24

Power Play

Before and during the last chapter, there was the early morning emergency Council meeting–the follow up to yesterday's meeting; for the Councillors it led nowhere, for Newman it led to the final set-up before achieving power. Newman felt huge that morning. Powerful. A guiding light. He saw clear wonderful daylight through the dome. Today, the world would be his. Mars would be his. At least until he could escape this forsaken planet. Today, his plans would climax and, so to speak, would he.

He stood outside the boardroom, watching the other Councillors file in, tapping into minds, checking his hold on them. Through the open doorway he saw Madeline already in her chair. No one used the word "Mayor" these days. She accepted her coordinating meetings. Treading water. Martian water.

He smiled, standing in the foyer, his aide by his side. Madeline must know she was on a slippery slope. About to slip slide to the bottom. Revenge would be sweet. He never tried to influence her. Not yet. He wanted her as she was. The only Council member he had not influenced was Marjorie, but she was focussed on building escape ships. Escape. From Mars to Earth. Who cared what the water was like there?

"In my office, waiting?" he asked over his shoulder.

"All of them," his aide replied.

"Excellent. Big day, Jim. Great day."

Jim, the first influenced, smiled supportively. He avoided patting Newman on the back, though. His boss did not like being touched.

Madeline watched Marjorie, the last Councillor, walking by Newman with a nod. He stood in the doorway. She took her usual chair, aide behind her, as Sally and Mike stood behind Madeline. They shared a smile. The other Councillors were icy. Icy. To Madeline, it felt icy. She wanted to leave but had to remain. This was her role, as long as it lasted. Standing behind her, Sally gently patted Madeline's shoulder, then stepped back.

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When everyone was seated, Madeline watched Newman walk in, his stride quietly determined. Confident, not overdoing it.

He stopped, standing by his chair, and looked at the Councillors. He shook his head.

“Thank you for coming,” he told them all. “You should know the latest. We are on the verge of another power and water shutdown. When the water stops, because of repair work, our steam plant also will stop. And I must tell you that the Smelter workers are overwhelmed with uncoordinated production demands. The air filters on the stacks are overloaded. Even more immediate, we have run out of sealant for the dome.

“You all know me,” he replied. “Know what I stand for. Stability. Strength. Order from chaos. We can make Mars great again, if we work together. But we must adapt. Change. Become something greater than this Council.”

Dramatic pause.

“And?” Madeline asked, still sitting in the Mayor’s chair, assuming now for only minutes more.

“To illustrate, to help, I have invited additional colonists to attend this meeting.” He nodded to Jim, who waved to people standing outside. Four men and women filed into the boardroom, nodding to the Councillors. “To achieve any goals, we need to have actual workers on this Council. These men and women represent workers from the Smelter, Water, Dome and Medical and Police Services. I suggest we vote to accept them as additional Councillors. Instead of disbanding Council, as has been suggested, we broaden it.”

Newman looked confidently at the Councillors. With the exceptions of Madeline and Marjorie, all raised their hands in agreement. Chairs were pulled up for the new Councillors, who sat in them, the other Councillors making room around the table.

“Uh, no election?” Madeline asked. “Is that in the bylaws?”

“They were appointed by their worker’s groups,” Newman told her. Informed her. “This is an emergency situation.” Still standing, he looked at them all. “First, let’s hear a report from Smelter, as of this morning.”

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“I represent the interests of the Smelter workers,” Antonio told them. He seemed just slightly hesitant.

“Of course,” Newman replied. “Go ahead. Production report, yes?”

“Yes. We are making progress on substitute ingredients for the sealant. Those are efforts for our scientists, and do not yet disrupt production although they divert some resources. We expect to be able to produce a replacement sealant soon, which would affect production. The new sealant will not be as durable. The iron pulleys for the dome workers have been completed. Metal production is now centred on new water piping.” He stopped. Appeared to relax.

“Thank you,” Newman told her. “Dome?”

Another of the new Councillors, a man, spoke up. He also seemed stiff. “As he said, we are able to continue work on repairing the dome. But we are running out of sealant.” He stopped, appeared to relax.

“Water?”

One of the men stiffened, also a bit distant. “We are able to avoid complete water failure. But there were problems, and as of this morning we are back to half flow. That gives the steam plant less power. It will be weeks, completing pipe repairs. If our workers hold out. They’re under a lot of stress, like the Dome and other workers. Especially these days, now that we are receiving fresh new pipes and larger patches.” He stopped, appearing to relax. His fingers on the table were stiff.

Newman did not bother to say thank you to any of them. He looked at the last new Councillor, a woman. “Tilda?”

“Thank you,” she said, also barely this side of mechanical. “I represent, basically, all the service workers. Police are concentrating on completing their investigation into the murders. The suspect, the Mayor’s former aide, remains in custody. Evidence to date is that he is guilty. Medical services report many colonists are stressed and receiving the appropriate medications.”

Newman looked at the people seated around the table. “Good. If I can put it that way. So how do we proceed? What new initiatives? Two ways. Smelter production must increase. We will agree to that. To prevent worse air pollution, a hole must be cut into the dome, to vent smoke from the Smelter into Mars directly.”

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Murmurs. Agreeing murmurs.

“Second, there’s the Mayor’s aide. We all know Mike. He’s been arrested and although the information is confusing, he’s a confessed murder. He was her aide for years. Her judgement is clearly even more questionable. She has become an embarrassment.”

“The police say he’s confessed,” Madeline said firmly, knowing she had already lost. “It’s despicable. But he agrees he killed the woman, but only in the game.”

“Yes, he agrees he killed in the game, not in the colony. Uh huh. His DNA was on her neck. Your Mike needs to stay in jail until we sort this out,” Newman told her, holding his ground. “The game itself may have to be shut down if we do not find a final solution.

“Weakness is no longer an option, Councillors. Mars was great. It will be great again. Under our leadership.”

“Mars is already great,” Marjorie spoke up. “And changes have been made to the game. Violence there is no longer possible. The NPGs tell me there is unusual control outside the game. From a colonist. One of us. They think one of us has become telepathic. Trying to control minds, to create its own reality.” She had not brought out her knitting.

Newman glared only briefly. “Then we hunt the son of a bitch down. There’s no room here for mutants. Or miscreants.” He strode to near Madeline. “But we should not be diverted. The Mayor here has shown poor judgement in her staff, in her leadership. We are in this mess because of her. She needs to step aside, for everyone’s good. I will replace her, in the new position of Chair of the Council. Only to help keep us organized and provide what leadership I can. That, at this point, only I can.”

Marjorie and Madeline sat still. Several other Councillors twitched, though smiling. In the end, all but Madeline and Marjorie raised their hands, avoiding looking at Madeline.

Newman smiled at her. “I should sit here now. You were elected as Mayor, not a Councillor. There is no longer a role for you at our table. You may leave.” He smiled, revenge was so sweet. “Thank you for your service.”

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There was nothing to say. Madeline calmly stared at him until he was done, looked at the other Councillors and stood, trying to understand why a majority supported someone they all believed to be a jerk. It sure was not the blonde hair, nice clothing. She already had a good idea why. But there was no point speaking on that here. They would not listen. Saying anything would only be her ego talking. Her ego had already created enough problems.

She stood, nodded to Newman, to the Councillors, to Marjorie, then silently walked out of the room, looking briefly at Sally, leaving her behind, to be her eyes and ears. She doubted Newman would allow Sally to stay long, but the sight of her isolated would be a good distraction for him.

She heard the door close solidly behind her.

Striding out of City Hall, she headed straight for her father. She wanted to talk with Sally but that was not possible. Her father was her next best choice. She found him in his backyard garden, pruning a rosebush. Suddenly the words burst out as he stopped pruning, startled. She told him what had just occurred. And her growing conviction that support for Newman taking over was wrong. He fed the Council litres of false hope and they drank it in, thirsty.

But it was more than that. His influence was unnatural.

When she finished, took a breath and started to relax, sitting in the nearest hair, he straightened and put down the shears. “Computer said an hour ago it’s 95% probable Newman manipulated Mike into killing Phyllis,” her father replied, straightening, putting down the pruning sheers. “Revenge against you, probably. Politically useful. Plus he seeks thrills. We’ve done research and everything zeroes down to him. No one else has popped up.”

“Ugh.” She’d hoped the fantastic was not possible. “He has telepathic powers? Like the plants?”

“Remember Jamison, a few months ago?” he continued. “Suicide? Newman hated him. Newman took two weeks off Council a few months ago, said he was sick. He was infected and knew it. I’ve seen his blood tests, the hidden ones. He returned to Council. Odd, apparently unrelated events began. Never noticed them until we searched. Jamison killed himself three weeks later. Newman has some type of power, he’s used it for some time, and now he’s grown stronger we believe.”

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“So what do I do? We do? I do?” Madeline leaned back. “He seems to control key people.”

“Can’t prove it. Yet,” he replied. “He’s under surveillance. Police I trust, who have not been corrupted. By the way, avoid the Chief.”

“Waiting is a lousy option,” she spat out. “It’s already gotten ugly. His lust for power must be controlled. Even if I have to shove it straight up his butt.”

“I appreciate this is very…personal. Still, eloquently put. What can you do now? Sounds like he’s already in control. With a base he has created.”

“Tranquilizer darts?”

They shared a bitter laugh.

“Seriously, dad. Our social fabric is suffering more cracks than the dome. Newman divides, he doesn’t unite. He’s playing people against each other. Who knows his real goal? It can’t be good and I can’t sit and watch.” She in fact stood.

“Be patient.”

“I understand, but the longer Newman runs free, the tougher it becomes.”

“Be patient. You aren’t alone in this. Many of us will fight to keep the colony stable.”

She left him as he went inside to return to his computer and phone. She went to police headquarters. She saw the Chief, who looked at her warily. Instead of talking about Newman, she asked for an update. He gave her the briefest of briefings. She left his office and went to his second in command, someone she knew better, trusted as not corrupted. Drake smiled at her when she came in, his eyes clear of suspicion. He was one of dad’s contacts.

Madeline felt her world growing smaller.

They agreed on the concerns. Newman had been under surveillance for several days. Secretly, by several trusted officers, as the Chief had turned the idea down flat. He noted the Chief had been acting strangely for several days, and now they were watching *him*.

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“Is surveillance the best you can do?”

“What else? Arrest him? Given who Newman is, we need evidence. Something hard.”

“There’s no time,” she told him.

“I understand,” he replied. “You mean, accidents could happen? He’ll need to inspect the outside of the dome? And his suit will fail?”

She shook her head. “Love it. But nope. We aren’t him.” Pause. “Right?”

He looked at her. “Totally.”

After she left, she phoned Shallot. Felt it was time to see her grand daughter again. By then, Newman had taken over her office and forced Sally out of City Hall altogether. Sally was on the way over. By the time Madeline reached her apartment, Shallot waited by the front door.

Shallot needed to do something. So did Madeline. They went into her apartment. Sally phoned, asked about lunch and stopped for takeout. Shallot brought out her notebook and they entered ***Mars and Me***, agreeing it was a place to start. Could they do something with Newman? His NPG? He did not seem to control the NPGs, only certain colonists–whose NPGs now reflected that influence. The game’s new strict prohibitions against using NPGs for violence were working. The NPGs felt safer, individually. Their being murdered and regenerating could no longer happen. They let Shallot and Madeline know they appreciated that achievement, being protected from the players (for whom the game existed.)

The morality of interfering with the colony was debated within the game. *Just like in your world*, Shallot’s NPG said, *suddenly we have unpleasant choices.*

At least you now have choices, Shallot typed.

Her NPG responded *Pollyanna*. Adding a smile emoji.

Shallot looked at her Nan. “Now what? How are you, Nan? Should we talk? You’ve been through a lot, yes?”

“Thanks, onion. Talked out,” Madeline replied. “I have to be alone and think. Can’t

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talk to anyone. Not until I've scoped this all out. If you don't know, there's no place right now for me at City Hall, in the government. I'm out."

"I think I should talk to him," Shallot told her.

That shocked Madeline. "Don't go near him," she said, alarmed. "You're under his radar, for now. Don't draw attention to yourself. Don't get near him." She sighed. "What a world. Anyway, he probably won't see you."

"Oh, he'll see me," Shallot replied, standing, finding something new only she could accomplish. "I'm your granddaughter. Privilege has its privileges. Finally."

"Don't."

Shallot smiled. "I always do what I'm told. You helped bring me up that way. The rules apply to everyone–but us."

Shallot left as Sally walked in. As she closed the door, she saw her Nan and Sally hug each other tightly, affectionate. Shallot smiled, walking away. She did not want Nan to be alone, Sally was lovely. And Mike had always been such a jerk.

She had to move and Newman was her next step. Then, George.

25

Gambling (Not Carefree Running In Woods)

Shallot walked through the down suburb, to City Hall, to Nan's former office, nervous, determined. She had to do this. No one else could. No one else she knew even had a shot at seeing him, at confronting him. But he would see her. Nan's granddaughter. Because he wanted to know what Nan was up to. Probably if Nan was crying a lot.

Newman's aide, Jim, sat outside the office, at Sally's former desk. "That was fast. What do you want?"

"What do you think? I phoned." Shallot told him. "To see the big cheese."

He smiled, picked up his phone and pressed a button. "Madeline's granddaughter is here." He listened, nodded, hung up. "Go right in, Shallot." He motioned to the

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closed door. “Try not to be yourself.” She walked to the door, opened it and stepped inside. Closed it behind her.

Newman sat at Nan’s former large desk, not hiding a smile. The desk had papers on it, files and folders. He turned off his computer monitor. “Well well well. Shallot. Grandmom send you?”

“She knows I’m here. Screw you.” She walked up to the desk, stood in front of it, uncomfortable sitting though he nodded to a chair. She should not stay long. “You’re messing with colonists. With their minds. Admit it.”

“Ah. Directness. Almost honesty. How refreshing. …you know, kid, coming here’s a gamble.”

“Is that a threat?”

“Why would I threaten you? I lead the colony and your grandmother’s washing dishes somewhere.” He shifted in the chair, relaxed, looking at her. “She wants to know what I’m up to? That why you’re here?”

“We both do.”

“Sorry, no secrets. I will repair the dome and water pipes. I will slow the pollution. Those are my immediate goals. Those can be accomplished, with proper leadership. I will make Mars great again.”

“How about an escape ship to Earth? When you have one built, you escape? Take off? And you dump us?”

“Ah. You want secrets?” He smiled, hand now fiddling with a file. A nail file. “Of course,” he replied. “We don’t have a future here. But even one escape rocket is a huge project. Take years. Until then we must thrive or it won’t be built,” he told her. “Win win. I want only the best for the colony.”

He paused, waited for her to say something. She said nothing. “You’re suspicious. You and your grandmother. I’ve heard the rumours. Mike killed that secretary. Plenty of evidence I was in my home. But that isn’t your big deal.”

He stood, held out his arms. “Think I’m telepathic? Do I look infected? A month ago I went to the Clinic, they examined me, took blood. Clean bill of health. Check

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it out. Anyone can see the report." And he twirled around, an odd little dance, laughing to himself, holding out his arms, twirling his fingers. "I love giving you a dance. Want to hear a song?"

"You're creepy," Shallot told him, watching him start to dance around her grandmother's former office. "You were always creepy. Now you're creepier. You said you'd be honest."

"I know some people find me creepy, yes." He stopped twirling to face her. "No one's perfect, kiddo. But enough colonists now find me just swell." And then he continued to twirl. "Any other questions? I'm having a great time. I'll do any dance you like."

She walked out, shutting the door behind her. Glaring at the closed door. Newman's aide still sat at his desk. She said to him, "Your boss is dancing."

"He's very expressive."

Shallot walked out of City Hall and headed for the Clinic, a few blocks away. She was running out of time and people to talk with. Talking with Newman was risky. It was time for more risks. Playing it safe had evaporated. Now she was on Newman's radar. Where would that lead? It was a gamble, pushing him. Done. She would not stop moving forward. She knew where her next steps should take her.

The nurse at the front desk smiled when Shallot walked into the Clinic. "Are you here to see the Director, about Councillor Newman's physical?"

"No," Shallot replied, as pleasantly as she could manage. "I want to see a patient. George."

The nurse pointed to a door. "Of course. Through there." And smiled and returned to her work.

Shallot quickly followed through. That was bizarre. Another staff person led her to the restricted hallway where George was, and told her his room number. His room was empty. She heard a sound, saw the open door down the hall, and found George and Katie, in her room. George on the bed, Katie on a chair. Both had their notebooks open. The TV was on, news, the sound low but audible.

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George stood before Shallot entered, putting down his notebook. Katie put hers to sleep.

“Hey,” she said, suddenly shy, to George. She vaguely knew Katie, from school. “How are you? Been thinking about you, a lot. Took a chance coming here, didn’t think they’d let me in.” She smiled, shy. “You knew I was coming?”

“Call it a good guess. We prepared the staff.”

Katie looked at them looking at each other and stood. “Well guys and girls, sorry but I have to get something from my room.”

“Isn’t this your room?” Shallot asked, looking only at him.

Katie closed the door behind her.

“Me being here. Newman will know. Aren’t we gambling, a lot?” Shallot took his hand in hers. “Our last morning a few days ago was awful. I feel awful. Terrible, at what I did to you.”

“What did you do?” He softly took her hand.

“Well, you know, telling you I didn’t’ want to.”

His hand on hers tightened. “Don’t. I was kind of crazy,” he told her, equally shy. “Sorry about keeping it secret. Sorry about being so, well, y’know, horny. At the time, all I could think about was getting laid. Sorry. Shouldn’t put it that way. But that’s the way it was. That time has passed. It’s like whatever is inside me had enough.”

“You’re being too nice. I could have been more understanding. If I’d known that was your last morning, then you’ be here…well, I want you to know we should have done it. I wanted to do it. I’m sorry you went off that way.”

Awkward silence. He smiled a little, then looked into her eyes. They shared looking a long time.

“How are you?” she finally asked. She squeezed his hand. “I was so worried but you look great. You haven’t lost weight?”

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“Gained a few pounds. You?”

“The colony’s messed up. My world has fallen. I’m not sure what to believe in. My weight’s good, though. Haven’t brushed my hair in days.” With her other hand, she lightly touched his arm, just above his lovely, masculine wrist.

“You’re in some danger, you know,” he told her, sounding worried. “Newman dropped by yesterday. To talk to Katie and me. We were ready before he walked in. Felt him coming. But I figured he’d show up.”

Her shy smile vanished. “And?”

“Our NPGs warned us. He’s their top candidate for the murders. Both. So, before he walked in, we coated ourselves. Shielded ourselves so he thought we were normal. No threat. And as he questioned us, we quietly got into his head enough so he believes we’re harmless. And, Shallot, you. He sees you now as a teen, a puppet of your grandmother, but nothing more.

“For now, anyway. He’s smart. And he never came back, so we can’t reinforce it.”

“Coated? Reinforced?” He was rapidly feeding her a lot to digest.

“I coated you when you walked in. Couldn’t before, you were too far away. Distance is important. Closer the better.”

“Coated?” She felt he was on another world.

He nodded. “He won’t be able to get in your head and won’t be suspicious why.”

“That was thoughtful. Helpful.” He smiled, accepting it all, she as still digesting. “I saw him half an hour ago. He was nice enough, but treated me like a joke.”

“Good. Shallot, been thinking about you. A lot. Locked in here, I miss you more.”

She took him in her arms. They shared a long hug. It felt wonderful, him against her. She thought of more, feeling his warmth, much more–but saw the surveillance cameras in the ceiling.

“I want more,” she whispered quietly. “Now. I do. It isn’t making up for that other morning. But not with them watching. Listening. Recording us.”

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They kissed. It was long, lingering, loving. She felt her neck flush. She felt warm. She did not want the kiss to end, so they kissed again. Just lips. When they parted, she licked them.

They sat on the bed, a little apart. “What do we do now?” he asked. “What do you want to do? That’s all that counts.”

“Talk?” she replied.

“What do we have to say we don’t want them to hear?” *I can project my thoughts into you. They don’t know Katie and I have powers. They can’t hear us. Takes real effort, you have nothing inside you. I’ve spent the last few days developing my mind.*

They didn’t mind the Clinic hearing aloud that they agreed they had difficulty respecting their parents because of the colony choices which had created such problems. The Clinic could hear that.

“We were born into this,” Shallot told him and the camera. “We deserve better.”

They ran out of small talk and looked at each other for a long while, sitting on the bed. As awkward as her meeting half an hour ago with Newman, but so profoundly different. After a while, Katie returned. She looked at them. “This is an improvement.” She smiled and sat on the bed with them. The three chatted harmlessly for the camera, then Shallot hugged them both and left. It was super hard, walking away.

We’ll see each other again. But not too soon. We don’t want him suspicious.

She felt his eyes on her back. “Maybe I’ll see you tomorrow. This was such fun, I’ll tell my friends you’re ok.”

She strolled out feeling lighter.

The day was not over and she had done a lot already. George was alive and healthy. She had challenged Newman, which could lead to something. And she was…coated. George may have bought her some time—to do what? How could George and Katie help, isolated in the Clinic?

Her parents were focused on their own issues. To a lesser extent, so were Nan and

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great granddad. She was mostly on her own these days. Her friends had work. Farha was easily available, only because of her father's support. Shallot looked at the hills and valleys facing her, mostly valleys, with ominous possibilities rockslides or flash floods.

She went home and sat in a chair in her bedroom, notebook on her lap. She saw NPG Shallot had just gotten home, was sitting as she was, reaching out to her.

For both, their personal connection felt surreal, unreal, given who each was, what they knew they were. Still, they shared a huge common bond. NPG Shallot and she chatted as besties about George, about what his growing power meant. About meeting Newman. How to stick it to him, so whatever his plans were, they would fail.

By then, it was evening. She ate a tense dinner with her parents, who agreed they hoped Newman was on the right track. When they asked what she had done, suspicious, she told them she'd met Newman. That he danced for her.

"That's nice," her mother said.

After dinner and helping mom clean up, Shallow went upstairs looking forward to tomorrow. She would lie in bed, thinking of the day, of George, of seeing him again. As soon as possible. Not tomorrow, but there is always the day after tomorrow.

26

New Day, Same Smell

A week later, it was a new day on Mars and something smelled bad. A little worse than yesterday, which was bad enough. To most everyone, including Newman. Last night he fell asleep smelling nothing bad but his feet, his soles tingly until he washed them with a damp cloth. He woke, smelling something worse than his feet. The smell was in the air, just as the thought of roses could be, but this was more like something rotting. Decay and corruption and disorder were in the air.

He was aware colonists were uneasy, despite the immediate gratifications of water and power repair, new sealant for the dome. But it was only a couple of days. But they looked outside and saw sandstorms. Inside, it felt for many they were in the storm. Waiting for the next crisis.

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Yes, they had representatives voting on a new Council–but no workers had voted for them. They had sort of self-appointed. With Newman's help. Despite his promotion of a popular image, Newman was aware most colonists thought he was out for himself. He also was aware that did not matter. His personality (which he thought was fine, though he realized he could be grating to some folks) was not the issue. Their issue was: would he help them? Anything would be better than the stagnant former Council. And choices were limited. Before, only three candidates. Now, only one revised Council.

Déjà vu all over again.

Newman knew he was more popular than any other public figure. In the first day he seemed to get stuff one. Workers felt more pressure to produce but understood the colony's survival was at stake. Yet something smelled, and for once it was not coming from the Smelter stacks.

Newman felt something smelled off. He did not know what, but something was not quite right. All the bricks were in place, he'd built the wall. Madeline had stayed out of sight for a week. Those kids in the Clinic seemed harmless enough. Yet he felt a fuzzy block around them. He wasn't suspicious, though—which made him suspicious.

Sitting in his large office, Newman looked up, through the windows, thinking. He should check the game, see where it was at, where his NPG was. The last while, the game was ahead of the colony, predicting its future. He coughed. The air itself was bad today, even in his office. The smelter was working round the clock. His idea of drilling a hole through the dome had met unexpected resistance from the engineers. They warned, given the existing stresses and the age of the dome material, which was over one hundred years old, drilling a large hole would almost certainly lead to a disastrous break in the dome.

Publicly, Newman said the engineers were working overtime on the plan. He also issued statements that water would now be stable, with no more failures. The truth was something else. That he could deal with. Was the problem out there apprehension?

He had to do something. Inaction was weakness. His first priority was enemies. Second, potential enemies. Anyone who might undermine his increasing authority. He could be charming or threatening, as the relationship required. For Newman,

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every relationship was a transaction.

Perhaps he should return to those kids in the Clinic. Figure out why he dismissed them so easily. He never dismissed anyone. Especially not someone who might have his powers. He looked up through the window, saw two workers at the top of the dome. Good for them. At least something was going right.

Dan and Warren were joined early in their double shift by two other workers. The four of them were getting the damage to the dome properly sealed, with what was left of the old sealant and then the new stuff. Warren kept looking up, at the anchor holding all of them from falling. In a couple of hours, workers in outside suits would scale the dome and inspect the corrosion close up. The new sealant was not as durable. Dan and Warren were resealing a crack they had sealed three days earlier.

Underground, Wendy and Peter were just getting off their own extended shift. There was one entirely new pipe ready to go, replacing the worst old one. It was satisfying, seeing the gleaming solid new metal under the bright lights. Steering clear of the bulldozers, they finally off shift, and went home, to create a baby. Well, they were exhausted. Making a baby could wait until tomorrow. And a shower.

Farah felt the rumbling underneath her, saw dome workers above, struggling to repair one particular spot. The light was poor but the Smelter promised new lights for the crops would be arriving in two weeks, at least some new lights. She knew the Smelter was forced to do the best possible, but it was running full throttle and the air grew steadily worse.

Coughing, she hoped the sacrifice was worth it. She'd know in ten or fifteen years, if she lived that long. It was hard outside, out on the Farm, breathing gray mist. And some crops were wilting.

Aaliyah hated at working at Marsball but had no choice. She avoided the lechers, who were everywhere, especially among the managers. She applied for a transfer out, as her NPG had done. To date, zero luck. She could sneak no time at work on the game. She was always watched.

This was not the first work experience she had hoped for.

Shallot's parents felt continued pressure from work, from increased demands and

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suspicions of their colleagues that their daughter was somehow creating problems. They were all still very concerned about the murder, still worried about who might be next. After a week, nothing had been resolved.

Shallot sat on her bed, notebook on her lap, in the game. Talking with her NPG and others about the colony's problems. She learned Newman's solutions were secretly failing. The NPGs were aware, ahead of the colonists. Everyone believed Newman was somehow behind the murders.

Newman now sat drinking a diet pop, looking in the mirror occasionally, thinking he needed to go under the tanning bed again as he thumbed through progress reports. Diverting Smelter pollution was…out. Stable water remained very uncertain, new failures inescapable. He was steadily gaining more control, he could feel it. That was good. But something still smelled.

Time to get off his butt.

Newman left his office, to make his rounds. He had to regularly refresh the colonists he had a hold on. With his aide, the Councillors, the workers' representatives in their new offices. He tried holding off once, with his aide, not doing him for a week, and Jim started to question what Newman was up to.

Every day, Newman made his rounds. It took a few hours every day, each day, so by the end of the week he covered them all. He could not do more than a few hours each day. Gave him headaches.

Standing in the City Hall front lobby, admin workers quietly side-stepping him, he walked outside. The air smelled worse out here, unfiltered. Breathing had emerged in this last week as a top priority. He knew there was only so much the colonists would tolerate. He had to do something quickly. People had to breathe, if only to get his work done.

He got in his cart and drove. Quietly cursing. He should not have to deal with these stupid emergencies. That should be for someone under him. He had not seen Antonio for close to a week. Antonio was key in the Smelter. Then double check those kids. He drove fast, wondering if he should wear a mask, coughing.

When Newman walked in, Antonio was in his office, reading something on his monitor. Blowing his nose, Newman said to him, "Tony, the air's bad."

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He shrugged. “We have orders to run 24/7. The filters were overloaded already. What about the shunt to outside?”

“Don’t count on it. New idea. Get rid of the exhaust, new direction.” He had Antonio’s attention. “What about putting the exhaust underground?” Antonio sat back, eyes on Newman, who right now he found commanding, his ideas enviable. “What if we built exhaust pipes to the water station, then used some of its pipes to pump the bad air underground? The workers there wear protective suits. Stop the pollution, no damage to the dome. The pollution will stay underground.”

“Have you talked to Water?” Antonio suddenly felt strongly it could and should be done. “You’d have to bring them onside.”

“I will.”

Newman had no choice but then to drive across the colony to Water and spend time with the Administrator there. It took more than he thought to convince her that pumping the Smelter’s exhaust underground would not create problems with maintaining the water supply. Even when he applied extra effort she was reluctant, telling him Water had only just stabilized. That the workers would find it difficult working in smog. That the pollution would not corrode the piping. Nor could he get her support for pumping exhaust into the lava tubes, away from the water. Newman had to spend more time with her than he wanted, should have, before. He would have to revisit her tomorrow, work on her and other key Water staff. She alone would not be nearly enough. Others in Water would feel the same.

Newman left tired. So many people. He thanked himself he did not have to bother, yet, with Marjorie—she was totally for building an escape ship. It was mid-day, so he went home and prepared a simple late lunch. He did not like putting effort into cooking. City Hall could wait a few hours and his aide could always reach him. He ate, then positioned his notebook so the security camera in the ceiling—present in every room in every apartment in the colony, except washrooms—would not pick up his notebook’s screen. He muted the sound before entering the game.

He did not use his avatar. He must stay distant, undetected. He tracked his NPG and some others, leaving no trace he’d been there. He knew NPGs believed he had taken over Council through some type of mind control. That he had similarly influenced key colonists. That he was involved in the murders.

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The NPGs were uncertain how to proceed, as they had been programmed to follow their real-life player or colonist. Now, not so much. There were too many real colonists and their NPGs to influence. Or, he had not influenced enough. He was frustrated. There was only one of him. His leadership would have to bring everyone along.

Also, it would be a relief to kill another NPG.

But ***Mars and Me*** had been sealed from further violence. The game would freeze if he tried. Alerts would go out. It would also anticipate violence and prevent it. Damn dumb game.

He looked at the NPG Mike sitting in jail. Newman smiled. Idiot. Tool.

Mike had been in his apartment, playing the game, under mental pressure from Newman. He could now reach fairly far, if he was alone and could concentrate. Newman killed NPG Phyllis and, a moment later, while Mike thought he was in the game, he was actually walking out of his apartment and onto the street, where he walked across the street and strangled the real Phyllis, thinking he was still in the game. Then he walked back to his townhouse, returned to sitting with his notebook on his lap, playing the game when Newman snapped him back. Not realizing he had just committed murder—and doomed the Mayor's political career. He so enjoyed screwing over Mike. As Madeline's aide, Mike had been a royal pain.

It was work becoming a Councillor, work dominating other Councillors. It was fun work, building control, but still work. He wanted results without work. It would all be worth it. Mars was an elaborate prison. He had to escape.

Still thinking of prisons, later that afternoon Newman returned to the Clinic.

He was tired, did not want to go, but had no choice. Something still smelled. Nothing so far today had been off, not in ways which troubled him. He had enemies. Some enemy, somewhere. He had to discover who they were. So he could stop them. Madeline must be in on it. But who else? He ran his fingers through his thick blonde hair.

First he went to the Clinic's head doctor, who he controlled. The doctor said that George's infestation appeared to have stopped, at least temporarily. Otherwise nothing, except he had made friends with another patient. Both had lived longer

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than any other patient. He told Newman he could do nothing but wait and observe. They were unusual.

Newman's suspicions increased. It was as if he had to fight inside, to be suspicious.

He knew the doctor could be ruthless when necessary. The vivisections were top secret. The doctor felt autopsies missed something in the patients when alive. But cutting up live patients told him nothing new, it was pointless, so he stopped. Reluctantly, because figuring out and stopping the infestations had been his obsession for over ten years.

Newman searched the doctor's mind and found it had been…influenced. It was subtle. But clearly foggy around George and the girl.

And there it was. Someone else with his powers. That punk.

The air started smelling good while still smelling bad.

Newman took the doctor with him, from his office, down the corridors, to George's hallway. They stopped, listened. It was quiet. Newman felt something. From down the corridor. Where the two remaining patients in the section lived. The other patient had withered, as had previous infected colonists.

Newman smiled, his mental walls up, as he walked into George's room, the doctor behind him. He saw George standing in front of a mirror, combing his hair. The girl, Katie, sat on the bed, a closed notebook on her lap. Both looked at him. Newman knew at once they were aware he'd been coming. Waiting for him.

For how long?

He sensed they had coated themselves. "Good afternoon," he said to them. He did not bother to smile. They knew. They both nodded, looking at him steadily.

You both can hear me. I know it.

George cocked his head, looking at Newman. *You here to hurt us?*

Of course not.

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That isn't what your mind says. Katie's voice.

Apologies. I'm frustrated. You of all people should appreciate that. We are different. We must be careful.

We want to leave. George matched Newman's steady look. *We could walk out but we would just be hunted.*

Newman's thin lips curved into a smile. *Of course. You should not be here. You can leave at any time. Go anywhere you want. I'm sure the doctor will agree.*

The doctor, standing next to Newman, nodded, smiling stiffly.

If?

No ifs. There is a but. If you can help me with the colony.

Help how? Katie asked.

The small room was quiet, still. The doctor stood listening but there was nothing to hear.

You tell me, Newman thought, to them. *You both have power. You can find a way to help the colony. It needs your help.*

George and Katie looked at each other, then back to Newman. They sent him nothing.

I understand. I feel your suspicion. Have I used my power? Of course. As you have. Walk out when you're ready. I'll have street clothing provided. If you want to help the colony, the Smelter workers are exhausted. You could walk among them, pepping them up. Is that so terrible? Improving morale?

Newman snapped his finger at the doctor, smiled again at them and walked out, the doctor following, closing the door behind them.

Outside, down the hall, Newman faced him. "Can you give them sedatives? Knock them out?"

"They'll know it's coming," the doctor replied. "Never work."

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“Drug their food?” Newman told him. “When that boy is unconscious, that little snot, vivisect him. Cut him open. See what’s keeping him alive. Do the girl too. Today if you can.”

The doctor smiled as Newman walked out of the Clinic.

There was only one other person he had irrationally thought was fine. Shallot. Why was he not suspicious of her? She was the Mayor’s grand daughter, tight with her. And Police told him she had interfered with evidence about the murder. Why had he written her off? He’d have the cops put her under surveillance, using the units he controlled.

Before he could really show his leadership, he had to ensure not only that his base was secure but so were his enemies.

He knew what he had to do next.

He spent the rest of the afternoon under sunlamps, improving his tan, black goggles over his eyes so he could not see.

27

Shallot On The Run

Shallot, looking out her bedroom window, saw the grey cart sitting across the street. The two obviously undercover officers talked on their radios or typed on the computer in their cart. They were there to watch her. Well, she’d gambled. Evening approached and everything grew darker.

Towards the end of day, water flow reduced again to half the possible rate–some pipes had to be re-welded. The steam plant was back to half power. Homes relied on batteries. The colonists were more stressed than ever. Would pumping the exhaust underground work? Newman said it would. Everyone was talking about it. But anyone who worked underground said no.

Up on top, beginning their next extended shift, Dan and Warren had to work exclusively with the new sealant. The old sealant had run out. They found the new sealant difficult to apply, it took longer to dry, then appeared suspiciously temporary. Sand coming in through a small crack was already chipping away at new sealant laid yesterday.

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The farms had newly plowed, enriched fields. But the smog was worse and plants continued to wither.

Dan and Warren, Wendy and Peter debated during their shifts and off work about what was going wrong. That some new changes were not good ideas. Especially an exhaust hole in the dome or piping pollution underground or using the new sealant before it was ready. And that Newman pushed it all. He was its voice. These were his plans. And he was a liar.

Worse than the original Council.

Shallot stood in her bedroom late in the afternoon, the one room that still felt like hers, when her cell phone chimed. It was Newman's aide, asking her to a meeting with Newman the following morning. She said "Of course, no problem" and immediately phoned Nan.

"Don't go," Nan told her with zero hesitation. "He visited the Clinic again today. George's NPG says Newman knows about them, that Newman sees George and Katie as potential threats. He's let them go, but only to see who they go to."

"He wants to see me. Feels like a demand. What can I do? I can't hide. The colony isn't big enough. And he'll know wherever I go."

"I'll call back. You say there are undercover officers outside?"

"In their cart. I don't feel safe here."

"I'll get back to you fast as I can. Sit tight. Nothing will happen tonight. Stay there." Madeline disconnected.

Shallot stared at the phone in her hand. Sit tight. Sure. She went to her closet, pulled out her two overnight cases, for sleepovers, and began packing. Then put the suitcases on the floor and concentrated on the backpack. She had to travel light.

Her notebook went in, along with whatever she thought she'd need for—how long? Her toothbrush, underwear, a pair of pants and tee shirt, a simple dress which she put on.

She looked at herself in the washroom mirror. She redid her hair, so it was in

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pigtails, a style she never wore. No make-up, nothing to attract attention. She pulled on the backpack and walked out the back door of the home she had grown up in, where her earliest memories had been made, without texting or phoning her parents. Or anyone.

She did not look back, lips pressed grimly together as she climbed over the backyard fence and began to walk down the alley. She had no idea to where.

The police must be watching all her electronics. Contacting anyone using the game or on her phone was dangerous. She had to move, to avoid contact, avoid being noticed, move until she knew where she was moving to: then double her speed. When Nan phoned back.

If Nan phoned back.

If she was her own, there was only place area remotely safe. On intuition she headed towards the Farm. Farha worked there and her dad was okay.

There were people to avoid, walking or riding in small carts. Almost all of them knew her. She'd eaten dinner or lunch with some. Now she kept her face down as she walked silently, trying to avoid any attention. She'd always been interested in getting attention. The thought made her smile now. Times had changed.

This morning, she woke in her bedroom, here home. Now increasingly far behind her.

She kept from the more crowded streets, kept from the business areas. She had two besties. One worked in Marsball, full of hostiles. The other was on the Farm.

Her cell phone chimed. It was Nan. She took the call. "You okay?"

"Kind of."

"Where are you?" She told her. "Good. Go to the Farm. They're ready."

"Halfway there."

She put her phone back in a pocket and doubled her pace.

By the time she saw the Farm, she no longer felt as frightened. Seeing the Farm

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buildings was a relief. She approached the main gates. Farm Security, something apparently new, stood by the gate, watching as she approached. Two officers. One said something into his cell phone as she walked up. Both knew her. They had gone to school together.

“Hey Shallot. You’re expected.” He smiled, a bit forced, he was the serious type.

“Hey Ted. Farha? Can I see her?”

“Second building to the right. The green one. Go now, get out of sight now. There are colony security cameras on the road.”

Not hiding her sigh of relief, she thanked him and quickly walked ahead. The green building was two storeys, large. A farmer, waiting for her at the front door, told her where Farha’s little office was. Farha was typing when Shallot knocked softly on the open door. “Finally!”

Shallot grinned, for what felt the first time in years. Smiles ain’t grins. Shallot filled her in on the latest. “I’ve come here for help. It’s beyond cool if you can do something. I have to hide. The police are onto me. It isn’t altering the video. It’s Newman, being paranoid.”

“Dad’s already working on it.”

Shallot put her backpack down, slumped into the chair facing her friend. “That was a lot.” She sighed.

“You okay?”

“No.”

“Well, how could you be?”

Farha got her a drink and Shallot eagerly took it. They began chatting, interrupted when Cary walked in. He looked at Shallot.

“Pig tails? Smart look,” he told her.

He told her there were several places he could hide her, for as long as necessary. The best was the locked barn. No one entered without Cary’s approval, only he and

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a handful of farmers had the key.

“You can live in there. We have storerooms. One is now a bedroom. “I’ll show you. Are you in?”

She thanked him, picked up her backpack and followed him out. They walked past several barns, Shallot undoing her pigtails. They went up to the one barn whose doors were shut. He unlocked the door, they entered, he closed it behind them. They stood there a moment. It was very quiet.

“Thanks,” Shallot told him. “You’re unbelievable.”

“We rely on helping each other, eh?”

He showed her several rooms built into the walls, storage areas. Past the rooms she saw a large field with tall plants. He led her to a nearby room, door open. Two farmers were finishing putting up a small bed for her. Cary told her she would have a room here, with a bed, desk and even a small adjacent washroom. Compact. And there were small doors to the storage rooms on either side.

She thanked Cary, thinking the small room would do nicely. It was better than she hoped. There was security on the Farm. She would be safe here, at least until Newman tracked her down. “Do you have any clothes?”

“Farmer’s,” he replied. “You’ll look fine. You should see the rest, though. You may not want to stay here, after you see the plants.”

She put the backpack down and followed him out, to the large field dominating the barn’s interior. The field contained plants, rows of them. They were like no plants Shallot had seen in person—only on TV.

Martian plants.

Over five feet tall, each of them. In long rows, spaced apart. Thick central light brown stalks. Branches grew from the stalks, with large orange-brown leaves. At the base of each stalk was an eye.

A large, unblinking eye.

Which turned as they approached, towards them. Shallot knew about the plants,

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there were occasional news features. But now she faced them. And they stared back. Now moving as she moved, following her.

“They never blink,” Cary said to her quietly.

“Hello,” she said to the plants, unable to think of anything else. She only could think they were watching her.

The plant nearest her twitched.

Then several plants twitched.

“What’s going on?” Shallot asked.

“They’re talking to each other,” he told her. “At least, we think so. Still have no idea what’s going on, after twenty years. They’re not hostile.”

“No,” she told him. “Creepy but not hostile.”

“We feel nothing from them, none of that telepathic stuff. They can’t or don’t want to, we have no idea.”

She looked at the plants a long time. They looked back. Occasionally twitching.

As they walked away, she waved good-bye, and the plant nearest her twitched it’s whole top.

He led Shallot to the rear of the barn, a smaller part, the pens. She looked at the animals, chickens, goats and cows, each weak and pathetic. There were not many, all were thin, one cow lay on the ground, apparently breathing its last. A farmer knelt by it, rubbing its head gently.

“Why these and not the others? The animals we walked by looked healthy.”

Cary shrugged. “Good question. They’re infected. Like the people in the Clinic, we think.” Shallot thought of George. “Infection started while they were normal. Why them and not others, we don’t know. Yet. Most of us assume they picked it up from the water, like colonists have. When we see an animal is infected, we bring them in here. It’s awful. Isn’t contagious. They just wither and die. No living creature should endure that.”

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“But the plants haven’t reached out to you? You’re certain they aren’t somehow dangerous? There’s creepy stuff in the colony about telepathy.”

“Yeah. We hear that.” He shrugged. “Well, we care for them. Provide water and warmth. I think they don’t want to harm us. They know they depend on us, we think. Dangerous? No. Creepy? Well, Shallot, I love plants, love watching them grow from seed. It’s beautiful. A miracle. But these…it’s got to me, them watching. I’ve felt plants looking at me, but not like these guys.” He shivered.

He left her alone, to return to work. The front door had to be locked, she could go nowhere, but then again had nowhere to go. Select farmers would come in frequently, tending the plants and animals, so she would not be alone. No longer isolated. She would get to know them, make new friends. Here, she could settle. From here, she could get a lot done.

Her normal was not a go-to, running and hiding, which was a go-where? Her normal now was get out there.

When she entered her new room, the bed had been made, there was a desk and a chair, even a worn armchair. The washroom had folded clean towels. Shallot decided to think of it as camping out. Temporary. As much fun as she could make it, which could be enough.

She sat at the desk, took her notebook from the backpack, plugged it in and powered it up, putting it on the desk. She pulled up the chair. Opened the game. Eagerly went to the page where she could create changes, the page she and her friends had used before.

Create an NPG Martian plant who can talk with me.

28

Frantic

The next morning, Newman was frantic. Shallot was a no-show for the meeting. He expected anyone to meet with him on demand. The young idiot stood him up. When he sent the police, she was gone. Apparently, gone a while. They could not find her—yet—but they were checking security camera footage. He questioned her parents. Nothing. They clearly had no idea.

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Madeline and Shallot. Probably George and that Katie. Enemies. Working against him.

Worse were the teens. Teenagers!

Shallot had gone into hiding. That made her suspect number one. She could not hide alone. Not in the colony. She had help. Who? He already had the police interviewing everyone the pain in the butt knew. What else could he do? And the bad smell remained, from pollution and otherwise. He knew his public image might be at stake. Colonists who supported him also did not like him. As long as he got the colony moving, he was okay.

That felt very temporary. More was needed, now.

He decided to call a rally. Within an hour. Have as many colonists as could be managed, give them time off work, have it in the courtyard, televised. Show the support for him. Newman had his aide, Jim, get on it.

But there had to be more he could do. What? He paced, occasionally fondling himself, considering murder in the game as a relief. Had the doctor vivisected those two kids yet?

An hour later, when his aide Jim came into the large office, Newman paced. Jim filled him in on the latest–Shallot was likely at the Farm. Newman nodded: she had friends there, it was isolated. But that meant she was probably with the plants. And he stayed far away from the plants.

Jim told him the rally was ready, people were in the courtyard, waiting, for him. Music was playing to keep the restless crowd appeased but they were restless, feeling pressure to be back at work.

“Crap,” he muttered as he walked out, Jim dutifully behind. The courtyard was half full. He expected that. He had to avoid talking about diverting Smelter exhaust, outside or underground. In reality, the workers’ groups involved were adamantly against it, told him if he pushed it further, they would go public. And the new sealant worked temporarily, at best. Colonists knew that also. Water and power were down again. He started well, leading the colony, but that was last week.

He walked down the front steps of City Hall to face the crowd. Walked up to the small podium and microphone on the top of City Hall’s front steps. Murmurs in the

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crowd grew silent as colonists in the small crowd watched him step up to the podium.

“Thank you for coming today,” he began, taking the mike into his hand. “I know the current state of the colony. Reality forces us to change. Including me. Yes, right now we face one crisis after another. Makes me want to go to the washroom a lot.” Quiet laughter. “I like the washroom, don’t you? Private. Air conditioned. That aroma thing so it smells good after I use it.” More quiet laughter. Newman felt better. Half his public speeches, his TV appearances, were entertainment.

“I only want the best for us. We must make Mars great again. It isn’t now. Make A Mars that is Great. Together, we can glory in living here! I love life here. Or want to. It’s tough, isn’t it?” Murmurs. Wrong murmurs, wrong direction.

“I breathe the same air as you. We will solve this problem! I do worry about the new sealant. It simply is not as good. The dome could fail at any time, truthfully. There is a growing consensus we should consider moving underground.”

Dead silence. After a moment, applause from one colonist, Jim, standing behind him.

“We would build a simple but secure enclosure to live in. From there, no matter what happens with the dome, we could live. Continue. Repair. I know this is a lot. But we are running out of time. I ask you all to think about this idea. It would be only temporary. When there is more information, I will talk to you again. In the meantime, be assured I will regularly update you on our progress.”

Silence. Then weak applause. He saw they did want to applaud at all. This would not play well on video. This diversion would not work.

“Thank you. Thank you all for coming. Thank you for building a better tomorrow.” He winced, he should not remind them of today. He smiled, waved, then left, fleeing inside City Hall. That also would not look good on video.

Inside, Jim found Newman pacing in the lobby. Administration workers turned to their offices, walking around them. It was difficult walking around Newman, he paced. Noticing them, he retreated to his office. They watched, shaking their heads. Watched Jim follow Newman into the office.

In Newman’s office, alone with him, Jim said “No offense, but you should have run

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that by me. You saw it was bad. Going underground? Is that our only choice? People would have to give up most everything. You don't have a consensus about the dome failing or immediately having to retreat underground. I mean, really. You needed to give them something. Inspire them. You offered living in a cave."

"I appreciate your honesty." Newman's voice was cool. "The colonists need a diversion until I sort everything out." Newman's voice turned cold. "Madeline and Marjorie are plotting. I can feel it. And that Shallot is up to something, with them. I have to find out what. The ancient Greeks thought when it rained, the Gods were peeing on them. Madeline's pee could shower me any time."

"Okay, yeah sure, but so? They'll turn against you."

"I had to divert the colonists. Have them think about something totally disruptive, that would totally occupy them. Divert their energy and stall any plans against me. It's a good idea, and it is done."

He paced, eyes on the floor, away from Jim. Jim was thoroughly conditioned. The twerp should never argue with him. Obviously, conditioning was never complete. Never total.

Well, he was certainly right that the colonists might turn against him, but now he'd bought a few days to turn everything around. It would not be difficult, once the physical plant was restored, the water and power back on full.

The dome could wait.

He wished he could enter the game and strangle Shallot. What the hell was she really up to? What was happening at the Farm? There were no security cameras there he could tap into, and none at all in that locked barn.

Shallot took a chair out to the plants and sat near them, facing them. Their eyes all turned towards her. Notebook on her lap. She said, out loud, "Hello." Nothing except the eyes watching her. In the game, Shallot found the new Martian Plant NPG and typed *Hello. Can you hear me?*

In this game? Or with you in the barn?

Whoa.

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It worked.

Now what?

Hello. Who are you? What should I know? Where do I even begin?

Bring George here. And Katie. George and Katie. Bring them here. So they are close.

Why? Why close?

They feel us but are too distant. It is best if they stand near us. Standing. An interesting concept, never moving. If they are here, we can talk with them. They need to hear from us. We from them. They are part of us but not we of them.

Okay, that made sense. Except she had only an idea what the plants were talking about.

Part of you? They're becoming plants?

No. Do not worry. They will remain…human.

What about me?

What about you?

She felt slighted. They were indifferent, it was almost insulting, except they were alien plants and she had to give them space. *I mean, what should I know that affects me? Who are you?*

Pause. *This had been secret. Only because of our failures to communicate with the animals or Farmers. None were or are receptive. George and Katie are.*

We did not intend to hurt your feelings. We do not have such emotions, there is much still to learn about living creatures who move.

We are what remains alive on Mars, as you call our home. We survived until the freezing and drought, billions of years ago, when our home lost its magnetic protection. We enjoy solar radiation but could neither survive no water nor the deep freezing. So our ancestors planted seeds. Many seeds. In the hope that one

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day, water and warmth would return.

Our spore are everywhere, ready to grow even after billions of years. They are in the air, what remains of it, the soil, the ice. When you drank badly filtered water, it contained our seeds. You drank our seeds.

Our seeds know only to survive. They are, in your terms, babies. We have seen they cannot tolerate living in almost all colonists. Most die before the colonists realize there is anything inside them. We mourn them. Where the colonist's body shows promise, the seeds grow. But humans cannot tolerate such growth. It is unfortunate almost all seeds which do grow accidentally kill their hosts. And then, the seeds also die.

But after decades, a very few humans have the DNA, the bodily structure, to allow the seeds to flourish. That developed recently. Perhaps our seeds mutated. Growing in a living creature was not our heritage. Our heritage is the soil. Colonists planted our seeds into Martian soil. They helped us grow. Provided warmth. Water. Enabled us to flourish. We have no wish nor need to harm you. Or infected colonists.

George and Katie. They are a success. We felt their presence, even at the great distance. The seeds have flourished within them. And there are a handful of others, but they have kept their infection secret.

What about George and Katie? What will happen to them?

It already has. They have formed a symbiotic relationship with the plants inside them. The plants are content to exist. They feel no need to grow now. They share with their hosts our powers, our way to communicate. We wish to speak with George and Kate, to explain and understand. We know they are pause *concerned. About their situation. They can be reassured. We can put them at ease. Do you understand? Agree?*

…yes. What about them?

George will come here, shortly. He reached out to us.

Shallot sat in the folding chair, looking at the plants, their eyes. Their eyes stared back. A lot to absorb. She immediately contacted her NPG–who already knew. Then she texted Farha and Allyiah and the friends who had joined her in the coffee

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shop. Then her great grandad, then Nan, writing all of them about the seeds, George and Katie, the plants, everything she had just learned.

The humans texted back, shocked, not about the telepathy but about the seeds. Seeds trying to grow inside the colonists was a shock. Only Shallot's great grandfather acted as if it was something he should have guessed.

The NPGs were excited. They flooded the NPG Martian plant with texts. They had to create more NPG Martian plants, to deal with the response. Throughout the colony, talk was about the seeds. About Newman's speech and having to move underground. About the failing dome.

Wendy and Peter missed all of that.

Their TV and computers were off.

They were creating a new life.

29

Pressure Pressure Pressure

Unexpected knocking on Newman's front door. Insistent knocking. Impossible to ignore. Many knew he was here, at home. He waited. The knocking did not let up.

He stopped what he was doing in front of the large mirror, put on a robe, hurried down the stairs, running his fingers through his thinning blonde hair, ensured the enhancements were in place, then at the front door paused, looked through the eye hole. He stiffened, then unlocked and slowly opened the door.

Madeline stood on his doorstep, Sally beside her. Two clear enemies. Arriving unannounced. "Charmed, I'm sure," he said to them.

"It's talk time," Madeline told him. "Can we? I figured you wouldn't answer. And this had to be in person. Can we talk?"

"Of course." Newman stood aside and waved them in, quietly closing the door behind them, trying to look prepared.

Madeline confronted him as soon as the door was shut. "We all saw your speech.

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Everyone is talking about it. And angry. Abruptly moving everyone underground? You got everyone pissed off. Sorry for the language but that's the best way to put it."

"Oh?" Was this why she came? He felt more confident. That he could handle. He knew the colonists would be angry. That was the idea.

"You lied. The Dome Workers contacted me. They never told you failure was near. The engineers are as concerned about your plan to live underground as they were about the hole in the dome or pumping the exhaust underground. They and Water say it won't work. If you continue, they'll go public. Do you want that?"

"The new sealant is not as good," Newman replied. "The engineers are exploring living underground. Colonists needed to understand."

"You panicked them. The dome is not that bad. Living underground isn't real. How can lying help?"

It went on like that for a while. Newman fed them standard replies, increasingly confident. Clearly, they knew nothing. Twenty minutes later, Madeline and Sally stood on the doorstep again, the door shutting behind them. "He wants people scared," Madeline said. "Why?"

"He's diverting them with the worst thing he could think of," Sally told her. "It's desperate. He wants the colony absorbed about going underground, not him. Something's chewing at him. Paranoia? He knows we're organizing. Shallot? He has the police hunting her."

"He's in over his head and knows it," Madeline replied. "Maybe he can't admit it to himself yet, but he pulled off the start but will never make the finish line. His arrogance is too obvious."

"What can we do? Speak to the other Councillors?"

"He controls them, hon. Except Marjorie and her aide. Because he needs her full throttle on the escape ship."

"This is about him wanting to get out?"

"I would say wouldn't you but you wouldn't, I wouldn't, we shouldn't–he would."

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They slowly walked, chatting, back to Madeline's apartment, having been evicted from City Hall.

Shallot's parents learned of Newman's speech after returning home from a disappointing Marsball final (Antonio's favourite lost.) They watched Newman on TV and spent the rest of the evening shocked, looking at the belongings they had worked hard for, belongings they would mostly have to give up. Looking at the home they had built together, over the years. They lay in the bed, Miranda crying, Antonio holding her.

Both had been conditioned by Newman. Both now questioned him, freed a bit by the shock. Moving underground sounded horrible. How could Newman even suggest it? Everyone knew things were bad, but nowhere near that bad.

Wendy and Peter, in bed, oblivious to anything or one but themselves, satisfied.

Shallot and Farha sat together in the barn, notebooks on their laps, talking to the plants.

Later in the day, Madeline got up from bed, washed, put on some clothes. Sally murmured, on the bed, watching. Madeline picked up her cell phone. "Got to do something," she told Sally. "It's all too stirred up. Relax. We can only watch right now. I'll stay in touch."

"Where are you going?"

"To the one other person I have to talk with today."

Sally nodded, slowly getting out of bed. "Okay okay okay. I'll get up and work my contacts."

Marjorie's home was lovely. Madeline always liked how it radiated charm and thoughtfulness. They sat together in the living room, a hand-hooked rug Marjorie created on the floor, fake yarn with a pleasant glow. The rug was colourful, a field of flowers.

"Worried?" Madeline asked as they sat on the lovely couch.

"Scared stiff. It's best not to show it. Tea?" She poured two waiting cups from the small tea pot on the table in front of them.

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“Any idea what to do? The colonists are quickly forming their own government, ignoring Council.”

She shrugged. “Predictable. We have to have faith in people. We wait. We’ve heard from the workers. Newman’s been exposed, lying. Bricks falling from the wall he’s built around himself. He knows they see through the hole. To him.” She sighed. “It is all so ugly.”

“We cannot sit and watch, not even at this early stage,” Madeline insisted.

“Try more tea.”

“We have to network with key workers. Help them.”

“We have been. For a week. You’re going in circles, dear.”

“Shallot’s gone into hiding. We don’t have that luxury. Newman may come after us. Will come after us.”

“I agree. Within days. He already believes we’re plotting against him. Me, not you. I’ll be warned. Go home and get some rest. First, finish your tea. I don’t think you eat well.”

Madeline left feeling a bit calmer. The tea, and Marjorie, warmed her. She was uncertain why Marjorie was so calm, but Marjorie had always been her own person. She spent more time with Madeline’s father than with her. She knitted her dad mittens last winter. Perhaps Marjorie was correct, that the best solution was to leave Mars altogether.

It took little time for Madeline to drive to Police Headquarters. She would have preferred walking, being among people. But her leg ached and she still did not want to be seen using a cane. She looked at it beside her, a symbol of her increasing weakness.

The workers’ organizations all had meetings planned for that evening to discuss Newman’s statement and the viability of pumping pollution underground, of building a new colony below them. The Water Workers in particular were angry at even thinking about working in the midst of Smelter pollution. Not only would it make their work harder, they were certain chemicals in the Smelter exhaust was corrosive, would further damage the pipes. And possibly poison the water everyone

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needed.

She was uncertain she should waste time at Police Headquarters, but had nothing else to do, and needed to do something. And there was still a hole to be filled.

The Chief smiled when he talked with her but his mind clearly was not in the room. He covered his wariness of her, was also busy with investigation reports he covered up (Shallot was at the farm, it was unclear where.) Not only did he have no problem letting her see Mike by herself, he encouraged it. She assumed Mike's cell was covered by security cameras, and he would send the talk to Newman.

After she left, he texted Newman. Newman wanted to know everything she did. He probably already knew, officers had followed her since yesterday evening.

A guard led her through corridors, then to the restricted area, then to the end of a row of cells, to Mike. The guard then left her.

Mike sat in a small, barred cell, on a single bed. There was a sink and toilet. No windows or mirror. He wore a convict's suit. He still wore his shoes but the laces had been removed. Nor did he have a belt.

She sat on a waiting folding chair outside the cell. His hands were folded in his lap. Hers clutched her handbag. He knew she was there but said nothing, did not look at her. "So. How are you today?" she asked, quiet, distanced. She was there because of guilt. She owed him at least a visit. He probably knew that.

"How's Sally working out?" he asked, looking at the floor.

She waited for him to look at her. He finally did, unable to bear the silence. "You knew I was unhappy. Unsatisfied. For a long time. You and I were only a convenience. True for both of us, yes?"

"Yeah. Yeah." He straightened. "I'm sorry. Really. I've been a jerk. I was a good aide, though, until this." He cleared his throat. The old, arrogant Mike was history.

"It's history," she told him. "Forget it. And as for this, it isn't your fault."

"My DNA was on her neck. Witnesses identified me."

"You were influenced. Without knowing it. By him."

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“How could he?”

“We think he has telepathic powers. From the plants. Like the plants.”

“I’m in jail. Seen the witness videos. I think I killed Phyllis. The real Phyllis. Like, in a dream. I can’t figure it out.”

She reached out but could not reach him through the bars. He still sat on the bed. “You were being controlled. Set up.”

“I was playing the game.”

“Yes, at first. Then you were made to believe you were playing. You were set up,” she repeated. “Mike, you were never the gamer type. Ever. When did you start?”

“Few months ago.”

“After you met with Newman maybe?” Mike blinked. “Think. You haven’t seen Newman for over a week. My guess is, he has less control over you. The last week, he’s been seen methodically being with certain worker groups, spending time with individuals. Who then start to act oddly.”

“…Yes. I remember. We talked one day at City Hall. He mentioned the game. That night, when I went home, I was eager to see what the game was like. I’d never thought it would be interesting.”

“And did you meet with him after that?”

Mike nodded. “Maybe once a week or so. Meeting him was routine. Part of my work.”

“He set you up. Probably to get at me, just before the election. He has powers, maybe from the Martian plants on the Farm, we don’t know. He killed the NPG Phyllis, then made you kill the real one. What did he tell you about the game?”

“It’s a secret, but who cares now? He said he used his avatar to kill NPGs in the game. There were no consequences. A few hours later, the NPGs were back. He showed me how.” He looked at her, trembling. She thought he might cry.

“You’ve been framed. And I can prove it. With your help. Will you help?”

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He stood. “Bet your ass. “Just keep that jerk away from me.”

“You’re as safe as possible, locked in here. I have friends here. They can prevent him from visiting. Soon you’ll be back to your old self.”

He looked at her. “That’s too bad. And, thanks.”

On the way out, she chatted with a few guards, ensuring she would be told if Newman wanted to visit Mike, and that they would try to stop him if he did. Best bet, transfer Mike to another cell so Newman could not find him.

It was getting late. She was not tired but needed a break. Limping. Should have taken her cane. She phoned Sally.

“I’m coming home. We need to talk.”

“The talk?”

“No,” Madeline told her, “Just talk. About Mike. Make coffee, please.”

“On it. Welcome home. I was thinking of going out for a walk.”

30

Freedom?

George walked out of the Clinic, Katie at his side. He took a long deep breath. Even though the air tasted bad, he relished it. Free air. He’d lost track how long he’d been isolated, locked in the health jail. More than two weeks.

We made it he told her. *On the street. Newman unlocked the doors. We didn’t have to do anything except go.*

What now? she asked.

The plants on the Farm want to talk with me. The Martian plants. I feel them calling, but they are too far away. Shallot told me, through the game.

You aren’t going home?

Going home means nothing to me.

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I'm going home. I need to see mom and dad before anything else.

They shook hands, then she left to walk one way, he in the opposite direction.

George felt no need to hide, as Shallot had. Newman was certainly having him watched, either followed or at least monitored by surveillance cameras. Katie as well. They probably thought he'd split with her because of some kind of plan. He had.

George grinned. He was sixteen but felt older than any of them. He could easily stay one step ahead. Newman was the only true threat. And George believed he would be safer with the plants. Newman was known to never visit them.

After two weeks in the Clinic, he enjoyed walking briskly, working his legs, feeling his body pump. He felt alive. Better than ever. Certainly better than that morning when he entered the Clinic. The moving lumps were gone—no, it was more accurate to say they had found a place inside him. Two seeds, no longer seeds. Two Martian plants. Growing inside him. Sharing their energy, their early, childish seedling thoughts.

What does sun look like? they asked, knowing only darkness.

See through my eyes. And they did.

Moving. We have no memory of our species moving.

They are plants. I am an animal.

We enjoy moving. It is amazing! The view always changes!

George saw people he knew. He waved, they waved back. They smiled but he saw it was phoney, they were absorbed in thought—probably about whether they would have to move underground. Certainly hardly noticing him. As he walked towards the Farm, most everyone George saw appeared stressed, some angry. The few he stopped, ones he knew well, they all asked how it felt to be uprooted. They told him they were glad he was out of the Clinic, but did not ask why.

Some told him he was better off in the Clinic. Otherwise he would think only of approaching disaster and living in a cave.

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He had been to the Farm once, a school tour. He knew where it was, not far now. The farm then was open. Now he saw it was fenced. A security officer stood at the main gate. He walked up, confident when he saw the officer's face. Two years ahead of him in school.

"George."

"Willy."

"The barn you want is behind me, over there." He pointed. "Oh, and welcome."

"Shallot's inside." Cary waited by the front door. He shook George's hand, let him in, locked the door behind them. George stopped, just inside, taking in the large interior.

"Thank you," he said to Cary.

"We have a common problem," Cary replied.

"I have to see the plants." Then he saw Shallot, walking up to him, shy, smiling.

He took her into his arms and they held onto each other. For a long, quiet while.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered into his ear.

"Don't be. I needed to be in the Clinic. Couldn't call myself."

"Not that." She started to take him to her little room, holding his hand. After a few feet, past the walls and stacked palettes, he saw the plants. He looked at them, waiting for him. He for them.

"Not yet," she told him. "We have something important to do together." She looked at him, holding his hand.

"Yes. I missed you. That was the hardest part of the two weeks. But. Shallot. I have to talk to the plants. Have to. They're calling to me."

"Why?"

"Because I have two growing inside me."

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Before she could reply he was walking towards the field. She walked with him, no longer holding his hand, finding it hard to keep up. In a moment they stood only a few feet from the rows of Martian plants. The eyes on all the plants turned towards him as he approached, now fixed on him as he stood a few feet away. He stared back.

“I’m going to talk with them, Shallot. I’ll be back.” He turned from her towards the plants.

Hello, George.

I came to see you. I have felt you for two weeks, after the plants inside me settled.

Shallot looked from him to the plants. She heard nothing. It was maybe stupid, but she felt left out. Almost abandoned, moments after he walked into the barn. When they told her George was coming, this was not what she’d expected, not what she yearned for, not what she needed. She thought he was coming to her.

Two of us live inside you. They will not harm you.

Know that. What is next for us? That I don’t know.

They will live inside you, sharing their power with you. They are happy.

Am I *going to become a plant? They turn me into one?*

No. You are their host.

What about Katie?

She also has two plants happily inside her. Perhaps it takes two, inside the right host, for our seeds to thrive outside the soil. We think on it. It is a new experience for us. We have only grown in soil. And we cannot move. Your plants are excited when you move. Which is always.

Yeah, they get excited even when I brush my teeth. What about me? Where do I go from here? Do you want me to do anything?

Be happy. It is good for your plants.

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Shallot felt increasing unease, watching George face the plants, focussed on them, their eyes focussed on him–except the single eye watching her.

Weird. Talking with no sound was weird. George entranced with the plants, not her—definitely weird.

She stepped back a few steps, took her cell phone from her pocket and asked Farha to come over. Now. This was too much to handle alone. With George, she felt alone.

Farha was there in minutes, with Cary. She walked up to Shallot and they hugged. Cary stayed a few steps back, watching. George ignored them, engaged with the plants.

“What’s up?” Farah asked when they parted.

“They’re having a chat.” She looked at Farha. “He seems okay. But this is plenty strange. I want to know what they’re telling each other.”

“Food vs. fertilizer? Dancing or being rooted?”

“Newman has to know we’re both here,” Shallot told her. “Why hasn’t he shown up? Or the police?”

“Probably wants to see what happens. My NPG thinks Newman has two seeds inside him too. Three, maybe, given how powerful he is.” Farha looked at Shallot. “Are they friendly? Is George? Is he a new threat?”

Shallot hugged her again. “My NPG says friendly. All they want to do is live. If the dome cracks, letting in the cold, they’ll freeze. They have every reason to help us. They would never last, underground. Even if we moved them. Which Newman would never allow.”

“Maybe they knew better,” Shallot replied. “Warm underground city, plenty of direct light. Maybe they’d love it. Maybe they’re just waiting.”

George turned to them, smiling. “Sorry I was away. Oh look who’s here. Shallot, they are very understanding. Guess you can call me a real Martian now. Wish I knew what that means.”

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He smiled, satisfied, he was finally here.

He needed to make time for Shallot.

He was only human.

Although he was satisfied, he could see Shallot was not. That bothered him. He could make her satisfied but had rejected the thought before entering the barn. He wanted Shallot as herself, natural, with no influencing. Just Shallot.

Because maybe he loved her.

32

Consequences

They were all unsatisfied. More, angry.

“What does this mean?” Wendy asked Peter.

“It means the responsibility’s been dumped on us. Because we’re grabbing it,” Peter muttered, standing next to her.

“Because no one else is,” she replied.

They were at the New Council meeting, composed of elected workers from each worker group. Also at the meeting were the Councillors, except Newman. The Councillors were all nervous. They weakly smiled, avoiding talking to anyone, which was fine with everyone because everyone ignored them. They might as well have written on their foreheads: *sell outs*.

The Water Workers were furious at the plans to pump Smelter pollution into the lava tube where they worked every day. Dangerous to them, risky to the colonists, pipes and water. Their mood was matched by the other workers crowding the large room. Beyond unsettled.

The Dome workers were furious Newman had misrepresented the dome’s status. That he lied to colonists about there being an immediate threat of unrepairable cracks.

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The Service workers were upset at the extra work Newman had created, colonists deeply stressed, random crimes being committed—often thefts of bottled water.

The Farmers were upset lighting had not been resolved and water kept being disrupted. The current crop most struggling.

The Administration workers sent three representatives, who remained at the back of the hall, taking notes.

After a few speeches–there was little need for speeches when everyone agreed–a consensus was clear. Public statements, already prepared, would be made by each worker group about the truth. Workers would discuss the situation with anyone they knew. The TV news would be involved. Their focus on solving problems was now on stopping Newman.

The first statement would come from the key engineers, that a hole in the dome was impossible to guarantee, with a 90% chance in three months of creating an unmanageable crack in the dome around the hole. It concluded that Newman had ignored their concerns.

A second public paper from other engineers would state that pumping Smelter pollution underground was feasible but the resulting pollution would not only make it difficult for the underground workers, and significantly damage the water pipes, certainly contaminate the ice from which water was drawn–it also would create an impossible environment in which to build an underground city and live in it. They condemned the plan and stated Newman declared it with no consultation and had ignored their concerns.

The Dome Workers would issue a public statement that the new sealant, while not as good, was reasonably durable and would continue to seal the cracks. More work was required to keep the cracks sealed, but only more work. For them, the larger issue was acquiring more workers. The statement concluded they had discussed this with Newman and he had ignored their concerns.

The Water Workers' statement condemning the plan to pump Smelter exhaust underground as ultimately threatening the colony, not saving it. The Farmers supported all statements. The Air Quality Group doubled down, stating Newman needed to be removed and Council restructured. Because he knew of these concerns, yet ignored them.

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Applause in the room as the statements were emailed. To all colonists. To Council. To Newman.

Newman watched the live feed of that main group on TV, in his living room, naked, fondling himself. Self-pleasure was the only pleasure he received these days. Yes–he had bitten off far more than he could chew, in fact he never chewed, just gulped it down. He had been frustrated, was too ambitious. He moved too quickly.

He nodded. Even made mistakes.

Fight this before it grew out of control, if it hadn't already. He had to push this to the right side. He pushed himself off the couch, wiped up. He'd been impulsive but it was not too late. Fix his mistakes, somehow. Starting with not yielding to impulses. Concentrating on shoring up his support. Or divert the colonists, if catastrophe did not work?

He could not reverse his public statements, cancel his plans. That would be weakness, an admission of failure. He must present strength. Never admit error. Never defeat. Always fight back.

George was in that damn barn, communicating with the plants. Had to be. Shallot probably with him. He never sensed plants inside her, but who knew? He knew the plants wanted to speak with him. Even over the distance, they had reached out, many times. Each time he shut them down, ignored their calls. He had to stay away from them, despite the yearning from the three plants alive inside him.

The plants were a fundamental danger, to him.

He called Jim to his apartment, showered and dressed while waiting, made coffee and drank it while pacing, restless. His aide knocked on the door within the half hour. Sweating. He'd apparently run.

Jim sat across from Newman in the living room, wiping his brow. Newman recharged him. He needed it. "Assume you've heard," Jim finally managed.

Newman did not ask Jim what he thought Newman should do next—he'd suggest withdrawing. Hiding. Defeat. "Call the worker reps on Council. Tell them to come here. To my home. Not City Hall. Now." He felt like strangling his aide, the idiot. Newman wistfully remembered killing his aide in the game, several times. Even after he converted him. It was so satisfying. As was making him murder that

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secretary.

I have to keep these impulses checked, he thought, *or my escape ship will never be built*.

The representatives—Newman had declared everyone was a representative, there were no longer Councillors–arrived quickly, fifteen minutes. Newman wondered why his aide took longer—probably because he was frightened by the worker revolt and his inability to stop it, fearing Newman's wrath. Now he had been recharged. Shock, powerful emotions, Newman had realized, eroded his control.

When they were all seated in his living room, half of them standing, nervously looking at him, they grew blank as Newman let them sip coffee and wait, while re-energizing them. They were stressed, emotions needing to be calmed and controlled. It took a while for so many. He could only skim.

Finally, when their eyes returned to normal, he slumped back. Looked at them. They him. He asked his key Administration pawn if she had heard anything from Shallot.

"No," Miranda replied. "Nothing. No note, no message. I did what you asked. I send texts, she doesn't respond." She looked at Newman. "I'm sorry. I assure you, it isn't that she's my daughter. I will contact you at once if I hear from her." She blinked twice, clearly hiding a struggle.

Newman nodded. He wanted to hear her confirmation. "And how is Admin?"

"Turmoil. Besieged. Administration was responsible for implementing the Council decisions. And defending Council. Suddenly there is a new Council. So far, they have ignored us. We exist to support them. Staff believe their jobs and pensions are on the line."

The others nodded in agreement. "They hate me," a woman from the Smelter told him. "Won't talk to me. Tell me I'm a stooge. They don't trust me–or you." She was trembling, tears in her eyes, despite being reconditioned.

Strong emotions were very difficult to overrule.

Newman stared at all of them. They stared back. Including Jim, his aide.

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“I am so sorry this is happening to all of you. We worked together, for a common good. I never wanted you hated. I wanted you as leaders.” They nodded, in agreement. “I apologize. To all of you. Know I have a solution to help. When you return to your workplaces, to your families and friends, here is what to tell them. I hope it will help. I will work to ensure it will.

“Tell them your minds were temporarily affected for the past few weeks. They already know. That it may have been in the water. That you are now finally clear. That my mind was affected as well. That is why we acted in ways which caused concern. Where did that insidious control stem from? Most likely, the Martin plants.

“The Martian plants, growing on the farm.

“For a while at least, they were strong enough to affect us. For whatever reason, their influence has faded. Probably only temporary. They want to destroy the colony. Have Mars for themselves. Tell everyone that.”

They all said yes, becoming energized, far from enthusiastic. Some of their tension had already faded. Done with them, tired, disappointed he had not brought them completely back, Newman told them to go.

After they left, Newman looked at Jim. “You should have warned me about those public statements. That this kind of revolt was possible.”

“I did.”

Newman glared at him. Despite being re-energized, Jim showed defiance. The road ahead might be rocky. Newman’s confidence drained by the hour.

Shallot sat on the bed with George, feeling rocky, her confidence, sense of self-worth rocky. There was space between them. It was quiet, they were alone in the barn, apart from a few workers at the animal pens, far away. She had not spoken more than a few words with him. He telepathically spoke with the plants, ignoring her. Now they were in her room. She was surprised he left them but he seemed to have had enough. For now.

She tried to understand. He so needed space. He had been through so much.

Finally she asked, tentative, “What are you thinking about?”

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He turned to look at her. “Sorry. Sorry. Not about us. Off in space. Or, on Mars. The real Mars. The one we invaded.”

“Oh.”

“About the plants. What life means to them. What a plant thinks being alive means. I know a lot of their history now.”

“And?”

“I don’t know.” He rubbed his arm. “It’s a lot. They are grateful we brought them to life again. Planted them, nurtured them. They find us interesting. We build a colony, they a community. The biggest difference is legs.”

“…and what about us?”

“Us? The colonists? Oh. You mean…us. Together.”

“No, no, not that exactly. I don’t want to pressure you. You’ve suffered so much. It’s just that, before…the last time that morning in my bedroom…I said no.”

He hugged her. She was surprised but welcomed it. “I’m super fond of you. Very.” Then he pulled away. “But Shallot, it was different before. My hormones were crazy. Being horny is the last thing I’m thinking of now. That sudden, well, lust faded in the first days at the Clinic. If I’m thinking about a personal relationship, it’s about Mars. Human sex or growing from seed? After talking with them, I kind of feel strange about sex. It’s so invasive. Can you understand?”

“Not quite.” She felt relieved but not. George was creepy. Chatting with plants was creepy. On the surface, it was fine. Perhaps it was all surface, nothing dark underneath. Maybe it was her. She had to get used to it. Adjust. She wanted to hug him and didn’t. That would not be smart. He might be alarmed or something.

Lately she had gotten little of what she wanted.

“They probably know you’re here. We’re here. Are you staying?”

“Nowhere else to go. And I’m not finished with the plants. Is that okay? Do you mind sharing the room?” He turned from looking out the open door, to the plants, to look at her. “I’m glad to be here with you. I’d rather be here, with you, than

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with any other person."

"Really?"

"I'm sorry. It must be very strange."

"This is all strange. You've changed."

"Worried I'll influence you? Change you? That I already have? Would you have those worries if I'd changed you?"

She looked at him. "No. You wouldn't. Of course. I'm sorry." She ran her hand through her long hair, nervous. He continued to look at her. She liked him focussing on her. "What about Katie?"

"You mean competition? I'm not thinking that way right now." He smiled. "She's my plant partner. That's all."

Nothing she could think of to say sounded right, so she said nothing. Now she was sharing her room with him. Her bed. That might distract him with his plant obsession. She had feelings for him, growing feelings. The feelings were good but disturbing. They felt as if alien emotions and thoughts were inside her–difficult to understand, impossible to control but totally natural. For Shallot, new emotions and thoughts.

This was not a slippery slope. This was an elevator, speeding past every floor until it reached the top.

33

Returning Home Again

Katie walked home slowly. Everyone she passed was agitated, upset, concerned. She felt their emotions. Katie herself was calm. The plants inside her were calming. Plants are calm. Even in a storm. She felt good.

She stopped one woman she vaguely knew and asked why she was upset. The woman told her, "Moving underground and now the plants, of course," and the woman hurried on.

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She reached her home, the house where she grew up, from infancy. Lights were on inside. Her parents were home—part of walking slowly was that she would arrive after their shifts usually ended. They would be preparing dinner. Would they be surprised! Their daughter, sole child, released and coming home!

Katie smiled and opened the door.

Inside smelled of fresh baked cookies.

She loved her parents, even though they frequently argued with her–which they told her was part of growing up. They got along well enough, and they loved her, their only child. Their main focus had always been on her. In the rest of the world, she was often nervous, never receiving the attention she believed she was entitled to.

Her parents, were done setting plates in the dining room (her mom thought it inappropriate to eat more than breakfast in the kitchen), had food on the table and had just sat down. When she walked in, they looked up.

“The Clinic told us you’d been released.” Her mother was unusually reserved.

“You okay?” her father asked. Her father was cool. He often was distant.

“Those things, are they still inside…” her mother added, trailing off.

They both stood, studying her. Their reaction was no surprise, she had been in the Clinic. She smiled her cheeriest best. “I’m fine. In remission or something. I have, well, here it is. I have Martian plants growing inside me. They share with me. I provide nourishment, an environment sort of. They provide me with their point of view. They think it is really cool when I walk.”

Her mother began shaking. Her father asked, stiff, “Say what? Martian plants, inside you? The Clinic never told us anything.”

“They called today,” her mother added. “Said you’d been released. Suggested I bake cookies.” They moved away from her as she approached.

“It’s okay,” she quickly told them. “They aren’t hurting me.”

“Will they hurt *us*?” her father demanded. “How do we know you’re not hypnotized by them or something? Or that you’re *you*? That you’re not infecting *us*?”

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Katie stopped. She expected concern for her. This was fear for them. “Mom, Dad, I’m me. Okay. Why are you afraid? You know it isn’t contagious, right? What’s going on?”

“Our friends. Co-workers. The TV news,” her father told her evenly. “The plants have been influencing people. They’re why Newman seemed power hungry. We’re all worried about them. What they’re up to. What they’ll do next.”

“Tell us,” her mother asked, shaking. “Is this war? Are they taking Mars back?”

They backed away farther. Katie stood hands open, shocked.

“Maybe you should return to the Clinic,” her father said. “You’re not safe here. People see you as a danger.”

“I’m sure we can make it work. Once people see I’m just me.”

“You heard your father. How do we know you’re you?”

Unable to do anything else, she abruptly entered their minds and calmed them. In a few minutes, they sat comfortably in their chairs, back at the table, sitting with her. Their eyes were glazed. Immediately she regretted her action. She did not want it this way. She uncalmed them, retreating. Did they know?

Her father’s gaze was cold. “What the hell was *that*?”

“Did you do something?” her mother asked, angry. “It’s true, isn’t it?”

Katie stood, backing away, again holding our her hands. “You were so angry. I just wanted it to be calm, so we could talk. I’m sorry. I swore I wouldn’t, but I did. I won’t again. You’re just so angry!”

“The daughter I raised,” her father said evenly, “would never have thought of altering my mind.”

“You swore you wouldn’t,” her mother added, icy, “but you did. Bent us to your will. What’s next?”

They were right, that was the worst part. She fled them and her home, crying. Finally straightening, wiping her tears, she found herself on the sidewalk in front of

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the house. People she knew walked around her. It was her neighbourhood. People she'd chatted with, partied with, now avoiding her, giving her a wide birth on the sidewalk.

Shunning her.

She clouded the minds of those around her, so they did not notice her. Their faces brightened immediately. That made it easier. She started walking. She could not remain here. Her parents might come outside any moment and shout she was a monster. They were probably calling the police right now. She had been freed from the Clinic, but now she could be charged, with assaulting her own parents.

She walked away, slowly, crying again.

Her parents watched, through the window. Then her father picked up his cell and called the police, not wanting to but needing to do something. His daughter had done something to them, her own parents. Who knows what the plants inside her would make her do next? The plants were dangerous, he had seen it for himself.

An hour later, as he spoke with the police, the TV news crew arrived, and he also talked with them.

Katie's mother patted his back and offered the police and news crew fresh cookies.

34

Anger Flares When Fanned

"There's no need for confrontation." Cary met the large angry crowd at the front gate, two security officers beside him. They were not armed. "Welcome to the Farm. We heard you were coming. I am here to help." Murmurs. "Why are you here today?"

"To see those plants," Antonio, representing the Smelter, told him. "To see for ourselves, after all the rumours. Are they a threat?"

"No. They are no threat," Cary calmly replied. "And yes, of course you can see them." The metal fence between them opened, the gate parting.

Miranda stood next to him, representing Administration, added, "Thank you."

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Cary smiled, dealing his discomfort in front of a mob best he could. “Everyone can see them. But space is limited. Can we start with a group of twenty? Start with those in front?” He backed away, pointing to the locked barn. The crowd members looked at each other, murmuring, then about twenty in front self-selected themselves and stepped forward. Among them were the new workers’ representatives to Council, hoping to earn trust.

He led them to the barn, the front door open, waiting. “We normally keep the door locked. I am in here every day Nothing has ever controlled me. Or tried to. The plants have never attempted anything on any farmer, as far as we know. Yes, the plants are strange. Marian. We all agree, just looking at them is…unsettling. Alien. When you look at them, do not be alarmed. As you are aware, they have eyes. Knowing and seeing is different.” And he led them inside.

They walked around the palettes to the large field. Some gasps as they saw the plants for the first time, in person. Soon they were only steps away. Standing near them was George. Shallot stood nearby. They both were farmers’ clothing.

George looked confident as they approached, smiled when they stood near him. He appeared healthy, normal. He smiled. “Hello,” he said to them. “I’m George. I was in the Clinic. I have plants growing inside me. Some of you, you grew up with me. Or know me. As you can see, I’m still me. George.”

Some stared at him, others the plants, actually both, eyes darting back and forth, from his eyes to the plants’, the plants’ eyes all fixed on them. Unblinking.

“I’ll answer your questions,” George told them. “Any questions. If the first one is, can I influence people? The answer is, yes. Let’s be upfront about that. Have I influenced people? Yes. At the Clinic. To get a better lunch.”

Murmurs, then silence. The colonists were drawn to the plants now, never having seen them up close. After years of the occasional TV feature and rumours, here they were. Large, over five feet. Orangey brown thick stalks and broad orangey red leaves. Large, unblinking eyes, staring at them. More eyes than they’d imagined. Every plant had seven or eight. All staring at them.

Miranda and Antonio remembered watching George walk out the door with two Clinic staff, thinking he would be dead within a week. They were already angry at the plants, Newman told her and everyone the plants were dangerous.

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Now, standing in the barn–they were just plants.

Despite those eyes.

Shallot, standing away from the group, seemed fine, but despite Newman, her focus was on George. “George,” Miranda said to him. “Honestly, I never thought I’d see you again.”

His smile was gentle. “I’m not only alive, ma’am. I feel fine. I was released. They told me I could go anywhere. I came here. Like all of you, I had to see these things myself. That’s pretty much the whole story.”

Nodding. The colonists all felt calmer, willing to listen. No longer stormy. What they saw was not what they had been told, felt like no threat.

“Turns out,” George continued to the group, “I survived being infected because two plants are inside me. One, you’re a goner. The plant draws too much energy. The plant is only a seed. It knows nothing, except to survive. The seeds are not trying to harm their host. They’re not aware, really.

“But with two, as they grew and finally settled, somewhere in my chest, I felt stronger, not weaker. Yes, I have alien plants inside me. Do they have telepathic powers? Do I? Yes. But I assure you the powers are very limited. I have to be a few feet away. The plants and I are too far away to affect any of you. Right? You feel okay, right”

More nodding.

“As you can feel, the plants radiate calm. After all, they are plants. It is their nature. They only become agitated when the environment changes. Deep cold. No water. A bad storm. In here, they are protected. They know we protect them. They have zero reason to harm us. They are simply happy to be able to grow and live.”

Murmurs.

“We were told they are dangerous,” Antonio said to him, holding Miranda’s hand.

“They only grew from the seeds because we brought warmth. Warmth and water. If the colony fails, the plants will die. The last thing they want to do is destabilize

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us. No, they are desperate to help us. Influencing Council, influencing Councillor Newman? Why? Why destabilize us? They need us. Second, you have to be close to them, and Councillors have not visited this barn for years. Until today."

The people in the crowd looked at each other. Rather than anger, shrugs. His explanation made sense. He obviously was okay. They felt fine, nothing influencing them.

George asked for questions.

How did he feel? What was it like, alien plants living inside him? What sort of telepathic powers? Had he used them? Was he going to die?

He answered patiently. Shallot shifted on her feet, watching, uncomfortable He lied smoothly.

By then Cary had entered the barn and seen most of it. The group was satisfied, he led them back out as they chatted with each other. George watched them go, smiling. When the door closed, Shallot stepped towards him. To her, he radiated power, in the best way.

"You hear?" he asked.

"They're no longer angry." She walked up to him and took his offered hand. It felt strong in hers. Reassuring. "And the plants?"

"I couldn't do it alone. They can work such a large group, so quickly. They want us stable, Shallot, not afraid. They agreed to help." He squeezed her hand. "No one but me, maybe Katie, understands them. There were no animals on Mars. Just plants. These survived, through their seeds. They are not used to animals, they have their ancestors' memories. How we move. That we move. Living movement around them makes them…unsettled. It's unnatural.

"It's taken decades for them to get used to us."

They stood together looking at the plants, which looked back. Shallot did not feel calm. Apparently, the plants saw no need to influence her. Good. This was hardly a calm time. She did not like him using his power, even though with the crowd it seemed necessary. Anger was no good. "What's next?" she asked.

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“Another group in a few minutes,” he replied. “I’ll do them all. Today will be busy. The plants are looking forward to the colonists being happy, calm.” He radiated confidence.

She gripped his hand. “You were strong. Powerful. A leader.” She squeezed again, his hand was so strong. She loved his wrists. Loved looking at him. He was more than cute. Shallot felt…a warmth. A warmth she had never felt before. A warmth inside her.

She knew what it was.

Squeezing her hand, he looked at the plants. Probably he was communicating with them. Planning a better future. Before uncertain, now Shallot felt confident. George knew what he was doing. And she was certain he had not influenced her, apart from him just being himself.

She heard footsteps approach outside and let his hand go, reluctantly, retreating to her room, partially shutting the door.

She looked at the bed.

Lying on it right now was a poor idea.

Anyway, she couldn’t be so passive. So she stood against the wall, by the partly open door, breathing fast, looking out.

She felt less guilt about that morning. George had no problems with it at all. And it had been better, waiting. Until the right time.

Like, now.

Or when all these crowds stopped. And he could focus his attention on her.

Was now the right time? The warmth. She’d felt aroused before but never like this. She imagined them together, but stopped. That seemed creepy. Although them lying together on a sandy, tropical beach, water lapping at their feet, birds in the background, the ocean free of sharks…

She heard the barn door open and another group walk in. She peeked. Farha led this group. The group was less angry—they must have already heard a little from

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the first group. She peeked out a bit more. George began his speech.

Oddly, it was almost exactly the same.

She shut the door, sat at the desk. The notebook was running, the game open. Messages waited for her. She did not bother to read them. How could George be so decent, honest and also devious? Deceptive? She knew she was falling for him. Was she falling into a pit?

She looked at her messages. One was from the Martian Plant NPG. *Don't worry. It lasts only a few days. They are only calmer. They needed to think more clearly.*

A message from her NPG. She responded.

I'm confused, her NPG texted back. *About George.*

Yes, it is manipulating them but—

Not that. How I feel. About him. Before, I never felt anything, not truly. It was whatever the programme required. Now I feel all warm and weird around him. Realistically, he can be creepy. These feelings are disturbing. Before, I think my feelings were pretend.

Yes. I'm not sure where this is going.

Oh, kiddo. We know where this is going. We aren't on birth control.

Don't be gross.

If we can't be gross with each other, who can we be gross with? Mom and Dad?

Don't be gross.

You heard about Katie? Going home was a horror show. Her parents afraid of her, because of the fear Newman stirred up about the plants. She's alone now. Not sure where, we're trying to track her. See if we can help. Her NPG is walking in circles, crying. Won't talk to anyone.

She may return to this barn. She hasn't much choice. What about Katie?

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Usually we are directly connected to our player. Not this time. Maybe the emotions are too great. We'll solve it.

And the fear of the plants?

Here, the colonists have already spoken with the plants. They understand, even knowing they were calmed, the plants are benign. Now we're all angry at Newman, for lying yet again, this time about the plants.

Understand. Right now, all that feels far away.

Shallot put the notebook to sleep. She heard another group of colonists come into the barn, heard George again begin his speech.

She should be out there with him. He was working hard, trying to make a difference. She was being stupid.

Shallot left her room and went back outside, to stand near him.

His work was difficult. She should support him.

Also, she was his…girlfriend.

35

Bad Moon Rising

Throughout the colony, people talked–for the first time, perhaps, as a community–*not* about Marsball. They worried about the plants. Newman. The dome. The air. Living underground. Living underground with Smelter exhaust. Talking about where they were and where they were being led and whether it made sense. They felt lied to, manipulated. What would happen next? What would they be told next?

Did their leaders know the difference between truth and lies?

Make Mars Great Again–its sole impact now was to create scorn. Newman, sitting in his office, having made his daily rounds, knew that. He had stuck his neck out and felt the approaching blade. Using the plants as a diversion backfired almost immediately. He sat alone. He should have realized.

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Jim. He blamed Jim, for not warning him. He had heard the many antagonistic murmurings focussing on him, the new leader. He made himself the face of everything, didn't he? This blowback was predicable. But dangerous. Something had to change. Colonists had to feel secure, stop feeling threatened, under siege, waiting for the next disaster. Yet disaster was all that united them. To rebuild and keep going, he needed a disaster. Something bad. That was always a diversion. With luck, the colony would hand him one. It would be a miracle, but miracles do occur.

Underground, in the deep lava tubes, Wendy and Peter were finishing a weld, water shut off in that pipe until they were done. About thirty feet away, another two workers finished welding in a new patch and signalled water was a go for them. Wendy heard the deep rumbling of the pumps, felt the ground tremble as unfrozen water rapidly approached—them! Water was pulled into *their* pipe.

Weary workers had turned on the wrong pump.

Suddenly turgid streams of water burst from the unfinished weld, the iron patch thrown up, bouncing off the lava tube ceiling. Wendy radioed for the water pumps to stop but it was already too late. The burst widened, doubling the raw open wound before the pumps were shut down. The cavern was a disaster area, again, covered in ice.

Water had to be completely shut off until the failure could be evaluated and which pumps should now be used. When the water stopped flowing, the steam plant shut down. Emergency lights flared on across the colony.

Up above, at the opposite end of the colony, Dan and Warren hung from the dome, desperately applying new sealant to a widening crack, the dome under pressure from a heavy sandstorm. The new sealant eroded against the pressure of the wind as they applied it. It had no chance. Even thick coatings struggled, and they were almost out of the new sealant.

They watched as the crack widened, connecting to a new crack above them, within reach. The fierce winds blasted sand onto their place plates. The crack was only two inches long, one wide. Warren desperately called for more dome workers and more sealant. By the time help arrived, their suits were brown and dusty and they could barely see through their face plates.

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Below them they did not see it but a jury-rigged filter on one of the Smelter's stacks blew, belching unfiltered crap into the air. Workers there ran, grabbing face masks. They had no replacement filter ready.

The three new crises, accompanied with again no water or power and now brown Martian dust rushing through the dome—disasters which were immediate—not in the future but affecting everyone now.

Council met within an hour of the third failure. Newman sat in Madeline's chair as the members came in. Madeline and Sally came in with the others, but sat along the wall, Madeline these days only an observer. Newman watched them all walk in. All shaken. Conditioning them as they entered and sat and looked at him, and then the table. For the first time, re-energizing failed. They were too upset. Too many upset, too deeply upset. He had to stop himself from glaring at them.

Failure was not an option. Failure was never an option. Nor was retreat.

He felt Madeline's eyes on his neck. His forehead was damp but he didn't wipe it. Weakness. Then he did wipe it, as not wiping it also showed weakness. He stilled himself, trying not to sweat. He looked ahead. Defeat stared calmly back.

He would never win, not here, not today.

He spent the afternoon trying to address the continually worsening events–talking and texting with Committee representatives and key workers he controlled. Everyone was angry. Challenging him. They were already difficult to control. The new burst water pipe and crack in the dome made it far worse. They looked at him, waiting. Barely controlled, some not at all. There were too many to concentrate on. He was surrounded.

He had to not think of this meeting as a trap.

He began by updating them on the water, power and dome situations. He stressed his understanding of colonist discontent. With extra effort, he told them the new crack had been sealed but the Dome Workers were exhausted. And angry. As were the Water Workers. The workers in the Smelter were angry they were causing more bad air because of the production the colony demanded. Even Administration was finally upset.

He forced himself to be patient. This meeting was crucial. He reminded them he

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had been right about the dome. Smelter pollution was worse than ever, validating his plans to pump the exhaust underground. As for the plants, could they not have made people visiting them *think* they were harmless?

He saw they bought the first two. Not the plants. They had all visited the barn that day. The plants, Marjorie said, interrupting the silence, were just plants. They could not move. And they depended on the colonists for warmth and food. She looked at the other Councillors and reminded them of what they all seen. Nothing evil.

He realized the plants had influenced them all, probably stopping him from calming them.

Marjorie looked at Newman, who for the moment appeared lost for words. They were all looking at him. She was not sure where *he* was looking. Off in space? "What are you looking for? Scapegoats?" she asked, snapping him out of it. She put down her knitting. "None of us believe the plants are a danger. Why choose them as your scapegoat? Of course, you've also thrown in Smelter pollution, the dome and moving underground." She leaned forward. "Most of us don't believe those issues are the real danger facing us today. We believe that you have plants growing inside *you*. That *you* have been influencing colonists." She stared at him. "That *you* are our real threat."

Whoa. Direct confrontation. "Are you serious? You know me."

"Yes," Madeline added, "we do. That's the point."

The confrontation, the demand, was empowering. He returned their glares, serious, engaged. "Yes. I have a plant growing inside me. So far, it has not changed me. Yes. I've made mistakes. Certainly I wanted power. I was so eager to lead. No longer."

He paused. Their glares softened very slightly.

"I have lost your trust. I deserved to lose it. I've faced reality. I regret my mistakes. My many mistakes. There is only one action I can take. I resign. Withdraw. Leave. Now."

They blinked, including Madeline sitting behind him. She expected defiance. Not bailing. Not retreating. This was not him. "You're resigning?" she asked,

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unbelieving her words, out loud.

“I need time to think. Reassess.” They listened. He appeared humble. “As for Council itself, I suggest to you it is now irrelevant. Ignored. The new Councillors have been treated horribly.” The new Councillors nodded. “The workers’ organizations have the power. I believe they will succeed. They will coordinate work and resources far more efficiently. I suggest we help them. And the best way to do that is for the entire Council to also resign.”

By then, all of the Councillors were nodding, including Marjorie. What Newman told them not only made sense, most had already come to that conclusion. Especially the new Councillors, desperate to regain friends and standing. Madeline, by the wall, understood where Newman was likely going, but could only watch him play his hand.

Newman stood, leaning forward on the table, looking at them. “This will be very difficult for me. Talking to you today has been difficult. It will be harder to go on live TV to announce this. First, I suggest one of you go on TV and announce that the entire Council has resigned. That is background. Then I will follow and take responsibility for my mistakes. Entire responsibility.” He looked down at the table, then into their eyes. “To feel good about myself, I have no choice.”

“Fine.” Marjorie picked up her cell and called, then looked at him. “TV will be here in minutes. They always have a standby crew downstairs.”

Newman nodded. “Excellent. Do we have more to talk about? Anyone?”

Dead silence.

Madeline finally stood. “Councillors, I urge you to reconsider. This is abrupt. Give it a day. Think about it. Council could still serve a purpose. We have a structure already in place. We do not have to reinvent the wheel.”

Zero. They all wanted out.

A two person TV crew came into the boardroom, a host and cameraperson. There was no set up, apart from the camera being turned on, the sound tested. Then the host looked at Marjorie. Marjorie told her, “Open it, then I’ll speak first.”

The host nodded, then turned to the camera. “Hello, I am Jane Withers. We are

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interrupting programming with this live broadcast from City Hall. We have been told a special announcement is forthcoming from Council." She looked at Marjorie. "Councillor Madras?"

The camera pointed at Marjorie.

"Good morning. I speak for the Council. We are in the midst of yet more difficulties. Power and water remain unavailable, possibly for days. We believe the colony is better served by the workers themselves coordinating resources and repairs. Given the situation, which is desperate, Council has decided to disband. All of the Councillors have resigned. We trust the colonists. This is sudden. I am sure we will have more to say in the days ahead."

She never managed a smile, though she tried.

"I believe Councillor Newman has something to add."

The camera turned, focussing on him.

He faced the camera. "I have made many mistakes. Many. Because I was arrogant. I apologize to you, Marjorie, and to Council. And to our former Mayor. You voted to do what I suggested. I wanted to make Mars great again. I believed I knew what to do. I was very wrong.

"I was overwrought. About the dome. Which actually did develop a crack, despite the new sealant. And the fumes from the Smelter, which have grown worse when a main filter failed, as I predicted. And the water, which I feared was under threat–and, again, it is. I feel horrible and humbled that these destructive events continue. You had my best efforts. They were clearly not enough.

"I am retiring. Retiring from Council, from politics. Honestly, I do not think it suits me. I will continue to work, perhaps with the Smelter workers, as they are the key to all production. As for the plants, they are harmless. Let's leave them be. Good-bye, and again I hope you accept my apologies."

He stopped. Took a breath. Everyone in the room, except Marjorie and Madeline, gave him respectful applause. He was sad, humbled. They all filed out until Newman was left alone, with Jim.

"You're retiring?"

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“I told them what they had to hear.”

“Uh—am I still working for you? Do I still have a job?”

“I’ll pay you out of my own pocket. I need you.” He looked at Jim and smiled. Jim remained in his pocket.

“Thank you. I’m committed to you.” Of course he was. “But. You apologized. Isn’t that weakness?” Nervous, confused.

“They should have apologized to me. I was in a corner, had to do something. Something dramatic. Something that bought me some time. The whole Council resigned. Now I’m only one who quit. Not singled out.

“I’ll stick in their minds. Soon the colony will realize my mistakes were not mistakes. Meanwhile, they will be diverted. I need more time.” He sighed. It was not supposed to be this difficult. “I want to talk with that kid, George. And Shallot. But not in that barn. Not near the plants. Can’t go within a hundred feet of them, understand?”

“Yes, sir. I’ll get them to see you here.”

“In my office? No. I shouldn’t have an office. At my apartment.”

“I’ll contact them as soon as I leave.”

“Good. Jim. You’ll be a greater help to me than ever. The next couple of weeks will be difficult. Stick with it.”

“Yes, sir. Of course. I appreciate your saying I’m a help, out loud.”

“I don’t do that, do I?”

“No.”

“I shouldn’t have to.” He looked at Jim steadily.

“Yes, sir. If I may, what will you be doing?”

“Winning them back. Circulating among the colonists. Acting respectful. Humble.

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I came close. Went overboard. Panicked." No, he could not admit that. "Almost but I never panicked." He could not admit it, even to Jim. "Let the workers shoulder the blame for the colony failing. I'll be in the wings." He looked around the boardroom. "I'm packing what I need from my office, then heading home. I can't kill anyone in the game. Maybe I'll finally have a moment to jerk off."

"Yes, sir. Of course, sir. You need to jerk off. Uh, relax."

Jim hurriedly left.

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