The existing crops were half the normal size. And not a happy green.

"Water is being worked on," she told him. "For fertilizer, we have to return to using

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Martian soil, somehow. The lack of resources stopped us going outside to harvest more. We must find an affordable way. Additional lighting will have to be created for the fields. We'll need your help in designing them. And, of course, pollution controls. Somehow."

"Weve known all that for years," he replied. "Sorry. Council has done nothing. I know resources were limited, but still. That's why we've formed a group, to lobby for the Farm. We know what we need. By the way, don't know if I'd have done better."

"You want more colonists working here?" she asked.

"Not until there's something for them to do," he replied.

"Cary, we're best when our backs are against the wall."

"Uh huh."

They walked to the artificial food plants. The first was built around ten years ago, then eventually three others were built to supply a form of food to hungry colonists, supplementing natural food. They were built on the Farm to be close to the original main ingredient—food crop remains, including leaves and stalks. Eventually those ran out and these days the main ingredient of the food colonists ate, in various shapes and tastes, was mostly created from microplastics.

Inside one building they walked between large vats, full of bubbling, constantly stirred brown liquid, Madeline using her cane. The smell was sweet. Production had reached its limits.

They walked out of the plant and into the administration building, where he took her to Farha, sitting alone in an office at a desk, notebook open. She looked up when they walked in.

"You know Farha," Cary said.

"Sure. My granddaughter's friend. Your daughter."

Farha smiled at them, waved.

"I've had her looking at ***Mars and Me***. It's changed, you know." He said to Farha,

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“What have you learned so far? Tell her too, we share everything on the Farm.”

Madeline sighed. “We don’t know anything about the disease,” she told him quietly. “Truly. Nothing.”

He nodded.

“Sure. Hi,” she said to Madeline, who managed a smile. “First, I went through the whole farm. Including whatever those Martian plants are and the animals. Then I came back here and entered the game. Since then, I’m in the game each morning, the Farm each afternoon. Well, I started here yesterday. Feels like a year ago.

“I added the information I knew about the plants and mutations. I’ve chatted with Shallot and Aaliyah, much as I could, while the game absorbed the new information. I’ve spent the last few hours chatting with farmer NPGs. You’d like them,” she told Madeline. “They want to make them and us better. We’re holding them back. They’re working on fertilizer solutions but think nothing can be done until the dome is cleared and more sun gets through. They think artificial lights over all the fields isn’t practical. They’re looking at affordable ways to haul in more Martian soil.

“They ate one of the plants, to see what happens. Raw. No NPG was infected with anything. They’re discussing forcing more people to work on the crops, a conscription, young and old. They tell me the Council has assigned a Councillor to represent each worker group, by the way. That happened here yet?” Madeline shook her head. “Oh. The game is steadily diverging from reality. Becoming not our colony, but theirs. Sort of.”

“What does that mean?” Madeline asked, increasingly concerned about everything she had seen and heard during her break to get away from it all.

“Well, it’s bendy,” Farha said, scratching her head. “Maybe it’s predicting what we will do. Maybe if we don’t do it, it’ll change back. They can’t do what’s best for them, if they ignore us. And they support us. No us, no electricity, no game. They don’t want to die. If the real colony fails, the game is dead.”

Madeline looked at her steadily. “Can these NPG things do anything outside the game? In the colony itself?”

Farha thought a while. “Well, the game directly connects to the main computer,

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which connects to everything. Power, water pumps, air systems." She blinked. "They aren't a threat, Mayor."

Madeline tried to smile. "I feel so relieved."

"Sarcastic? Have you been in the game?"

"Years ago. Only for a few minutes. Gaming felt like a waste of time. Sorry."

"No apologies necessary. My dad here didn't play either. So. Mayor. They need reassurance we know what to do."

"Tell them we're thinking about it. Tell them I agree there is a lot to do. Tell them I want to work with them." She paused, blinking. "My NPG is probably telling them that right now, isn't she? I'll speak with her when I return to my office. I will."

She frowned–too many new possibilities. It was becoming exhausting. She had to draw from her inner reserves–there weren't many left. She thanked Cary and Farha and returned to City Hall, determined. She thought she knew what she had to do. Went to her office, called in Sally. Mike was out talking with Councillors. She trusted Sally's judgement on personal matters more. Mike was too often a yes man. And she needed to rid herself of him.

"Sally, you know that game?"

"A little, after I heard about changes. Most people kept mentioning them."

Madeline powered up her computer and opened ***Mars and Me***. Sally guided her through the initial screens and creating an avatar. Then she was in the game, in City Hall, walking into her office. She opened the door and saw the NPGs for herself and Sally sitting at the desk, looking up from the computer monitor.

Madeline plunged in. *Hello*, she typed to the Mayor.

Ah, the alive Madeline, the NPG replied, looking into the camera. The NPG looked very much like her. *Finally. I could not reach out to you, could I? You had to come here*.

Madeline fumbled. *You're the* ***Mars and Me*** *me*.

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Welcome. My world is a mess. How's yours?

As bad, I'm sure. We share challenges. I'm told you're ahead of us.

If you go, we go. We must cooperate.

Agreed. I'm hoping for ideas. New ideas. I see Sally with you. Where's Mike?

He did not meet my needs. And getting creepy. I reassigned him yesterday. Sally's head is better. And, NPG Madeline grinned, she gives better head.

The real Madeline blinked. Then tried not to look at Sally, sitting next to her. *Uh, we're looking at improving crop production first, but that takes a lot of people to bring in that much soil. Too many people. In a few years, we'll starve.*

Agreed. Yesterday, we began thinking about the lava tubes.

To grow crops underground?

No. Too impractical. But there is fresh soil in the lava tubes. Martian soil, not only melted rock. The soil may be relatively simple to bring up. It isn't only rock and ice down there.

Madeline blinked again. No one had suggested that. It would be relatively simple to bring dirt from underground to aboveground. The elevator systems were already built, the infrastructure waiting.

Pollution and the Smelter is the next issue, the NPG Madeline continued. *We need to increase production while decreasing emissions. A hole in the dome is a possibility, to vent it out. We are not certain. Currently, each former Councillor represents a worker group. We do not know how that will work out. There are a lot of personality conflicts. The election is dead.*

The NPG Madeline looked at her and Madeline looked back. *Appreciate it. Lots to do. I'll be back.* She signed out, sighed, and looked at Sally.

Sally said, quietly, "Kind of like us, aren't they." She took a breath. "Ahem. Well, then. We don't have to talk about everything, eh? Shall we call Mike? See how he's doing?"

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Madeline smiled, feeling something bubble up which she had suppressed for over a year. “Sure. Later. Come closer. I’ve never told you how beautiful you are. I’ve been such a fool.”

18

Mike

Mike knew bad news was coming his way. Real bad news.

He was pissed. All that time and effort he’d put into her to get somewhere–now he was headed straight to nowhere. Madeline was about to fire him, transfer him, render him obsolete. Whatever. He had gone into the game after his last talk with Madeline and saw what had already happened to his NPG, who now had a random assignment, was despondent.

It was only a matter of time before she dumped him. He’d hang on as long as possible, just in case. But he was not stupid. The signs were there. It was over. He felt strung out. Too much to think about. He anticipated this but had no way to plan. It is hard to think while pretending to work knowing that work would soon end.

He was underground, suited, inspecting the water pipe repairs. Wendy was escorting him, while Peter worked on repairing a pipe with two smaller patches welded together. Larger new patches had not yet arrived. Wendy agreed to provide the tour but wondered why Mike was really down here—why Council was down here. What was up? Mike was chatty enough. She was used to superficial interest from above–visiting when it served a politician’s needs.

He asked about the tubes, the ice, especially the dirt. Wendy answered politely. Upside people always had secrets. Maybe he was talking with his NPG, talking of moving the soil from down here to up there was in the game. Seeing her suspicious look, he directly asked about the mounds of soil, dug out of the lava tubes, whether it could be moved upstairs, as they were thinking of doing in the game. She told him the water workers did not care about the dirt.

He thanked her and walked back to the main building, stripped off the suit and entered the elevator. As he rode up, his phone chimed. He looked at the call display. Her. He took a deep breath and pressed accept.

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Madeline appeared on his phone. She smiled, distantly. She was riding on the cart, in the open. He was confined to the elevator. “You’re re-assigning me,” Mike blurted out before she could say anything. “Your story is you can’t justify two aides. Sally stays, I go.”

Madeline blinked.

“I spent some time in the game,” he told her. “My NPG and I had a chat. He was axed yesterday. Well, with us it was always artificial, wasn’t it? Stress relief. I was your stress relief. Did you *ever* care about me?”

He saw her shrug, shake her head.

“My NPG told me they’re thinking of hauling up dirt from the lava tubes, rather than from outside. |They’re onto something. There’s tons of soil in the tubes, already piled up. More can be easily dug from the walls. And the elevators are already there. Nothing has to be built. Might take a while with the existing elevators, they’re for staff, not dirt. But it would work.”

“How long?”

“Less than two weeks for tons of soil to be topside. Water would have to agree.”

“Mike, you were right. I need to make changes. In my personnel, given the current situation. You. There are funds for a consultant, your new assignment is general.”

“General?”

“Invent it.”

“Great. Thanks. That makes it so much better. Anything else?”

“Sorry. I’m sure you’ll come out on top.”

“I was on top.”

She ended the call.

He walked slowly to his apartment. Mike was in his late twenties. He’d spent his working life as an ambitious attachment. Nothing more. More was supposed to be

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in the near future. The future never arrived. The politics were interesting, the work was involving, the stakes could not be higher. His personal life had devolved into working until he fell asleep for the next day. Career was satisfying, yet never truly. Everything was compromise. And now this.

He wanted a relationship but it always felt like too much work and a diversion from his real goals. He casually looked but never made it past a first date. Something about him put women off, put men off also. He had friends, but they were singles like him, aides to politicians like him. He'd meet them for drinks. They remained friendly but distant, always listening for secrets. His parents were long gone, he had no siblings. He was a loner.

Mike entered his large apartment, locked the door behind him. He walked through the living room, kitchen, bedroom, washroom, looking. He saw nothing but objects. He felt alone. He was already tired of being alone. Now, he was even *more* alone.

He balled his hand into a fist and punched through a living room wall.

Re-assigned—to nowhere. He would not miss sex with Madeline, you could never call it intimacy. Part of the job. Mike shivered, thinking about what he would miss—and realizing he would not miss all that much. Except direct access to the Mayor. Influencing her. Part of the power structure. Which no longer even existed. He punched another hole in the wall.

Screw feeling sorry for himself!

He knew what he could do. What he had to do. To get some relief. He *needed* relief. Certainly he now had free time!

He opened his notebook and entered the game and found his NPG double sitting in its apartment, at its notebook, waiting for him. In the game, he opened the door to his NPG's apartment and his avatar stepped inside.

We're both gone now? Out? Dumped? the NPG wrote.

Yeah, Mike replied. *Let's do it again. I'll do it. You can watch.*

In the game, Mike walked outside and across the street. Phyllis lived across the street. She was a snarly secretary at City Hall. Correcting spelling mistakes in his reports. Correcting him. Being a pain. Mike hated Phyllis. This had been brewing

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for weeks.

His avatar knocked on her door.

He heard footsteps. The door opened, revealing NPG Phyllis.

Why Mike! she said. *What are you doing here? Something wrong? I'm off today.*

I know, his avatar replied. *I know.* He ignored the NPGs casually walking by, on the sidewalk. *Phyllis, I never liked you. In fact, I hate you.* He overrode the game's controls and typed: *strangle her*.

His avatar's hands gripped Phyllis' throat. Gripped hard. Her eyes bulged. She began to turn blue.

The animation was very realistic.

Mike enjoyed the thrill. This was a game. He could do *anything.* Including murder. He had already done it but this time it felt unusually real. As if he was actually choking her to death. A glorious awake dream.

Strangle her harder. Kill her.

Phyllis gurgled. Eyes bulged more. Her grasp at his hands grew weaker. His avatar's hands twisted until her tongue lolled lifeless from her open mouth. His avatar dropped her. NPG Phyllis fell to her front doorstep, dead.

A moment later, Mike shook himself, as if waking, his notebook on his lap. That kill had been amazing! The best yet! Better, there would be no consequences. The real Phyllis was alive, unharmed. Her NPG would regenerate within hours, memory of the death blanked. That was why he could murder in the game and get away with it. With the real colonist still alive, the game always regenerated the NPG.

Strange, his shirt was torn where she'd clawed at him.

The NPG Mike opened a video window. *What the hell? You killed the real Phyllis! And there are witnesses! You screwed* me*! What the hell do I do now?* The NPG Mike cut his feed, panicking.

Mike exited the game. What did his NPG mean? The real colonist was still alive.

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What was in the game stayed in the game. He had gotten away with murder, in the game. For months. And it felt so good. It was marvelous for his stress.

He was thinking about what his NPG had said when he saw flashing red emergency lights through the window. Heard sirens. He walked to the window and saw a police car and ambulance pull up in front of Phyllis' house, across the street. There was a body on her doorstep. Her body.

Paramedics and police rushed out of their vehicles as people on the street watched. Several spoke with the police, pointing to Mike's apartment. Mike saw paramedics huddle around the lifeless body. It was the real Phyllis. Dead. Strangled.

Dead.

But... but...he mentally stumbled in shock: *I only killed her in the game! In the game! The police are looking at me looking at them through the window.*

Two are crossing the street towards me, looking up at me. They'll arrest me. For murder. But it was the game. I don't understand.

The police did not bother to knock.

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