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Murder on Mars

A murder in the colony was terrible–but had been usually limited to domestic violence: couples in love killing each other because they loved each other. But a *random* murder? Without love? Colonists were shocked. Four murders over the past two hundred years, all domestic disputes-this was the first without any clear motivation. If not love, hatred? Phyllis had no enemies. Her murder was irrational, illogical–which made it terrifying.

Fear grabbed everyone.

Such things do *not* happen on Mars! Earth? Sure. But Mars?

Shallot and her besties heard about it from a colony news broadcast. Entering the game, they found the NPGs horrified. The murder occurred at the same time in the game and real life. That was bizarre. Not possible. Game events occurred first in real life, caused by a player's actions. First the NPGs were ahead of the real colony about the election. Was the murder in the colony first, or in the game? Why Phyllis? The NPGs were rattled.

Shallot felt a new urgency to protect the NPGs *and* the colony that was her home. Her NPG told her she was frightened. That *she* did not want to be murdered. Especially now that she felt so alive. What had happened to safeguards in the game preventing violence?

Shallot typed she'd ask her grandfather. Murder! Worse, the police had arrested Mike, her Nan's aide. This was a terrible blow to her credibility—and to Nan personally. Shallot knew of Nan's relationship with Mike. Someone was behind this. *Who? Why?*

Newman walked with Antonio through the Smelter, chatting with the workers. Newman did most of the chatting. For once, the workers talked not of production problems or colonist dislike, but of the murder. Newman told them it was a challenge they all must face. That the murder demonstrated the stresses afflicting the colony. And that he knew the path to justice.

Newman had dropped by unannounced, announcing to Antonio he would represent the plant and its workers to the colony. Antonio shook his hand and said sure.

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These days, he liked Newman. Wanted to hear his opinions. More, Antonio's role was to protect the Smelter and Newman was a consistent supporter. Newman liked walking through the Smelter, especially the plant floor, feeling the searing heat from the molten metal, chatting with the workers, connecting with them. Antonio had seen it often, the last couple of weeks.

Newman had attracted followers, including Antonio. He exuded a power Antonio and others could not deny. Did not want to deny. A powerful leader would be such a relief!

Newman was still there when the Smelter workers broke in the afternoon for a group meeting. They met on the floor of the smelter, the largest open area. The meeting was as fiery as the molten iron around them. Antonio stood with Newman, listening as worker after worker said the colony was falling apart and only production from the plant would save it. Would keep the water flowing. Would keep the power on. Even the dome, as the plant manufactured the sealant used on cracks. The workers were tired of being disrespected, tired of the equipment breakdowns, tired of being blamed for pollution. *Everything* depended on the smelting plant. Newman encouraged the discussion and suggested they send a motion to Council and the other groups that the Smelter had earned top priority and should have a veto power over all colony decisions.

Applause.

Moved: *To ensure safe working conditions and respect, the other worker groups should be informed immediately that the Smelter should have a veto over any colony activity related to use of resources. Otherwise, Smelter workers will halt production.*

Passed unanimously. Applause. Applause now directed towards Newman.

Newman nodded his approval, smiled and waved.

The Smelters' new position was transmitted to the other worker groups at once. One of the Smelter workers told Newman he could talk with Council–but who cared? Council no longer mattered. This was, Newman was told, democracy in action.

"I couldn't agree more," he replied. "You need strong leadership to get you through this. You have it. And if you want help, brothers and sisters, I am always

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available.” He made a short speech, to enthusiastic applause, how they could solve problems on their own, that they did not need him or any other politician.

The Farmers’ group was first to reply, almost instantly, as the meeting was about to end. The Farmers also demanded a veto and colony priority, noting Smelter workers needed to eat. If the Farmers’ demands were not met, they wrote harvesting would be delayed. Food would stop.

The Underground Workers replied they also wanted a veto, noting all workers had to drink. The Dome Workers were inspired to also demand a veto, noting none of the colonists would live long if the dome cracked and solar radiation poured in (along with Martian air.)

The Administration Workers replied they were neutral, wanted more information for a study of the situation and were considering preparing a report, which would include graphs.

The Health and Service Workers sent an email, advising they had formed their own group that morning. Their members included workers in the Clinic, hospital, paramedics and police. They did not say they wanted a veto, but noted they may be selective to whom they provided services–including emergency medical services. The Police group demanded that every colonist receive identity cards bearing their photographs and fingerprints. Given the murder, colonists had to be tracked and surveyed.

After all groups conferred via a video conference, members from *every* group agreed to create a new group: the Air Breathers, which would focus on pollution. Also the Bug Group, which would focus on the strange disease affecting colonists. The two new groups noted that breathing decent air and fighting the strange disease should have top priority and veto power.

Video conferencing was then shut down. This was getting complicated.

There was a lot of discussion among the Smelter workers about how to proceed. “We can’t all have top priority,” muttered Antonio. “Has this become a pissing contest?” a worker nearby also muttered. “Is democracy a pissing contest?”

Newman said loudly, “At the start we piss all over each other. Jockeying, then compromising. Stick with the plan. See who caves first.”

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They started to discuss about whether alliances were necessary, and with whom, and starting when, and for how long, and what priorities should go to whom, but after a while were tired and had to return to work or go home. They agreed to meet again, when another break could be created in the continuous shifts.

Antonio and Newman walked back to Antonio's office, Antonio's eyes glancing at Newman to judge his reaction. Newman was smiling. In the office, Newman closed the door, Antonio sat behind his desk and sipped some coffee, made with bottled water. He needed something warm in his stomach. It would be tough at dinner tonight with his wife. Administration objected to anyone but the Council having power. Newman was clearly moving in another direction.

Even home life was moving. After Newman visited Administration, Miranda was more supportive, even held his hand.

As Newman paced, silent, Antonio checked the game for what the NPGs were doing. The workers had already formed the additional group organizations and a representative from each had replaced Council as the government. In the game, the new group voted on vetoes.

"Why are they ahead of us?" Newman growled. "Stupid game shouldn't be able to do that. It's supposed to follow us."

"They're improving Smelter filters. And production. And starting to haul up dirt from the underground." Antonio looked Newman. "Why are they hauling up dirt?"

"To fertilize the fields," Newman replied, looking at a poster of the colony. Keeps the cost down, no trips outside. Tons of dirt down below, in the lava tubes. Fresh Martian soil will help the crops."

"So you've been in the game? You play it?"

Newman, smiled, an odd smile. He ran his fingers through his thick blonde hair—an extension was loose. "Been a player for almost a year. It's a great diversion. Have you tried it?"

"I have, yes, starting recently. I talk with my NPG. Very informative. Should I talk to yours?"

"No." Newman continued to smile.

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Antonio felt calm, even a little blank. He watched Newman pace back and forth across the small office. “What’s happening? I feel strange.”

Newman paused to stare at him. “You feel fine. You feel okay. You trust me. And forget the game, Tony. Don’t worry about the game. Or the murders. Leave that to me. Concentrate on the Smelter. And what the opposing groups do.”

“Opposing?”

“Everyone else.”

Shallot spent much of the day in the game, motivated by the twin murders of the Phyllises, sitting on the couch in the living room downstairs while mom and dad were at work, notebook on her lap. She still felt a mess. Few of her friends phoned or texted. Nothing looked or felt right. The living room looked strange, the washroom felt cold, her bedroom was someone else’s. When she phoned or texted, she had to speak in code.

Only the NPG Shallot was readily available, who shared her experiences and would understand, was not spying on her or being told to spy on her, or was simply avoiding her, absorbed in her own problems. *Hey*, Shallot wrote her. *You must be doing better than me.* She managed a small smile for her avatar. *It’s been a while. How r u?*

Is there any more about the murders? NPG Shallot replied, anxious.

Not yet. It’s all over the news. Everyone’s rattled.

Don’t know about your world but here there were witnesses. Several. They saw the murder. An NPG strangling another NPG. Then the murderer vanished, popping out. We’ve learned that happened seconds before the murder in your world.

Shallot NPG looked at real Shallot’s avatar. *We think the murder guy was one of you. A real person. Acting as a player. Because in your world the same woman was murdered. Mike’s in jail, for murder. He acts confused. You understand. I’m so creeped out!*

Shallot’s mouth was open. *Criss cross. Like that video,* ***Strangers On The Smelter Train****. Can’t be. What is done in the game happens here?*

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We're frantic. I'm part of a team trying to figure it out.

I'll start one also. Wow. Immense. I'll talk to my great grandad, he led the original development team for the game. He must know about this by now.

I spoke with his NPG. Not a clue. NPG Shallot stood, then sat back down and typed. *We used to have a handle on what was happening. It always happened in your world first. Now my friends are asking me if* you *have any answers.*

That's what it's come to? A real person with answers? Gimme a break. NPG Shallot paused. *Sorry. We talk about real people, players, as the source of problems they refuse to fix. Then we have to deal with it. Sorry.*

Shallot left the game and the house, taking her notebook with her. She texted her great grandfather she was coming to visit. He replied he always had time for her. He welcomed her at the door, standing with it open, leaning on the doorframe, rubbing his leg as he watched her walk towards him. He had a good idea why she was visiting. They hugged and went into the kitchen. He had prepared small sandwiches, with cucumbers, and a fresh pot of tea, next to it two empty waiting cups.

"Grandad," she said as soon as they sat, "you've heard about the murder? Murders?" He nodded. "All the NPGs are alarmed. They say it happened first in the game. How? Did it have anything to do with the real murder?"

"Yes. This isn't a kitchen discussion." He pushed himself up and limped into the living room, which he rarely lived in, and looked out the window at the small, struggling garden. At the rose bushes. She walked up to stand beside him, noticing even a little movement made him a little out of breath.

"Cysts on my liver," he said quietly. "Presses against my diaphragm. Who knew?"

Shallot touched his back.

"We have to fix this," he told her. "And will. Someone from here, a player, went into the game. He created an avatar and used it to kill an NPG. Maybe that could be done despite the anti-violence rules. I talked this morning with the woman currently supervising the game. Seconds after he killed the NPG, in real life her counterpart was also murdered. The same way. I'm told Mike denies now killing the woman. He says he was only playing in the game.

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“The answer is a human player. How? A colonist who has unusual powers. Mind control powers. My first thought was, the Martian organisms we’ve ingested. We know the Martian plants communicate, a form of telepathy. Maybe one of us has gained that power. And is using it. I know it’s possible. Don’t tell anyone, but it includes one of the Councillors. She told me a few years ago.”

He shook his head. “It’s evil. Doesn’t make sense, onion. The game was supposed to help solve problems, for us to work together, colonists and experts. Not as a way to kill. Couldn’t have imagined years ago an NPG would murder another NPG. That a colonist would use the game that way.”

“Telepathy? Isn’t that kinda far out?”

“So’s living on Mars.” He straightened. “Can’t get farther out than that, eh, onion? Whatever it is, we’re forced to work together, colonists and NPGs. Working together on a disaster, as I figured. First, find the murderer. Stop more murders. Solve the crime.

“The original game had strict protocols preventing violence. We anticipated it being used the wrong way by players, so we coded it to prevent murders. But it’s complicated. We’re looking now to see if other NPGs have been murdered. The difficulty is that if the player is still alive the NPG may regenerate. Come back from a bad dream, unaware of what happened. And of course when a colonist dies, from natural causes or accidents, their NPG also dies.” He sighed.

Shallot looked at her great grandfather. “We should call Nan about this, I think.”

“I imagine she knows.” He heard a chime, picked up his cell phone. “That’s her. The police are letting her see Mike, we are invited.”

Shallot stood. “Text her we’re on the way. Let’s go.”

He started towards the door. “We’ll take my cart. Isn’t fast, but it’ll get us there.”

He appeared so frail at times. “Are you up for this?” she asked, concerned.

“Nope.” He was out the door first.

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The Two Mikes

Mars had never experienced a mystery. Before Mike and Phyllis, it all was pretty obvious. Madeline had Sally drive her to police headquarters. She arrived at police headquarters, stunned, and went in, while Sally decided to remain discretely outside.

Mike? A murderer? He had many sides, some negative—but a murderer? Impossible! She thought she knew him! Yet they said there was evidence. And that he initially confessed, then withdrew his confession while still apparently acknowledging he had murdered Phyllis. *Evidence?* Her life had been difficult, now was worse, but this was a nightmare. A new nightmare. The rest was politics. This felt beyond personal.

The police called her after Mike was arrested and confessed, muddled though it was. Not only was she the Mayor, he was her aide. The Chief believed she should be informed. The ride to the police station was dominated by her fear and confusion, and a sense of profound betrayal.

She was escorted by a waiting officer at the front desk to the Chief's office, where took one long and suggested she sit. He briefed her on what he knew so far. During the talk Shallot and Madeline's father joined them. He repeated what he'd already told Madeline, then had the officer take them to a small viewing room with a one-way window facing an interrogation room.

Through the window they saw Mike, sitting nervous at a table, hands cuffed behind his back, two police officers sitting opposite him while a third stood behind. Mike's eyes darted to the window, back to the officers. Madeline's heart sank, looking at him. A few days ago, he exuded power. Now she saw a wreck.

He knew he was being watched, by guards in the room and through the glass by others, probably including his former boss and lover. He shivered, haggard. Confused, distraught. Exhausted.

An officer looked at the window, nodded, shrugged. Mike had said nothing new.

Madeline stifled a moan and leaned against a wall, looking at her former lover and aide under arrest, dripping guilt and confusion. She could not stay in this room, watching. She drew a deep breath, resumed her outer shell and walked out of the

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viewing room. She did not pause in the hallway, opening the door to the interrogation room. She strode inside, trying to harden herself, or at least prepare for this horrible situation. But there was no way to prepare. She closed the door behind her.

She looked at the officers. She wanted privacy, waving to the door. They stayed where they were. She did not ask them to leave.

“Mike?” she asked, quiet, standing across the table from him. He looked from the table to her. Despite herself, she stiffened. “Mike! What the hell? Talk to me.”

He wiped his forehead, sweating. “Sorry. So sorry. It’s nuts. I hope this hasn’t made it worse for you.”

“No, not at all,” she told him, trying to sound comforting. “Mike. Did you kill that woman? Phyllis? I knew her. She worked a hundred feet from our office.”

“Yes. No,” he said quietly, shaking his head. “I killed her but I didn’t. Not in real life. I never meant to kill her in real life.”

“What do you mean? I want to understand. To help you.” She pulled up a chair and sat opposite him, next to one of the officers. Struggling not to be stunned. Not to break down.

“Three months ago,” Mike told her, “Newman turned me onto ***Mars and Me***. I’d never played a computer game before except shooters. Never cared. Never time to waste, my work is everything. Was everything.

“***Mars and Me***. It was so real. Inspiring. I could do anything there. It was a game. Not real. I could do things I could never do here. With no consequences. It was only a game, what I did inside it would not matter. One night, after a really rough day with Council, in the game I went to Newman’s house. I strangled him. Killed him. His NPG. I had figured out how to override the safeguards. I could not use a weapon, but could kill with my hands. All it took was doing it, to kill the NPG.

“I enjoyed it.

“It was a rush. A release. And it was only in the game. Just pretend.”

Madeline sat listening, eyes narrowing, taking long deep breaths. The officers did

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not bother to take notes–everything was being recorded.

“The next day, Newman was there, as usual an ass. When I checked, his NPG was in the game, as if nothing had happened. The game regenerated him. His death was not a fact. His NPG did not remember me killing him. I had killed him, with no consequences. So, that night, I killed Newman’s NPG all over again.

“It was liberating.”

He wiped his forehead with his hand again. “Over the last weeks, in the game, I’ve killed each of the Councillors, Newman three times. Never Marjorie, I like her. Never you, of course. That would be too weird.”

She raised an eyebrow at what he considered weird.

“It was a…diversion. Harmless. I even killed NPGs I barely knew. Mostly, it was revenge. And, finally, satisfaction. A few days ago, Phyllis messed up one of my reports and was…snippy. Ugh. Then you fired me. Guess I was boiling over. So I entered the game and strangled her. It was no different than the other times, though I felt more charged up.

“Except this time, she was strangled in real life.

“I was in my apartment, playing the game. I didn’t know what to do. I saw them coming for me. They arrested me, brought me here and took tests. My DNA was on her neck. *My* DNA. But I was in my apartment. I did it but I didn’t. Killed her but in the game, not here.” He sighed.

“It was supposed to be harmless fun.”

By now he returned to staring at the table, unable to look at her. Madeline kept herself from shaking. No idea what to say to him. She started to lean forward to pat his shoulder, then pulled back. She did not want to touch him. This man had been inside her. Now she did not want to be in the same room.

Madeline pushed herself up, feeling weak. “This isn’t you, Mike. I promise we’ll sort this out. It has to be some kind of mistake.”

“Yeah sure.”

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She stumbled out of the room, hand on the walls for support as she went. Wishing she had brought her cane. Or Sally, to lean against.

One of the officers followed, looked at her, then stood in the open doorway. Outside, she leaned against a wall, face in her hands. When she took her hands away, she was dry-eyed. “Yes, officer. We had a relationship. And I let him go as an aide yesterday. Gave him a reassignment of his choosing. I dumped him.

“That stupid damn game has leaked into the real world. Murder in the game, evidence here. There’s something horribly wrong. You still investigating?” she asked him.

“Yes ma’am, we sure are,” the officer replied. “One team’s tracking his history in the game. And looking for evidence of other murders, at least in the game. There’s solid evidence he did it. DNA. Witnesses. Understand?”

“Completely. Thank you.” He nodded, pulled back into the room and shut the door. Alone in the hallway, she began to shake, then finally cried. For a moment. Cutting it back to presentable as quickly as she could manage. “Sweet mother of Jesus,” she muttered. “What was he thinking when we were together?”

She leaned against the wall, back to it. On hearing footsteps, she took a mirror from her purse and checked her face.

“I’m so sorry, hon,” her father said quietly.

“No one’s fault. Except his. Thanks, dad. Can’t say how awful this is.”

“Can we do anything, Nan?” Shallot asked quietly.

“Help me go home and get loaded,” Madeline replied, putting herself back together.

“Really?” Shallot asked.

“No. Call another emergency Council meeting. We may have to shut down that game. Quickly. Sally’s waiting outside.” She saw Sally entering the hallway, concerned. Madeline gathered her strength, straightened, moving away from the wall. “Thanks. Talk to you soon.” She gathered her strength and walked away, towards Sally.

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“The cops called and told me,” Sally said, taking her arm.

“Jeez Louise.”

“Nan?”

Madeline did not look back but held up her hand and waved, then turned a corner and was gone, holding onto Sally.

Shallot looked at her great grandfather. “I’m heading home,” he told her. “Check the game, talk with my NPG. Build new safeguards into the game, reassure the colony. Before the game is shut down. Sorry, you’ll have to get a lift.” He hugged her and left.

Shallot stood alone in the hallway of police headquarters.

Officers walked by, glanced at her i.d. visitor’s badge and continued walking. They all had places to go, achievements to accomplish. What was she doing? She felt drained but not empty. She slowly walked from the station, out into the colony. Much to think about, and the crowded police station was hardly the best place, for example: had someone murdered *her* in the game?

No—NPG Shallot would have told her, yes? But no—the NPGs had not realized any NPGs had been murdered until Phyllis. She was aware NPGs expired when their players died. What if the player was still alive? But she pushed those thoughts away. She had to warn her NPG about the imminent danger to the game.

She sat on the nearest bench, took her notebook from her backpack and entered the game. She updated NPG Shallot, who was shocked.

Late last night we figured out several of us were murdered but were regenerated. We’re researching the NPGs who had no memory for a day. Creepy. Stick with it, stay in touch. Talk with your besties, see what you can do on your end. NPG Shallot signed off, needing to inform the other NPGs the Mayor may shut down the game, starting by contacting Madeline’s NPG.

Shallot no longer felt alone or drained. What had she been thinking? She was no emo! She phoned Aaliyah, told her there was an emergency and they should meet with Farha immediately. Farha texted to meet her at the farm, where she now worked. Half an hour later, they sat together in Farha’s office, Aaliyah on an

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extended lunch break after telling Marstan she was meeting with Shallot. Time off for that was no problem.

Shallot closed the door and told them about Mike and the murders and the threat to the game. “I thought things would get simpler,” Shallot told them. “Solutions would pop out. Though Nan is going to have dirt brought up from the underground caves, just like game.”

“Fresh soil and nutrients,” Farha said. “One solution.”

“Now the game itself is a problem. If the murder issue is not resolved quickly, they’ll want to shut it down. And we don’t want more murders in the colony, either. So I have an idea for a temporary fix.”

“And?” Aaliyah asked.

“We need to misdirect the police, the colony, about the murder. I can’t believe I’m saying this, but can either of you hack into security cameras? Create videos from them?”

“Of course,” Farha replied, intrigued. “We both can.”

Hacking accomplished, they zeroed in on Mike’s apartment and street, then went back to the time of the murder. Mike was not in his apartment. From stored digital footage, they recorded him when he was at home earlier, playing the game. Then they pasted that footage into the time frame of the murder, ‘proof’ he was somewhere other than the crime scene. They saved and left. When the police looked, which hopefully was not carefully, they would find evidence the real Mike was in his apartment.

“The cops have his DNA on her neck,” Alyssia said. “This won’t fool them long.”

“Long enough,” Shallot replied. “We need a day.”

“Maybe he did it,” Aaliyah said. “But that makes no sense. How could he do it when the killing in the game was only seconds earlier? If he wasn’t in his apartment playing, who was?”

“Okay,” Shallot said. “Agreed there’s a suspect, somewhere. I suggest we meet with our friends. In person. The ones we trust to work with us. Team up.”

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Aaliyah and Farha nodded. “Tonight,” Farah said.

“Couple of hours from now,” Aaliyah added.

“Agreed. Maybe I should tell mom and dad,” Shallot said. “Maybe we should each tell our parents.”

“Are you kidding?” they replied. “Let’s stick to people who know us.”

21

Shallot and Friends (Some of Them)

It was hardly a party.

In only a few days, everyone’s life had changed. Now everyone lived on a slippery slope, slowly sliding into darkness.

Not all of her invites showed. More than a few did not want to be around Shallot–rumours had spread she was involved in stirring the colony up and that the police were investigating her. Similar concerns hounded Farah and Aaliyah. The six who arrived were glum. They all now sat in Shallot’s bedroom, nervous. Shallot knew she would have to energize them.

Her mom and dad were at the Marsball final. So were many of the other parents, the rest watching it at home on TV. Power and water had returned–but limited. That was not reassuring—everyone now waited for tomorrow’s disruption. They refilled water bottles, bathtubs.

The young women sitting around Shallot’s bedroom had all grown up together, most from day care on up. The initial chatter was no longer about sex or clothing or food. It was about feeling nervous. About whether one of them might be murdered next. Some sipped synthol, some popped a Fizz. Shallot, Farha and Aalliyah held bottles of water.

Shallot told them about what had been learned, the concerns about the game and the murders, about the emergencies, the threat to the game and the colony. “We’ve never had to meet like this. Had a meeting like this. Actually, ever had a meeting. We’re here to find a way out.”

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One of her friends said, “I’m not sure I ever fit in, here or anywhere else. I’ve spent years faking it. Now, it’s like I have to face up to whatever I really am. And I don’t know who I am.”

Murmurs around the bedroom.

“Speak for yourself,” another said. “It’s growth crap. Everyone goes through feeling alone. Give it up, we’re sixteen. Adults. We can handle whatever they throw at us.”

“We all wear the same damn clothes and make-up,” another chimed in. “It’s all so fake.”

More murmurs.

Shallot saw several pop more Fizz. Others drank more synthol. She wondered what they had ever talked about. Stupid talk. But didn’t stupid talk always have an undercurrent of the truth? “Can we start with the murder?” she asked them. “And what we can do, to ensure we’re safe?”

They were all long-time gamers and their NPGs kept them informed. They’d already discovered some of what Shallot told them. Some said they’d heard new evidence on TV affirming his alibi, video of him in his apartment when the real life murdered occurred. Most of them wondered whether other players killed in the game like Mike did. Whether the killings would spread to real life. *Creepy*.

Shallot used the murders to animate the group. They were all involved, it was an immediate threat. Shallot suggested they become a team and create lists of colonists—men—they suspected of secretly being capable of murder—in the game, perhaps in the colony. They would work in teams, doubling up, investigating separately and then comparing results. The meeting ended with the young women sharing hugs and most leaving, now having goals. That left Shallot, Aaliyah and Farah.

She looked at them. “That worked out better than I’d hoped. But they’re all so unhappy. Were we always pretending?”

“Sure,” Aaliyah told her. “Weren’t you? Weren’t we supposed to all be pretty and friendly?”

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“It’s a start,” Farah said. “We’re growing up.”

‘Yeah, I guess.” Why did she still feel no farther than the bottom? “Sorry guys. Maybe I should’ve popped a Fizz,” she finally said.

“We’re on the same page,” Farha said to her. “Though I’m not sure what page it is.”

“Not sure which book,” Aaliyah added.

“What about our parents?” Shallot asked. “How’re yours? Mom and dad are already fighting.”

“Mine too,” Aaliyah told them. “But it’s different. They both work at Water. They argue about how to get more resources, to stop the leaks. For them all, it’s immediate. There are safety issues, too. Mom and dad wonder about the dirt but as long as the diggers stay out of the way, fine. They’re focussed on getting entire sections of pipe replaced. Getting safer suits for the workers. They think everything starts with water. Can’t say I disagree.”

“Mine are fine,” Farha said. “Dad’s really worried about our food. He gave me time to work with the NPGs, that’s where bringing up soil from underground came from. That may help. Mom works admin at the Farm, she’s getting it organized.

“No one understands the Martian plants and mutant animals. They’re creepy. The animals seem to barely notice you. The eyes on the plants, they follow you. They never blink.”

They all shivered.

“Nan and granddad mean the most to me,” Shallot told them. “But Mom and dad are my family, y’know? I live with them. They argue a lot and it’s getting worse. They’re near the edge. If they break up, I don’t know what life would be like. I know what living with them is like, even when they’re upset with themselves or me. I don’t want to find out what living alone is like.”

“Won’t happen,” Aaliyah reassured her. “They’ll weather it.”

They sat together on the bed until just before Shallot’s parents were due home. Then Aaliyah and Farha left, giving Shallot a hug, none of them reassured about

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anything important in their lives. Shallot thought she put on a good show. She felt more at home in the game. The NPGs had the personalities of their counterparts but were changing, acting with more overall purpose. Change in the game was more rapid.

She checked in the game. Her NPG parents were almost home, travelling separately. Both looked tense. Just like her real parents, probably.

She turned off the notebook and waited. She soon heard the front door open. Should she go downstairs and see them? Or tell them she felt sick, and stay in her room? But what was happening with them? She had to at least go downstairs and see how they were. She yearned for dinners to return to boring.

She changed her clothing, to feel different, put her notebook in her backpack and went downstairs. Her mom and dad were in the kitchen, working on dinner, looking at the cooking, not themselves. She wanted to say something, could not think of anything. They had not seen her so she quietly walked out. She decided she couldn't handle more. She knew enough about how they were doing, from a glance into the kitchen.

She looked at the police yellow tape covering the front door of the woman two blocks down, who had been strangled. Soon enough, they would discover the video of Mike in his apartment had been altered. Maybe they were hunting now for who altered them. She remembered Phyllis, from visits to her Nan at City Hall. She remembered the face, the occasional wave. They rarely spoke, if they did it was about nothing.

Phyllis meant as much to her as a random NPG.

She walked down the street, looking at the houses, up at the discoloured dome. She felt twitchy. The only way to stop twitchy is to do something. Hadn't she already done something? She was most worried now about her family. What could she do?

Mars and Me.

She left the sidewalk, walking into a small park, today no one played. She sat on an available bench, opened her notebook and entered the game. She had friends in the game who understood as much as Farha and Aaliyah. As real as the friends she

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had in the colony.

She checked first with Aaliyah's NPG. She was working hard, avoiding her NPG parents, doing research on how the murder became real. They chatted a bit. NPG Farha was back on the farm, talking with Shallot as she watered the Martian plants, avoiding the eyes. New dirt had already arrived and was being plowed in. She hoped it would help the crops. That done, she went for the reason she entered the game. She found her mother's NPG. NPG mom was tons easier to talk with. At work, NPG mom was very upset, with her husband and with Shallot, worried the colony was falling apart, that she would somehow lose her pension. She did ask if Shallot had finally had sex. Still mom.

Shallot hesitated to contact her dad's NPG. He kept saying he loved her, as dad did, but he never acted like it. She found Antonio at work at the Smelter, in human resources. He looked at her. She at him.

I'm busy, he told her. *Love you. What is it?*

She asked about the smelter. *They're all upset*. She asked how he was. *I'm trying to work. Sorry, onion*.

She gave up on dad, searched for *her* NPG, found it searching for her.

NPG Shallot told her that her parents were tense. It was uncomfortable at home but at least they'd stopped arguing. She had idea why. They thought of themselves as extensions of the players. Now players were eliminating them. The NPGs still felt betrayed.

Shallot tried to reassure her counterpart. She did not get far. *Maybe it's Mars*, she finally typed.

No, it's one of you. The Martian plants communicate with each other telepathically. We have Martian organisms in our bodies. Maybe there are infected colonists who developed such power. Or something. We think mind control is behind this, maybe.

Okay, I'll think about that. We are still trying to figure the organisms out. Meanwhile, we need comprehensive blocks against any *violence in the game. I've asked my great granddad; he said your great grand dad is working with him. Also, not just violence. But to wall the game off more from what happens in the colony.*

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To make us independent.

Working on it, pal. Shallot left the game. A mom and dad were now in the play area, with a toddler. The toddler was having an enjoyable time, on the swing, pushed by his mom. She texted great grand dad about NPG Shallot. In a moment he texted back *Working on it.*

She rubbed her neck. Organisms. In her, inert. So far. She thought of George, wanted to contact him but the Clinic would not allow it. She needed to talk with him. She began to shake and had to grip the bench. Was George even still alive? Were his last memories of her turning him down, calling the Clinic on him?

She sat on the bench, holding herself, rocking back and forth, thinking of him. She re-entered the game and looked for him. No avatar. His NPG sat in a small room, sitting on a bed. With a woman his age beside him. She texted but received no response.

22

Evening's No Better Than A Lousy Morning

Should we tell them?

Not if they won't tell us *anything.* George looked at Katie, then returned to glaring at the door, the windowless walls.

It's weird, hearing you in my head. She frowned. *This morning when you said Hello and hadn't said anything at all. What does it mean?*

It's Mars, he replied. *It's Mars inside us.*

Yeah but what on earth does it mean?

They both laughed. Out loud. It was the first sound they had made in the room for a while.

They had spent yesterday and all of today together, together since they'd met. They found no other patients, the medical personnel refused to talk about anything meaningful, and to avoid questions left them alone. Water and normal power had partially returned, so the medical staff rushed even more as the Clinic was restored

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to a relative normal. There were not that many staff in the Clinic to begin with—there were usually only a handful of patients at a time. George and Katie had all the time to themselves they wanted, and they wanted. Talking, thinking, growing. Sharing a bond. And then, this morning, sharing thoughts.

We can speak to each other but no one else. What does that mean?

Maybe our range is limited. Maybe we can be telepathic only with other infected people. People who have as much Mars in them as us. I feel two of something inside me, growing.

Yes, I also feel two. We gain their telepathic power as they grow. Doesn't feel creepy.

Feels empowering.

They sat on the bed, near each other, not touching. They felt no need to touch. Not when they were nonphysical.

We should tell somebody about this, George thought to her*. Our friends. I want to see Shallot. I'm sure she want to see me.*

The Clinic won't let anyone near us.

What about the game? We've hardly bothered with it for a couple of days. I can't email Shallot, maybe I can text her through the game. They both had their notebooks on the bed. They powered up. Katie was in the game in seconds. Searching, she found her NPG.

Hey! Guess what? I'm telepathic! So is George!

Katie NPG replied. *Us too! Since yesterday! It should be creepy but isn't!*

Her NPG was excited. They began sharing experiences, ideas how to use their new power. While Katie chatted, George finished entering the game and sought Shallot's NPG.

Hey there, health jail boy.

He told her he was okay. That he had a new power. To tell Shallot. That he needed

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to see her. NPG Shallot told him what real Shallot was doing. And that they both worried about him, that Shallot really wanted to see him also. They both had thought he might even be dead by now. They'd heard nothing. She wrote she'd inform the real Shallot, told him of the two murders, and signed off so he could text Shallot herself through the game.

George texted Shallot directly.

I am alive and okay. I worry about you. I have no idea what's going on outside. But don't worry about me. I'm good. Lumps don't move any more. But I and another patient here, we both have two somethings growing inside us. We've developed powers. Have to see you. Want to see you. Come here. We can influence the staff, get you in.

We know about the murders. If there's a conspiracy involving a colonist, we think could be a target. Because perhaps the colonist has these powers, and wants them for himself.

Mike sat in a cell, a police guard watching him through the solid glass. The single bed he sat on was thin, as was the pillow he held on his lap. "I hear a voice. In my head," he told the officer. "Telling me I did it. My DNA is on her neck. But I only killed her in the game. I remember sitting there, doing it. Sitting in my living room. Not on the street, my hands on her!"

The officer nodded. "There's video evidence showing you at home. It was faked, put in after the fact. Someone trying to help you? Any idea who?" Mike shook his head. The officer continued, "You've seen the actual surveillance footage. You put down the notebook, stand, leave the room, leave your apartment. Street cams show you walking across the street and knocking on her door. When she answers, you kill her. It's recorded."

"I heard a voice. Telling me I could kill in the game. That's when I started. Couple of months ago. The voice. Sometimes, it tells me who in the game to kill. It's hard to remember but it told me to kill Phyllis, I think.

"Uh huh." The officer nodded again. "Whose voice?"

"It's muffled. Very familiar. I'm trying to identify it, God I'm trying. It doesn't want me to identify it."

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“Someone you know?”

“Yeah, a man. Oh God I need help!” He looked at the guard through the glass. “Do you believe me?

“Do I think you’re nuts?” The guard returned Mike’s look. “No. Doesn’t feel like it. Maybe the voice is real. We *are* on Mars. Nothing here’s a surprise.” He smiled. “We’re following down every lead, *that* I can tell you. If there’s a bigger picture here, we’ll find it. Our eyes are open. Opened. Most of us think you killed her but aren’t responsible.”

“What does that mean?”

“There’s a lot of talk about telepathy. Because of the Martian plants. Maybe you’ve been…influenced?”

“By the plants?”

Newman finished the rest of the glass of smooth expensive simulhol, leaning back in the plush chair in his living room. He enjoyed the heat slipping down his throat and warming his stomach. Smiling, feet stuck out, shoes and socks off. More comfortable. His feet looked a little thicker, felt full, as if they were full of…roots.

His feet stank. He should have a shower. He had people to meet. Though looking good, smelling good, just for others—was that not weakness? No. It was not weak to be admired, to want to be admired, as he deserved.

It had been a long day at the Smelter. By now he’d met all of them. In the Smelter and the other working areas. Colonists were angry, worried, complaining about being victimized and ignored—a perfect base for making Mars great again. He’d focussed on the Smelter, starting with Antonio. The Smelter produced iron, plastics, almost everything the colony used and needed except food. Its feet were in everyone’s life and as smelly as his.

He wiggled his toes, and he saw, idly, his crotch. He refilled his glass, then returned to his crotch. Newman missed playing ***Mars and Me*** daily. Whenever he had time, was especially angry, he found release in killing the NPGs of colonists he hated.

He hated most of them. Or at best they were inferior. Lacked vision. The colony would only survive if it was strong, unified. Under clear leadership. As only he could

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provide.

But he had little time to play these days. Mike was–he smiled–overkill. Turning him into a murderer who'd be found out was luscious revenge against Madeline, especially at the start of the election campaign—the Mayor's aide, a murderer. Mike himself had little to do with anything, except Newman found him obnoxious. Choosing Mike was all about her, about the woman challenging him.

Mike took a lot of effort but it built to an exciting climax. Newman replayed the video of the murder, in real life and in the game, many times. Dangerous to kill in the colony, yes, but worth the gamble. His position was perfect. He had key colonists in hand and almost all the Council. All he had to do was sort out the problems inevitably created.

But it demonstrated he could enter a mind and influence it to do something profoundly abnormal. More completely than he had to date. To an extreme. That day, he entered the game and strangled NPG Phyllis. Then he entered Mike's mind, and while Mike thought he was playing the game, in a daze, he was strangling the real Phyllis. Then blankly walked back to his apartment, sat back down and continued with the game–as if it had all been in the game.

She must be sweating blood.

Originally, it was to undercut her campaign. Now there was no election. Mike was still useful but not in the same way. Plans change.

He developed purple boils on his back six months ago but told no one, not even his aide. No way he would let anyone know and be forced into the Clinic. The Clinic was a termination point. No one yet had entered and left. If he was going to wither away, Newman decided, he would wither in private. No one should see him diminished. So he took two weeks off Council, telling Jim, his aide, he was exhausted. That it was a forced vacation, he would just stay at home, be available by phone and email.

They all told him, including Jim, take as much time away as you want.

Bastards.

He'd show them, show them all. Because he never withered. The moving lumps disappeared, perhaps dissolving inside him, he had no idea. He felt something, no

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discomfort. The lumps were absorbing themselves into him. The purple boils on his back were absorbed into his body in a few days. After a few more, he felt stronger, not weaker.

He returned to Council stronger, bolder. Soon he was aware something was very different. Aware he had a power. He could tune into minds near him, hear what anyone close to him thought. Better, he could manipulate their thinking. It took experimentation, enjoyable experimentation. Starting with Jim. Then several Councillors, the most susceptible. Over the past couple of months. Now almost all the Councillors and a handful of key colonists were unquestioningly loyal, to him, and what do what he wanted.

They now served him. He had to meet each once a week, to re-energize them, but now his followers were stable. Everything was right, as planned.

The minds of Madeline and Majorie were stronger somehow, so he avoided them. But after those close to him in City Hall, he began visiting the Smelter, other worker groups. He searched but never found anyone he could telepathically communicate with, no companion mind. But he did find minds to influence, to mold to his needs. And it was far better if his powers were unique. Except for the plants. Instinctively he knew to avoid them.

Working for his future was a strain. ***Mars and Me*** had been a great release. After realizing the NPGs regenerated if they died but their colonist players remained alive, and he could kill them without consequence, he enjoyed finding NGPs of colonists he despised and strangling them. The game did not allow weapons, he found no way around that, but it did not matter.

He enjoyed using his hands.

Now he sat in his apartment. The time had arrived. Months of preparation ensured he was set to act. To force the changes Mars needed. Only *he* should have the power.

Mars was failing but he would make it great again.

He got up, went to the washroom and had a shower, taking extra care washing his feet.

Then he went to sleep after jerking off, ending a long day, looking forward to

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tomorrow. They would be onto him soon enough, but by then it would be way too late.

23

Will I Enjoy Today?

The next day began by the clock–not the Martian sunrise, the sun dull and distant, but from alarm clocks at each colonist's bedside. Outside, around the dome, another sandstorm was kicking up. The deep cold was unforgiving. The solar radiation worse. More cracks were developing in the old dome. The air more polluted, noticeably smoggy. An unpleasant morning to wake into, even under the dome.

Shallot woke, rubbed her eyes, not feeling at all refreshed. What would today bring? Off the top, she heard her parents moving in their bedroom. Should she have breakfast with them? Would that be spying on them/them on her or just eating? Everything, even relationships, was now more work than ever. Becoming transactional. Work with no idea if success was at the end of the road. Her life had become work without pay except the bettering of her life.

Blah blah blah. She was unable to just lie in bed or lie to herself. She pushed herself out of bed. Whatever today led to, she would meet it head on.

Shallot's great grandfather woke slowly, feeling stiff. He pushed himself off the bed, then stood, not moving, shaky until he felt stronger. He looked out the window, wondering what the day would bring. Much to do. He'd been up half the night.

He'd had insights last night, talking with the NPGs and the current computer expert supervising the game, about its possible connection to the real Mars. No one thought it had one. He worked with them to create new programming in the game to completely prevent violence of any kind, by any means, including reflecting real life. Who was creating the violence in the game? That was their big question. The violence in the game and in the colony had to be connected. And the sole connection any of them could think of was a colonist.

He went to make tea and toast. There was a lot to do. Too much, because he had let it go too far.

The first of the new iron pulleys was in place in Dan and Warren's sector. They

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stood on the steps on the pully, Dan pushed the button and they rode up to the top of the dome. They looked at each other, uncertain. More power had been restored, the ride up was faster than the last time. Going faster to uncertainty.

They reached the top. It was still. Felt maybe okay. Dan reached out and grabbed one of the new iron pulleys. He tugged. It felt firm. Looking at Warren, he attached his suit hooks to the new pulley, grabbed it with both hands, and stepped off. He swung back and forth, looking at his partner.

“Better than ever?” Warren asked.

“Yeah.” Dan pulled himself to the dome’s surface, attaching two suit hooks into it. “Feels solid. But look at that crack. We need more sealant.”

“Good luck. You know the Smelter says they can’t produce more. Run out of two key ingredients. They’re trying to figure it out. Say we have to wait.”

“The dome won’t wait.”

Wendy and Peter stood by an elevator, waiting to ride down to the underground, moving inside their improved protective suits, pulling at the sleeves, adjusting the gloves. They had to wait for the elevator. A load of dirt was being taken up. The doors opened and, as Wendy and Peter stood to one side, other workers used a small construction vehicle to scoop the dirt out of the elevator and into a waiting dump truck.

As they watched, they grew more nervous than ever. They worried about the water holding. Too many patches. Another burst pipe felt inevitable. They held hands as they stepped into the dirty elevator. It was a long ride down. They did not speak this morning of making babies. But they hugged before starting towards today’s pipe. It was very weak, had to be repaired in the next few hours. They looked at the other underground workers, who looked back. For a long moment, the workers silently looked at each other. Then the moment was over and they all returned to work. Most wished they were somewhere else, but the colony depended on them. Water was still only about two-thirds of normal pressure, enough to barely keep the steam plant producing power.

At least the colony was warm. At least they still had food.

In the Clinic breakfast was doubtless nutritious but definitely boring, less designed

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to wake up them up than encourage them to return to bed. After finishing, eating in her room, George and Katie experimented with entering the minds of the staff. Influencing. They started with better food. George came up with the idea and took the lead. It was a simple goal, easy to know if it succeeded. And it worked. At noon they were served a more elaborate lunch than usual that actually tasted good. Staff smiled at them more, stopping by to chat rather than rushing off. They learned nothing new but their environment certainly had improved.

What next? Free themselves? To go where? To do what?

After lunch, they sat on the bed in his room, entered the game and informed their NPG friends and select player avatars about their new power. Asking it be kept secret. Top secret. Because they were totally uncertain where it would go. Could they change the colony for the better–or for the worse? Tampering always had ripple effects.

Could they change anything important? Would it stick?

More important, was telepathy only the end or only the beginning of changes within them? Would they mutate? Turn into crawling gooey gobs of Martian flesh? Their future remained uncertain than ever. But at least they had some control. What happened next depended on them, not adults telling them what to do or think.

This is a trap. I need to get out of here, Katie thought to him.

Ditto. But there are a lot of staff between us and the door. Getting better food was easy. Walking out will take time. I have to do each of them. It would be better if you helped.

I don't like doing that to someone. It doesn't feel right.

We are prisoners. Remember, Katie.

Farha, from her office on the Farm, strategized with NPGs while her father Cary and other farmers laboured over newly plowed fields enriched with fresh soil from the lava tubes. They had to ensure the delicate plants already growing had not been disturbed. Water was back on, but not quite enough. For a while it had not been quite enough.

Earlier that morning the police came to her office and questioned her, asking about

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altering the video. They had traced it to her notebook. Feeling trapped, but prepared for them, she answered the questions honestly, telling them she was trying to protect the game. They told her they might arrest her. After they left, she entered the game and told her NPG what had happened. The same had just happened, an hour ago, to the NPG. They both worried the game would be shut down, then the colony. For her NPG, that meant oblivion.

Aaliyah was also questioned by the police, at Marsball. The visit shook her. She never thought the police would find out so quickly. Her story to them was honest, matching Farah's. They questioned her, threatened to arrest her eventually, then left. She was shaken. For Aaliyah, the police presence was too much. She could not be calm, like Farah or even Shallot. She was barely holding on, worrying when she would be arrested. She shut off the game and tried to concentrate on work, know her supervisor was watching her.

Marjorie prepared for the morning's emergency Council meeting by having breakfast with her aide, finishing knitting booties while discussing the latest estimates on building an escape ship with existing resources. They both worried that between the water and power outages and other disruptions, planning building escape crafts had faded to wishful thinking. When she entered her office at City Hall, her aide asked why they were bothering. "Because there's always a chance," Marjorie replied. "And because we cannot simply sit and wait for Council, or Newman."

"What does that jerk off have planned?"

"Now now now, we don't have to call names."

Newman prepared for the morning's Council meeting naked, looking at himself standing in front of a full-length bedroom mirror, jerking off. He liked watching the splatter on the mirror. All of his work was paying off, despite the danger to himself he had created. All the obstacles had been overcome, for today. Today would be the start to new life on Mars–new life for himself. The colonists would accept his leadership. He would make himself great, as he deserved. And would make Mars great along with him.

First, he needed a shower, to wash himself clean.

Madeline and Sally woke in each other's arms, naked. They woke slowly, enjoyably,

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cuddling, snuggling. A long kiss. “You have a lot today,” Sally said, nuzzling. Madeline enjoyed the cuddle, the warmth, the soft flesh against soft flesh. Her older flesh with younger. He knew Mike secretly was contemptuous of how her body had sagged. Not Sally. It was the inner Madeline Sally saw.

Warren looked at Dan. “No more sealant, than what?”

“Pulley seems okay,” Dan said.

“We got the first one.”

“We were the ones with the broken rope,” Dan reminded him. “Sandstorm’s kicking up again.”

“Yeah.” Warren looked at him. “The dome’s not going to make it, is it? The basic substance has been corroding for decades. Needs more than patches. Needs a complete overhaul.”

Beneath them, underground had been a large open cavern with a lake of frozen ice, large pipes with heating elements running into the frozen surface. All that was still there, but now large sections were occupied by bulldozers and workers (in less protective, improvised suits) digging up Martian soil and loading it into large crates. The cavern was far better lit but noisier, full of rubble and machinery. Everyone had to be far more careful than usual. Wendy and Peter worried that a construction vehicle would run into a pipe. Large moving machinery around the delicate pipes was a bad idea.

As they stepped off the elevator, they saw workers finishing a large patch on a damaged pipe. They waved to each other, then Wendy and Peter headed for their assigned area. “That was nice, this morning,” Wendy told him.

“Too bad we have to come down here.”

“Think we made a baby yet?” she asked.

“I’m trying to use that telepathy everyone talks about, to find out.”

They shared a laugh as they reached the pipe. They had a large repair to weld into place before the aging pipe burst. They began reluctantly, uncertain there were patches big enough to fix the pipe. Their only choice was to keep working hard, and

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hope.

Shallot, working hard on her home life, decided to eat breakfast with her parents. And hope it went well. By now that was a big deal. She had no idea what to expect. It took a while for her to even decide, much less put on clothing and go down there. But she did, determined. She could make things better!

They looked at her and said hello. In the kitchen it was very quiet. The clatter of plates. She sat at the table with them, mom having put the full places on the table. She tried a smile. Nowhere.

Only pass the salt talk.

They had trouble looking at her, she at them. When the plates were clear, in the sink, they finally looked at her. “The police were here this morning,” her mom said to her, tense.

“Yes,” Shallot said. “They interviewed me, in my bedroom. It was about someone interfering with the game, and the murder.”

“They say in Administration you’re up to something,” her mom, now Miranda, told her, tense, voice firm.

“Same at the Smelter,” her father added. “Something about that game. There are rumours you and your friends doctored evidence about Nan’s aide. The police asked me about you, after they interviewed you upstairs. I told them my daughter has kept us in the dark.”

“Me too,” Miranda told her. “We’re your parents. Tell us now. What have you been up to?”

She put down her spoon and burst, abruptly telling them everything. The words flowed. The dam burst. She was unable to stop. She had felt so guilty, lying to them.

They listened, sipping coffee, quiet.

When she finished, they murmured thanks, deep in thought. “Wish you’d told us first,” her father said. Mom said nothing. Then they left, for work. “I’ll tell people you were trying to fix the game,” her mom said as they left.

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Shallot washed the dishes, got her backpack and stepped out onto the street, uncertain where to go except out.

Aaliyah and Farha were at work, at Marsball and the Farm. She had other friends—didn't she? A week ago she did.

She had read texts in the group chat about searching for bad guys, but no one texted her directly, asked how she was doing. Shallot understood. Everyone was scattered. And most of her friends had *always* been jealous of her privilege, of her family, something she was born into, never earned. Some were friends to get closer to privilege and power. It was silly. Just because her grandmother was Mayor, her great grandfather a colony leader. Her mom and dad powerful in their work areas.

She glided through life so far. Slid along the knife edge of the slope, trying to avoid the downsides. She saw her past more clearly. It was not pleasant. She shivered, although it was warm.

She saw two workers, at the top of the dome, working on cracks. Outside the dome, a fierce sandstorm had begun, creating a constant loud thumping against the dome. Under her feet, she felt rumbling from the digging. Thumping above, rumbling below.

She started to walk. To nowhere, just walk. It felt good. Like…movement.

Enough. She phoned Pam, a semi-bestie. Turned out, Pam felt as undermined as Shallot. She did not know who to call or what to do either. Her parents were fighting and she did not like her new entry level position at the Smelter. She apologized for not phoning but said she had not phoned *anyone*. Some of the other friends said the same, others put her off. Everyone was…discombobulated.

Well, at least it ain't just me, Shallot thought.

While listening, Shallot found a large bench in a nearby small park. She told Pam where she was, invited her to come over. "I need to be around someone real," Shallot told her. Someone I know who won't argue, who'll understand."

While waiting, she phoned other semi-besties. The message from all was similar. Several agreed to join her on the bench, relieved to just see each other, rather than problem solve.

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Pam arrived first, followed by Marge. Then Cara. When Fran arrived, they moved to the coffee shop.

The usually crowded shop was almost empty, although power and water had been restored to almost normal levels. They purchased tea and muffins and sat at the table farthest from the windows.

“Some of us were born into privileged families, some not,” Shallot said to them, sipping tea, “but we all feel screwed. I feel like my job every day is shovelling crap.”

“Yeah,” Cara said. Nodding. Muffin untouched.

“Your grandmother and great grandad know anything?” Pam asked.

“He’s working to fix the game so murders can’t happen there. The crossover, no one knows. Nan’s on it but no one knows. The thinking is, it isn’t the game, it’s a player. A colonist.”

“Do we know *anything*?” Pam asked again.

“If you haven’t been in the game this morning,” Marge told them, “George and Katie, something’s going on with them. Telepathic powers. Probably from the Martians inside them. They’re trying to fix it so they can have visitors. George wants Shallot to contact him.”

“Mind powers. It’s cool *and* scary,” Cara added. “It isn’t a big leap to think there are other colonists with powers. Building power by controlling minds. One by one. There’s probably a list. Of victims. One day, we’re next.”

Shallot sipped her tea. “Maybe someone older, the Martian organisms infecting him over time, and him able to hide it. Or her.” Shivers. “Could be a lot of people we know. I know a Councillor like that. Self-involved to the max. He’d love having that kind of power.”

“Newman?” Cara asked. Shallot nodded. “Yeah, he’s a creep. But it could be any of our parents,” Cara added. “People keep dark secrets. I find it hard to think about.”

“We’re caught up with the game and murder,” Shallot reminded them, “but that

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isn’t our major problem. For out futures. This is about the climate we live in, the compromises we make, how we’re paying for them. It isn’t fair, we didn’t do anything, we just were born here.”

Pam looked at her. “What else is new? That all you got?”

“She’s got enough,” Cara said. “We have to act about our whole environment, how we approach it. We live in it. Besides, we’re sixteen. We’re not kids anymore. We have to be responsible.”

“I thought we were just going go talk,” Shallot said. “About nothing much.”

They finished their tea and muffins, each talking about what they would do next. Identifying potential murderers among the colonists had gone nowhere. They were not sure what to do next except take one step after another. After the meeting broke up, Shallot phoned Aaliyah and Farha to update them. She walked out energized. She had done *something*. Meeting with people off line was good. Even better, talking honestly was *something*. She looked up at the dome workers, feeling confident.

“This crack is getting worse,” Dan said. “And we’ve run out.”

“I’ve called for more sealant.”

“We need two more Domers.”

“Yeah,” Warren said. “Sandstorm ain’t helping. I’ll call down.”

“And more air. Even with two more Domers, if we get them, it’ll take five hours.”

“Pulleys here won’t support more than four of us.” Warren told him. “And have you looked at the hooks?”

Above them were four heavy duty “hooks,” spaced regularly along the top of the dome and sides, to support repair workers. Hooks below the dome, joined to large black junction boxes. The boxes quietly hummed, containing motors to adjust pulleys or ropes. Dan pointed to what held the boxes on the inside of the dome: thick, two foot wide bolts in holes drilled through the dome. On the outside, the ends of the bolts flared out six feet square, holding the bolts in place, supporting the heavy weight of the boxes and chains. And of the workers using them.

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Dan followed Warren's finger and saw corrosion on the outside of the hole, and that the ends of the bolts had visibly eroded. "Crap."

Shallot wondered what they were talking about, looking up. The colony had to be getting better. If it did not improve, it was back to that awful doom spiral. She wished she could visit George.

She felt rumbling under her feet.

Wendy was grumbling as she felt the digging vibrations through her suit. "I guess."

Peter glanced up as he finished welding a new iron compound section onto a main water pipe. "You guess? You guess we should marry?"

She used a smaller torch to finish the weld. "I love you. These days, I vacillate, ok?"

"You don't have to have faith in the colony. Just in us." He watched her complete the weld. "I have faith in *you*."

"You're sweet. We'll need to recruit more water workers to keep the pipes from falling apart again." She leaned forward so their clear faceplates touched.

"No children, no future," he said. "We should think of ourselves, what we want. There's the big picture. Then there's our picture."

"Just go for it and see what happens?"

All over the colony, people were unsettled. The NPGs matched them. No longer was anything taken for granted. They had taken power and water and reasonable air for granted. Now the basic fundamentals could stop at any time. And unlike before, everyone knew it.

Everyone was either energized, trying to figure out what to do, most directing their energy into the new workers' organizations. Or they worked but felt stunned, stunted, going though motions. The NPGs urged their players to think about moving underground, creating a crude city away from the solar radiation and sandstorms. Channel resources where we will need them in a year, the NPGs urged.

But their players responded nervously. Go underground? That would be moving.

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Above ground, they knew what they had. Below ground, what else might go wrong? While they lived in elaborate caves? The NPGs had not considered those issues. To them, belongings were meaningless, artifacts of their players. Everyone felt the situation was building to a climax. A huge crack in the dome, air and warmth escaping.

The average person felt tiny.

Shallot felt the rumbling, saw the dome workers. Adjusting her backpack, she walked down the street, deciding where to go next, what to do. She could phone Nan, ask how the morning's Council meeting had gone. But perhaps she should stay away from using Nan in any way that was…privileged.

She'd call Nan later. She was her own self. She refused to feel small. It was not in her.

She had to think big.

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