36

Hurricane At Your Door

“Now what?”

Madeline looked at Sally as they sat in her apartment. “Best guess? He’ll avoid the plants. For now. He’ll sit with the workers’ organizations, quietly feeding their fears and need for…him. Ugh.”

“Ugh. Drink? Cuddle?”

“Not yet. No time.”

“So…what? Time for what?”

Madeline shrugged. She liked this chair, plush and comfy. She could settle in and think, no longer weight bearing. “We network. Talk with the rational. Use the NPGs to help.”

Sally took her notebook from her bag, opened it, powered up and entered ***Mars and Me***. She started typing almost at once. “Your NPG and mine are getting ready to go to the workers’ meeting.” Typing. “My NPG says the colonists in the game are almost equally divided. Forty percent want Newman back as soon as possible. Forty percent want anyone else. You rank low. She says the NPGs see you as weak. She keeps reminding me, this is about change.”

“Thank you so much for the brutal honesty.” She smiled, as if welcoming a good friend. “Sweets, I’ve wanted out for a long time. Out of this swamp. The daily disasters. This Martian sandstorm.”

Sally put the notebook to sleep. “I’ll know more when I chat with other NPGs. I saw the dome is not okay and water and power is mostly off for two more days. No one wants to pump smog underground, especially not if they may have to live there. They believe is a solution is within reach, they just haven’t figured it out yet.”

“Lot to chew on,” Madeline finally said, standing. “They’re ahead of us. Like them, we should be heading out, for the meeting. No time to waste, eh?”

With no time to waste, Jim drove straight from Newman to the Farm. On the way he

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made phone calls and texts. He was stopped by a traffic officer but explained it was a political emergency.

He was met at the gate by Cary, who took him to the barn. Jim stopped at the door, then took a few steps back. “Can he come out here?” Cary cocked his head, looking at him. “I don’t like the plants either. They’re weird.”

Cary went inside, closing the door behind him. Jim stood outside, waiting. He knew he wss not nervous. He knew what he had to do, knew he could do it. Still, he checked his watch several times. It was a Mickey Mouse watch. Jim bought it when he started as an aide with Newman, six years ago. Mickey grinned optimistically as the second hand swept along.

The door opened. Cary stepped out, followed by George. George waved at Jim, relaxed. “Hi.”

“Hi. You know who I am?”

“Sure. You work for Newman. He want to meet me?”

Had this sixteen-year-old read his mind? Or simply made an educated guess? “You got it. He knows you’re important. He wants to talk.”

“We already have. He wants help influencing colonists.”

“Not any longer. The situation’s totally changed. He’s resigned from Council, admitted his mistakes. Now he’s trying to figure things out. You see, he has a plant inside him as well.”

“Just one?”

“Uh, two I think. He won’t talk about it. Embarrassed. He shouldn’t be. He needs to learn. From you. To feel more secure.”

“That’s nice. We think he has three plants living inside him.” George looked at him a while, then put his hands in his pockets. “Sure. I assume, at City Hall? His apartment?” Jim nodded. “Nope. Here or nowhere.”

“He doesn’t want to be near the plants. Not yet.”

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“I bet.” George smiled. “Here or nowhere. I’ll do a meet and greet.” George turned, smiling politely, and walked back into the barn. Cary closed the door behind him.

Jim started the walk back to his cart, waiting before calling Newman. He had to think this through. George both closed the door and left it open. He had to weigh it all before calling Newman. Especially meeting in the barn, near the plants. That would require quite the pitch.

George, satisfied, walked back to the plants. Shallot sat on a chair, near them. “How’d it go?” she asked.

“Progress. Newman wants to see me. I told him only here. You?”

“I listen but they don’t talk to me.”

“You don’t have a seed inside you, cutie.”

“I think they like me. They radiate warmth. Caring. I feel it. But they’re not in my head.”

“You’re only feeling their affection. They like you. Because, I think, you like me.”

“Oh. ….okay. I think I understand.” Shallot smiled for him. What would tonight be, when they were together in bed? Would he think of her or those damn plants? She knew he was attached to them, so she had to be careful. So he would not prefer them to her.

Shallot wondered if her parents or even grandmother had these problems when they were sixteen.

Sally sat with Madeline in her cart as they drove, Madeline’s cane by her side. Madeline had decided using the cane in public was okay, or anyway becoming necessary. Did her public image matter any longer? Could anyone think less of her?

Sally did her best to be reassuring, she saw the wear and tear. And, underneath, tears. “Almost there. Gonna use the cane?”

“Gonna. Screw it.” They were going to a large worker’s meeting. Many would see

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the cane, word would spread. She shrugged.

“How’s your grand daughter?”

“From her texts, she’s dealing with love, at sixteen.”

37

Democracy

The most active workers attended the general call. By then, most workers had become active.

The only space large enough was the Marsball arena, with the agreement with Marsball that the meeting would be over before the latest regional final. Colonists crowded, excited, into the seats closest to the playing field, where mikes had been set up. Almost one hundred turned up—a quarter of the colony.

Marina and Antonio were there. Wendy was there, Peter performing emergency repairs on a water pipe. Warren was there with Dan. Cary and other farmers attended, as did all the workers on Air Quality. The resigned Councillors were present, looking resigned. As were their former aides, all now unemployed, wondering what was next. Madeline walked in, limping, using her cane. Sally stood proudly at her side.

And Newman was in the crowd, chatting with colonists, contrite.

The workers on Air Quality and the central Workers’ Colonists United group, formed only the day earlier, sat unsteadily on folding chairs placed on the playing field, facing the group.

The Marsball playing field was made of large, interconnected trampolines.

Marsball, a team sport, took advantage of Mars’ lower gravity. Seven players from each of three teams played in a game, each player hanging from thin cables attached to the ceiling, on swivels running the length of the field. A large red ball—the Mars Ball—dropped from the ceiling to start a game. The players then bounced up and down on the trampolines, at times reaching near the ceiling, catching the ball if they could, passing it down the field towards their own goal.

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With three teams competing against each other, a Marsball game was fast paced, often dangerous as players frequently crashed into each other. When the players grew angry and frustrated, they took off their gloves and punched each other. Key members of each team were ‘enforcers,’ whose main role was to intimidate and punch players on the other teams. Family audiences loved it.

Children were brought up with Marsball by their parents, on home trampolines. Being a player was well paid and prestigious. Game winners were honoured, the ultimate finalist team celebrated with a parade and free pastries featuring the faces of the players. You could eat a cookie with a photo of your favourite player on it. Especially popular were Marsball donuts, featuring the faces of a smiling player, their mouths wide open where the donut hole was. People enjoyed sticking their tongues in the hole when licking off the delicious icing.

When it looked like anyone who wanted to show up had, a woman stood up, on the field. She chaired the central group. She updated the crowd that there would be no power and water for several days. Patches on the dome were holding, the Smelter’s new patches had failed. The Smelter workers were exhausted. All the workers were exhausted, working double time voluntarily, without extra pay—there was no money to pay them.

The leader of the Smelter workers stood and apologized. He said the Smelter needed more workers and was struggling, making mistakes. The atmosphere was tense but his apology was accepted. Everyone could smell the sweat in the stadium. The leaders of the Dome and Water workers apologized to the Smelter workers for criticizing them, acknowledging everyone struggled these days.

The woman chair noted that the Smelter Workers and other groups initially insisted that they each receive top priority for resources, but now each group’s position was that colony needs should have top priority, not workers’ groups. Coordination was starting to work, channelling people and material to where they were needed most, based on a vote by the new central Workers’ Group.

They refused to call it a Council.

There was then back and forth between the workers on the field and those in the crowd. By then, most of the crowd had left their seats and were sitting on the field or standing, bouncing on the trampolines. The whole field began vibrating. Those seated held onto their seats, some falling off until soon everyone stood, or tried to

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stand, while bouncing.

The atmosphere was cooperative. They were there to solve problems, not create new ones. They all knew each other, had grown up together, now were taking responsibility for the problems they faced. No one wanted power. Responsibility is easier to swallow when shared. Everyone bouncing made it easier, even a bit silly.

Madeline watched, to one side on firm ground, leaning on her cane. She chatted with people bouncing up and down, listening. Newman worked the crowd, hardly bouncing, feet widespread, barely listening to the speeches, instead reinforcing minds he controlled, acquiring new minds. Although getting tired, he struggled to keep a straight face, enjoying himself. They were all so naïve.

On his journey there had been tall hills and deep valleys—behind him now, he would ensure that. Victory would be easier than he thought. And come soon. He could feel it. He never should have questioned himself. It was stupid to think he was arrogant.

Madeline was proud of the workers. They had always resisted working together to decide on resources. That was what Council had been for. Responsibility forced on them, they rose to the challenge. She walked out of the arena as the meeting ended, using her cane, leaning on Sally. Newman left as well. The meeting was nearly over, he was exhausted. He had a headache, it was too much and he had only done a fraction of what he'd planned.

They both missed Wendy, the last speaker.

She moved from a trampoline to firm ground. "I'm from Water. I have an idea. I've discussed it with other Water workers and our engineers, it's feasible.

"Our immediate problems are the dome and Smelter pollution. What Water is proposing is not about Water and pipes." She had everyone's attention. "We pump water from under ground to the top of the dome and let it flow. We can use weak piping we've thrown away. There are ladder steps and rungs built into the outside of the dome. We can quickly build a pipe along the outside of the dome to the top. Then we pump water into it.

"Today it's -130. The water will shoot out the top and freeze rapidly. Water will flow down, coating the entire dome with ice. We think the dome can not only

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support the weight, it will strengthen it. The ice will protect the dome from the sandstorms, stopping the cracks. If any cracks start, we pump up more water. After the ice has strengthened the dome with a thick coating, we can drill a hole through the base of the dome, connect it to the Smelter and pump the pollution outside." She stood on firm ground, watching as they went still, slowly stopping bouncing.

They began to applaud.

Shallot and George sat on the bed, watching the event on TV. "Very good," George said to her, to himself, to the TV. "They came together very well. They deserve better than what they've had, leaders avoiding the issues. They're building a real colony. The water idea of coating the dome could really work."

She looked at him. "You sound as if you expected this. I thought they might fall apart, arguing."

"They have too much too lose. We want to work together but we're trained to compete." He propped himself up, leaning against the wall, smiling a little. "They only needed a push."

She felt her heart beating. They had agreed about him using his power. "George?"

"Yeah, it wasn't just calming." He smiled more, taking her hand. "All the colonists I met the other day, when they came here. While I talked to them, we encouraged them. We wanted them to work together. To create their own solutions. Not to be told what to do or think."

"And…you're not?" She squeezed his hand tenderly, though trembling. "Couldn't you let them decide for themselves?"

"They were too angry. They needed to be calm, and to see the open door. We just tickled their brains."

"I guess that's what we talked about." She squeezed his hand again, firmer. "Sorry. This all has me upside down."

"Only thinking of the future, Shallot. For all of us. Nothing wrong with that."

She smiled, her increasingly strong feelings coloured by his complexity, his

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underlying arrogance, compassion, intelligence, blind spots. She saw his arrogance as strength. He also had great wrists and beautiful eyes.

She felt herself being sucked in. She needed to talk with someone else. Nan. Farha, Allyiah. Friends whose motives she knew and understood. Women. Who were not virgins.

“Don’t worry, the colony will work it all out. Sorry, they’re calling again. Maybe they think I shouldn’t have told you.” He smiled and walked out, to return to the plants.

Shallot sat alone on the double bed, dealing with conflicting feelings, thoughts, fears. She heard some noise in the barn and assumed it was workers. If it was anything important, George would tell her, he was outside. She sighed. The game. She could speak with NPG Shallot. She got off the bed and was at her desk, opening the game, to speak to someone artificial, when George leaned in.

“Katie’s back.” He motioned behind him. “She’s feeling alone and frightened and confused. Thought you might know something about that.” She followed him out of the room. He pointed to the storage rooms on the other side of the barn, opposite their room. One door was open.

George returned to the plants, now walking among them. Shallot approached the open door. Inside, she saw Katie sitting on a single bed, trembling. Just a bed, nothing else yet. She looked up when Shallot knocked lightly on the door.

“You came back,” Shallot said, stating the obvious. “What did they do to you?”

Katie continued to tremble, hands in her lap. “I tried going home. My mom and dad are frightened of me. They wouldn’t go near me. Because of the plants inside me. Newman and others panicked them. It was a horror show. I tried calming them, they realized it and then it was worse.”

Shallot nodded and stepped into the small room.

“I walked out. No way I could stay. My relationship, it’s changed like forever. Outside, I had nowhere to go. Couldn’t return to the Clinic, ever. No way I could stay with any of my friends, their parents would be as bad. The only other place I could think of was here. George was here. And you. I remember you from fourth grade.”

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Shallot sat on the small bed next to her. “How about company for a while? George sleeps in there, but that’s all he does. He talks to the plants. You could move in with me for a while, he could use this room.” That solved her problem with George—getting some space to sort her feelings out—and helped Katie. “Share with me. Sleepover?”

Katie shook her head. “Thanks. Maybe. Right now, I feel better alone. There’s so much I have to figure out.”

“Yeah,” Shallot told her quietly. “I totally know. Well, maybe I have no idea. Struggling to get a grip.”

Katie grunted in agreement, from deep inside. “How’s George? I worry about him, what he’s thinking.”

“He spends almost all his time with the plants. He’s more interested in them than me. He feels bad about it. They talk a lot, just them. I have no idea what. They never speak out loud.”

“They’re teaching him,” Katie replied. “Feeding him. Their main interest, I think, is protecting the plants growing in us. I feel nothing but warmth from them. What I don’t know, neither do they, is whether the two plants inside me will be content to remain inside me. I talk with them, they want to grow but don’t want to hurt me.

“God, I wish I didn’t have to deal with this. George, he deliberately took another seed, they gave him their best the first day he was here. He has three.”

Shallot looked through the open doorway at George, standing in the centre of the plants, stroking their leaves, all their eyes on him. Except the plants nearest to them, which looked at Shallot and Katie.

Later that night, Shallot slept in her bed when George came in and pushed her shoulder, waking her. She looked up. There was a bulge in his pants.

“It’s time,” he told her. He took off his clothes, pulled her nightgown off–she lifted herself to help–then lay on top of her. “I think you’re wonderful. And that you want this.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “I feel bad about that morning.” She felt him push into her.

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She gasped.

He moaned.

He pushed in deeper, easily as she felt him fill her. Her first time. She winced at a little pain. He was completely inside her. The romance novels were not like this. He held himself deep inside her, then began a steady pumping in and out, whispering into her ear she was wonderful. She rose her hips, meeting his rhythm. It felt natural.

Fulfilling.

She moaned. It felt good.

She also felt him lying heavily on top of her. Smelled his sweat, his arousal. His musk. She imaged them on a sandy desert island beach, waves lapping on their toes. His rhythm was steady. He stopped talking. He was somewhere else. She realized she had no idea what he was imagining, where he was.

Abruptly it felt unnerving, a heavy body on top of her, controlling her. It felt good but…alien.

Lust, on Mars.

He certainly had an orgasm. She was sure about that. About herself, she'd never had an orgasm and thought if she'd had one, she'd know. Later, they lay in bed together, smoking, watching the blue smoke drift above them, curling into shapes. Tobacco had been one of the first crops imported to Mars and for some reason grew better than food. Now there was no longer enough tobacco, so it was a mix including flavoured sythnico.

Shallot never smoked before. It was a night of firsts.

38

"Life can be a lonely ride," he told her as they sipped tea in his living room. The room was scented by roses, in vases and the back garden. "We need company. We need other people." He nodded to Sally, who nodded back.

Madeline she sat with her father on the couch in his living room, watching them

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nod. “Tell me about it. Never thought much about my personal life before. Like a cart at the electric plug, being refueled to keep going.”

“Welcome,” he said to Sally. “Heard a lot about you. Good to finally meet you.”

Sally smiled, sitting across from them. They sat together on the couch, she in a comfortable arm chair facing them. Everyone had a cup of tea. “She talks about you a lot. We’ve met a few times, but only at her office. We’ve never really talked.”

He smiled back. “About time. I met Mike, her other aide, also. Serious loser.”

“There’s hope for him,” Madeline said quietly.

“Yes, sorry, my big mouth.”

“No, I still have feelings for him. Pity. Some guilt.”

They all sipped tea.

Madeline felt awkward, as did Sally. Sally didn’t even like tea. And the roses were a bit much. “You weren’t surprised about us,” Sally said to him.

“It was not hard to guess, between her comments about Mike and you, where her personal life might be heading.” He poured more tea. To him it smelled pleasant in the room, of roses, a rich aroma, not too sweet. “I watched the arena meeting on TV,” he told them, holding his cup. “Looks like our little village is coming together. Too bad it took two hundred years and a few disasters. I like the water idea.” They had not heard yet, so he explained Wendy’s presentation.

“Sweet. They rose to the occasion,” Madeline told him.

“And you?” he asked.

She finally smiled. “The Council can drop dead. Wish them the best. For me, I’m gone. Out of there. My ambition was killed, slowly. Especially during my second term, when nothing better happened. I focussed wrong. What I should do and who I could be. Lately it’s felt all wrong, my whole life. I never focussed on me.”

“I was proud of you as Mayor,” he told her.

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“That was part of the problem, dad. I love pleasing you.”

“Oh?” He straightened a little. Then, yes, you should have ignored me. And your mother. And focussed on what you wanted.”

“Why didn’t you just say something?”

“You were the Mayor we needed.” He smiled. “It’s your life, sweetie. You made your own decisions.”

“Uh huh. From now on, feel free to give me helpful hints when you think I’m totally off track.” He hugged her. They drank more tea. “Dad, the village is evolving fine. The problem is Newman. He started with Council, now he has all of them, except Marjorie. He has the plants’ powers.”

Sally directly asked him. “Why hasn’t he done Marjorie?”

“He can’t. She has two plants growing inside her. She protected herself. Me. And without you knowing, both of you. Coated us.”

“Coated?” They both blinked, tea cups in their hands.

He explained he had known Marjorie from birth, her mother and his wife were great friends. He’d watched her grow, encouraged her political ambitions, as he had Madeline’s. Halfway through her second term, she secretly visited him. She had boils on her back and was terrified of going into the Clinic. It meant death. He assured her the condition was not contagious, that the Clinic could do nothing, that she would be most comfortable going home and waiting it out.

She stayed in his guest bedroom three weeks.

The first week, she struggled. Then she grew stronger, returning to her old self—and something beyond. There were two plants growing inside her, she told him, and she spoke with them telepathically. She nourished them, they nourished her. She swore him to secrecy. No one could know. Her husband had passed away but she had children and grand children. She would eventually tell her daughters.

She returned to Council, newly empowered, energized, very much at peace. She had always been that sort of person, and was a perfect match for the plants. She did not like a lot of movement, either.

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“We talk every few days,” he concluded. “I know you’ve networked with her. You’re building a resistance. Not to the colonists, to Newman.” She nodded. “Best approach. He remains the danger.”

Newman flopped into the comfortable plush armchair and wiped himself off. That was good. Better than with someone else. He could be as slow or as fast as he wanted. No needs to consider but his own. Fondling himself, now satisfied, he considered his options.

He could relax. Stay at home. Let them put water on the dome. But there was a danger in them solving their own problems. They had to appreciate the need for a leader. He could sabotage the Smelter. That would send them all reeling. But production had to continue. A new crack in the dome was possible, but too unpredictable and dangerous. The underground? Water production was vital. The Farm? Food was necessary, until the artificial stuff caught up. If it ever did.

Madeline, Majorie and their pals were organizing, waiting to pounce. It would take time to deal with them, they were the toughest to influence. He did not understand why Madeline and Marjorie resisted him. Even that Sally. He had influenced Mike early. Did someone get to them later? Another mystery he must solve, because it meant another enemy. Was it someone he knew, worked with every day? Who also had plants inside them? He would never suspect whoever it was–they likely influenced him to think they were fine.

Like he thought George was fine, and that Katie.

He needed to divert the colonists. That was the only real solution. Buy himself more time before all the doors shut on him. Have them thinking not about the dome or other problems. Certainly not about him.

How about they thought about themselves?

Sex.

He smiled.

He thought of the colonists filled with lust. Cheating on each other. Ignoring work. Breaking up relationships. Subversion from within. No one would know it was him. It would be easier, he could tap into their existing libidos. He got hard, thinking about it.

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Shallot sat in her room after chatting with Katie about sex and love and relationships. Broken relationships, new ones. Shallot left her to get some sleep, both of them, for different reasons, heartbroken. As she walked out, she saw George standing among the plants. He turned to look at her and smiled. Her heart pulsed. He was so strong, manly, confident.

So George.

He had done it, with her. Was it making love?

She did not turn on her notebook but sat on the bed, leaning back on the propped-up pillows, needing to be alone. To sort him and her out. Her face felt warm, thinking about it. She was no longer a virgin. What did that mean, except she was no longer a virgin? None of her friends had a problem with it. No matter what the first experience, they keep talking about trying again.

It was an important part of being alive.

She knew about hormones. She knew about biology. She knew about needs. Why was it confusing? Occasionally creepy? That first time, George seemed so…self-involved. Thinking of himself. Not of her, of her pleasure. It did not bother him, when she talked with him shyly, later, that she was glad he'd come but she had not. She knew what her besties would say. If you like him, go with it. If you don't, try someone else. Whoever turned you on.

Shallot felt she was way beyond liking George. She was falling in love with him. Giving her heart to him. She did not think it was him. Or those rows of plants. It was her.

Shallot had to go with it. Everyone had flaws. And many of her friends talked about boyfriends as projects. They would make their lovers better. So they were lovers.

Shallot was still on the bed, thinking, wondering what would come next, when she saw a shadow and looked up to see George leaning into the room, looking at her.

"How are you, pumpkin?" he asked. "I'm tired. Of the plants. Of standing. Of not being with you. You're so beautiful. So warm."

He walked into the room, shutting the door behind him.

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Shallot saw only George, smelled him. He needed her. She wanted him to need her. She loosened her clothes and made room for him on the bed.

39

Leaving The Past Where It Belongs

Over the next two weeks, the colonists were excited. Production centred on creating new, flimsier piping for the outside of the dome. Workers outside, wearing protective suits, drilled a hole into the Martian soil, directly over the underground water. Then installed pipes from two pumps up through the hole, then up along the side of the dome, to the top. The work went quickly as old piping could be used. If it had small leaks, fine. More water to spray onto the dome.

New lights were installed on the Farm and the crops responded, improving.

Newman did not stay at home and watch. He moved outside, among the colonists, regularly apologizing for his arrogance. He did not respond to George's invite to visit him on the farm, in the barn, next to the plants. But he was a regular visitor everywhere else.

Marjorie came to the Farm one day. Cary led her into the barn, chatting with her about the crops. Inside, George stood waiting, Shallot near him. She smiled, seeing Marjorie.

Marjorie smiled at her, looked at him. "How are you, plant boy?"

He shook her hand. "Could be worse. You here to see me? Shallot? Us?"

"Katie. I heard she's in a bad way."

"How'd you hear that?"

"The plants. Where is she?"

George was surprised. He thought the plants' range was limited. "In there," he said, pointing. "In her room. She doesn't come out much."

"She feels everything she loved is gone," Shallot said. Marjorie nodded. "But, speaking of that, not many seem to feel, uh, alone anymore. Some of the farmers

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have become…horny.”

“They’re not alone. I’ve seen it. People distracted. Production is down a little, but at least we can now breathe without dread. The Smelter has slowed down.”

“It doesn’t feel right,” Shallot told her. “Newman?”

Marjorie shrugged. “My guess? He’s still working on distracting the colonists, from him.” They looked at her. “I doubt he’s given up his plans. He’s a Mr. No Defeat man. I think he enjoys power. But his real goal in taking over is to build an escape ship and get out of here. That’s where he wants to go. Up there. Back to Earth. So do I but I’m dealing with a full deck.” She turned from them and started towards Katie’s room. “If you like, we’ll talk more.”

She stepped into the open doorway and paused. Katie sat at a small desk, on her computer. Probably, Marjorie thought, in that game. “Hello. My name’s Marjorie. I’ve had two plants inside me for almost a year. It’s a whole new world. Want to talk?”

“About my whole new world?” Katie looked at her standing in the doorway. “It sucks.”

“I thought so too, at first. It must be far worse for you. I was able to keep being infected secret. Mind if I take a load off?” Katie moved her chair, to face the bed as Marjorie entered her private space and sat on the bed. “Could be softer. I’ll send over a better mattress. Can’t live a decent life without a decent bed. …Newman knows the three of you are here.”

“Can I get a better chair?”

Marjorie smiled. “Of course. The plants worry about you.”

“Yes, that’s what they tell me. I don’t like listening. I have no privacy. I’m part of their colony. I hear their voices, telling me it’s okay. That they’re my family.

“I used to have a family. A real family. My family. I tried going home. I frightened mom and dad. They were terrified of me. Because of the plants. Shallot’s the only friend I have left, maybe now Farha. I’ve left my world behind. Rather, it has left me.” She began shaking, then began to cry, putting her hands over her face. Marjorie moved a little on the bed, pulling at the sheet and blanket, wanting to

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comfort her but unsure Katie wanted comfort. She already had suffered enough intrusions.

Katie did not cry long, then sat up, wiping her eyes. “Sorry.”

“I cried a lot, too. What can I tell you? I can’t compare myself to you. My world turned upside down when I was a lot…older. And nothing else changed, but me. I knew I was infected. Kept it secret and stayed at home. I was lucky. I have two plants inside me. As they grew, we harmonized. No other way to describe it. You understand. I could return to my normal life. But you. Enormous. I’m so sorry,” she concluded, gently.

“Thanks. I appreciate what you’re trying to do. It doesn’t help.” Sniffling.

“I can speak with your parents. Reassure them. You’ll be able to return home.”

She sat up. “You can? Without changing them?”

“Without changing them. Better than you could, I’ve been around longer. They’ll be themselves. Totally. I can tell them about myself.”

“I’d love to go home. I miss them. I could handle anything if I was home again.”

Marjorie got off the bed and hugged Katie.

Katie hugged back, holding her tight.

When they parted, Marjorie said to her, “For a moment, let’s talk to the plants.”

“It’s creepy. They’re different. They’re alien.”

“Do it with me. You need to meet the community. So far, you’ve resisted. It will make life easier for you. It did, for me.”

They slowly closed their eyes, relaxing, standing together in the small room.

Hello, Katie. Welcome.

You welcome the plants inside me.

You and they are one.

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They want me to tell you they are happy. That they worry about me. Is that because I am their host?

If you have joy, so do they. They look forward to you returning to your family. They are fond of your parents. We do not have families. We do not think of parents. We grow, from seeds. As we grow, we join the community. We have our ancestors' memories. We share our history. Some remember better than others. We are individuals yet one. Talk with us to understand. You have resisted. We would never force you.

…it would help to be part of a community, yes.

Looking at them in the open doorway, Shallot knew they were talking with the plants. As was George, standing near her, eyes a bit blank as always when he talked with them. They were not standing on the same planet. She thought Marjorie would help Katie. Katie didn't belong here. The plants made her nervous. Well, the plants made her nervous too!

With a little shudder, the other three were…busy…Shallot returned to her room, to open the game, to talk with her NPG, to *think*.

What did an orgasm felt like?

She spoke with him again, that morning, more directly. He apologized, agreed he was only thinking of himself. Next time, he would think of her. A word popped into her head. She smiled, feeling more confident.

Project.

40

Lust, On Mars

Antonio and Martina ate a quiet meal. He thought of problems in the Smelter, worrying about the reduced production, but more was on his mind. It took a long while before he realized that she had not said a word since coming home. Neither had he.

But they kept darting glances at each other.

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Antonio looked at the desert. Pudding. He sighed. “Marty, we have to talk.”

She stopped glancing at him. “Talk?” Nervous, now more nervous.

Both were nervous since coming home.

“Things have been hard lately,” he began, hesitant. “We haven’t gotten along. For weeks, hon. Physically, mentally. Physically. I know how long we’ve been married.” She sat straighter. “I think I’ve fallen in love with someone else.”

Her eyes widened. “Love?”

“No. Wrong word. I love you. Only you.” He shrugged. “Call it lust. I don’t love her. But we’ve been screwing like crazy.”

She bit her lip. “Who?”

“Nancy. Her name is Nancy. She works at the Smelter. Earlier this week, after Newman visited, she kept looking at me. Giving me the eye. Coming onto me. It didn’t matter I was married. So is she.” She looked at him, hands on her lap, to hide the trembling. “Well, it was mutual. We flirted. It became overpowering. Today, I shut my office door.” He was breathing hard. “Sorry, it was great. I want to be with her. All the time. Or at least have that kind of sex all the time.”

He paused, seeing she was quietly crying. “I am sorry. I love you. I never betrayed you, cheated on you, until today. Well, the last few days, we started kissing then.”

“Don’t apologize, please, sweetie. I don’t deserve it,” she finally said, eyes on the uneaten dessert. “I’ve felt unloved for a long time. Long time. And Philip, who works near me in Admin, he’s always been so…friendly. And strong. Last Thursday, after we talked with Newman, something happened. It wasn’t love. It was lust. It was so sudden, like we had been waiting for years. We couldn’t help ourselves. I couldn’t.

“I’m sorry. The sex was fabulous. Woke me. I feel woke. And…I want more.”

He pulled his chair closer, looking at her steadily. “Want to move out?”

“No. I love you, love living here. And, he’s married. And, he’s already involved with someone else. But he gave me orgasms, Tony. Orgasms.”

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They sat at the kitchen table. He cut off a small piece of dessert, looked at it on his spoon.

After they sat together quietly for a while, he finally said, “I don’t know what’s going on. We’re too old for this.”

“I’ve always loved you,” she told him. “I never needed anyone else. The last few days, it’s like my hormones have gone into overdrive.”

“Yeah. My work’s suffered, production’s down across the colony. People are noticing but no one seems to care. Most staff at the Smelter are horny as hell.”

She talked quietly about how Admin also was in turmoil, less getting done. Office romances in Admin were part of its culture. But no more than flirting at work. Staff had in a few short days gone far beyond flirting. Colonists were getting along better than ever, in a way, except for the sudden break-ups.

He took a bite of his dessert and swallowed. “Sounds like the Smelter. Love your deserts, by the way.” She watched him lift another piece to his mouth and eat it, smiling. She took a piece of her own dessert and licked it off her spoon.

“Know what you mean about hormones,” he said, his voice changing, deeper.

He stood. She stood. He reached out. She took his hand. He pulled him to her.

The kiss lasted forever.

They headed upstairs.

The bed felt like new. Their aging bodies felt flabby–who cared? All they felt was a driving lust. He fell on top of her, she gripped his shoulders, pulling him to her.

They had never made love like this. It was not love. It was…something else. A force inside, shoving them.

Lust, on Mars.

Newman watched, stroking himself, on his TV. The hidden cameras installed last week were fine. He’d told the police cameras were needed should Shallot return home or Madeline visit. By now, all key people working against him were under

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police surveillance. Recording something illegal would be a boost for him.

Shallot's NPG told her the NPGs were concerned. Two weeks ago, a few of them began behaving oddly. Being interested in sex. The NPGs understood sex technically, but they had never been physical, in any sense. Concerned, they pooled their information and concluded Newman was behind the problem. He was influencing colonists, pumping up their libidos. As the colonists went, so went the NPGs.

We feel helpless.

Won't that jerk ever give up? Shallot typed.

Nan didn't answer her phone, so she texted her. Then Shallot spoke with NPG Nan, who told her she was retiring from politics–after Newman was dealt with. She now felt she'd taken her life's work in the wrong direction. She wanted out. Shallot slowly lowered the lid of her notebook, putting it to sleep.

George would enter the room soon. There had been last night, this morning, then this afternoon. She was enjoying it more, at least getting used to it. The heaviness. The lurching. The panting in her ear. His being with her but at the same time being somewhere else.

He initiated. Each time. When he wanted. Now, after he came, he tried making her come as well. He told her it was advice from the plants. They wanted her happy.

She felt embarrassed. Trapped. He should sleep somewhere else.

She couldn't, wouldn't hurt his feelings. Her feelings for him had grown strong. At the same time, she resented him. Him and his needs. Using her. It never felt like making love. Shallot needed space, to think it through. No, to adjust. She understood some of this was normal. She was still at her desk, notebook closed, when he entered.

"Hey. How are you," he asked, smiling, starting to unbutton his shirt.

"Kind of tired, actually."

"I'm not. Today's been good."

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“How so?”

“The plants encourage me to learn. Grow. I’ve been improving. But I need a break. It’s so, uh, ethereal.” He approached her. “And for a few days, physical. The plants say you need the attention. You’re upset with me.”

“I have a headache.”

“So?”

“Really. I feel sick. I could throw up. All over us.”

That stopped him. “Seriously?” She nodded. “Gross.”

“It may be nothing. Something I ate. Or a cold or flu. Ugh. Think I’m going to chuck up.” She put her hand to her mouth and her cheeks bulged.

He backed away, hands still on his shirt. “Crap. I’m sorry. I don’t want to catch anything.”

“Maybe you should speak to Cary. About getting your own room. There’s a good room a few doors down. Before you’re infected. It would only be for a week or two.”

He was backing out of the room. “Yeah yeah. I’ll talk to him now. I’m sorry you’re not feeling good. Try not to puke.”

He closed the door behind him and she sighed, relieved. Then listened. It was quiet. She hoped he would not bother Katie—if he did, she’d tell him to drop dead. She hoped. She returned to the game. She found the Plant NPG. *What are you and George talking about?*

Life. Success. He grows strong. We are proud.

Why is he so horny?

The plants inside him. It is a unique experience for them. They enjoy it. It is quite unlike how we are fertilized.

She sat back. Great. *Will it stop? Any time soon?*

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Yes. Soon. George's interest is not in physical acts. A balance with his plants is already in progress.

She took a risk. *He seems to only pretend about us. As a couple. Can you help him to be more involved with me? To be part of me? To care for me?*

We are pledged not to interfere. We have done so only once, when the colonists visited. He insisted it was minor and for their own good. But, as for caring about you, he must do that himself. We do wish you luck, Shallot.

As for lust, what should you do? We have heard about it but do not understand it.

Indeed, we feel no overpowering urges.

Indeed, we do not feel, as you know it.

So, as for lust, good luck.

41

Lubricated

Work on the outside water pipe was nearly done, more slowly than planned but the overriding need pushed workers. Otherwise, the colony had staggered to a near halt. Water and power remained at half strength, at times none at all. Couples fought, stayed together, broke up, got back together, just quit. Few had their minds on work, and at work were distracted by the obvious lust surrounding them, everywhere. No one spoke of why, they were too distracted, too self-involved. The lure of physical pleasure was exhilarating. Many colonists felt freed from the daily disasters. Liberated.

Lubricated.

It was a small community. Affected colonists unwittingly influenced the unaffected, heightened libidos spreading like a disease. Young or old was irrelevant, though the older colonists felt a welcome return to yearned-for youth; unfortunately, during lustful encounters several very old colonists died from exertion. Several others were hospitalized. Many of the infected began to lose weight. No one bothered with daily exercise at work, there were more indulgent physical actions to burn calories with.

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Why not?

The streets were not as clean but almost acceptable. There were less workers underground or on the interior of the dome, but an almost acceptable amount. The work they did was distracted, often having to be redone. Repairs on the water pipes were taking longer, which everyone decided was almost acceptable. Because many colonists' minds were elsewhere and those who protested were ignored.

Acceptable was not new. The first colonists had to decide what was acceptable in their artificial environment. What was acceptable then was reasonable. The colony's main needs—additional resources of all kinds—were met for the first hundred years, as planned, from Earth. Even the billionaire who funded the colony never believed it would manage to be completely independent. After Earth's imports dried up, acceptable increased the colony's problems. The colony managed, as compromises began to be increasingly made. What was acceptable continued to be, more so.

Every key decision was acceptable. A compromise. Step by step, it made sense. Sense seasoned with hope.

The NPGs previously, duplicating the lives of players, never thought about the future. Shallot's NPG told her everything, including that she spoke regularly with the Plant NPGs. Like the plants, the NPGs had no choice but to follow a life they were born into. The NPGs never cared before. They had never really cared about anything. Until the game was changed.

They knew the colony had stalled and had many discussions about what they could do. Madeline's NPG suggested to her a drug, something put in the water. A de-arousal drug. The NPGs had developed one and gave her the formula.

Madeline sat at the desk in her bedroom, in the game, reading. Sally lay on the bed behind her, gently snoring. Madeline smiled. Sally had lovely, light snores. With cute little gasps. Had she seen a doctor about CPAP?

She smiled again. What she now had with Sally had nothing to do with Newman. It was all theirs and had taken its own sweet time. She was so glad she'd dumped Mike. With Sally, it felt real, genuine. But a lot had changed around them. They made love but not every day, not all the time. Not like some colonists who had morphed into human bunnies.

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Madeline considered her NPG's suggestion. She knew they were relying on her. Still, drugging the colony's water supply was a huge step. Not just whether it would work. Whether anyone had the right. She and Sally had long, inconclusive discussions. Pros. Cons. Madeline not only saw mostly cons, she already had decided to follow a different path. A path that did not include imposing her will on others. As she had spent her misguided career doing.

No, drugging the colonists without their deciding it themselves was a no go. What was a go was giving them the information so they had a decision to make. She let her NPG know and asked for advice. Then she sat back, idly scratching an itch. The police did not have evidence to arrest Newman, despite the surveillance. Only remarkable coincidences. Madeline asked her NPG to think about how Newman could be exposed, tripped up.

Free speech means anyone should be allowed a voice. Voters are smart but can be misled. Less, she thought, in a village like the colony. The problem was worse when the population was in the millions and people only knew politicians through TV ads. Countries could be swept into madness. History proved that.

It also proved that the colony, only four hundred people, could be different.

How could she encourage the colonists to agree to drug themselves when it meant stopping their orgasms? Stifling everyone's libido? It was so…personal. She sighed. This would take more thought than she felt like. She was tired. It had been a long day. She returned to the bed and the sleeping Sally for a long cuddle before drifting into a troubled, unsatisfying sleep.

Shallot lay awake. She heard George snore, a few doors down. Through the wooden walls. She left her room quietly. His snoring was louder. Katie's door was closed. She left the barn and walked into the night.

Unlike before, there were no overnight workers on the inside of the dome, nor farmers working the fields. She did see a few workers outside, on the new water pipe, reaching along the dome to its top. She knew of the plan and saw in it hope. She returned to her room feeling better, but shut the door behind her, slipped under the sheet and blanket. She left the light on, weary, drifting into sleep. She did not want to be in the dark.

Sex? Tonight she was thankful to be alone.

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42

Sex: Question Or Answer?

“Something weird’s going on,” Wendy said as they lay in bed. “Our relief never showed up and we found them in the change room, well, humping. They’re both in long term relationships– with someone else. Only the water pipe outside the dome is close to being finished. Water could start running up it by late tonight.”

“It was gross,” Peter agreed. “And yeah, lately it’s been *very* weird,’ Peter added. “No one themselves. Obsessed. …Speaking of that, should we tell anyone about us? The new three of us? Your folks and mine? Friends?”

“We’re not even sure.” She shook her head. “Too early. Bad luck.”

“Names?”

“Too early. Bad luck.”

“Is there anything we can do that’s on time and good luck?” he asked, shifting in bed. She hugged him. “Don’t know if I should say this. Now that we’re here. But, maybe, is this the best time? It isn’t too late to rethink.”

She kissed him. “We need new life to survive. It’s up to us to create the future, Petey.”

“I’m with you. Feel like making another one? The future needs as much help as we can give it.”

“Clock.”

“We have two hours before our next shift.”

“Let’s get out of here, big boy.”

They reluctantly left the bed, dressed, walked, trying to clear their heads. As they looked up, imagined the dome clear, unscarred, the Martian sun unusually bright. At least the air tasted better, now that Smelter production was down. It was less crowded outside, these days colonists were mostly indoors, indulging themselves. The walk was pleasant.

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“This is lovely,” he said.

“It isn’t lovely at all. Hon, we have to do something. Our shift is a couple of hours away. We have time. We need to do something–now.”

They got on their phones, walked back home and within half an hour six colleagues turned up, all shy, awkward as they settled into the small living room. They looked at each other, uncertain how to begin. Embarrassed.

“There’s practically no one working on the dome and nowhere else right now,” Wendy finally said. “We all know work has slowed to a crawl. And we all have a good idea why.”

“Yeah,” one man said. “A lot of men have hard-ons.”

“Women are full of lust,” a woman added.

“Everyone’s gone nuts,” one man muttered.

“All they think about is sex,” a woman said to them. “They come on to me all the time.”

“It’s a carnival,” another agreed. “A merry go round, everyone grabbing for the brass ring.”

“I’ve had calls from the former Mayor,” Wendy told them. “They’re trying to form small groups to deal with this. To get us back on track. No one knows yet how.”

“We’ve been derailed,” Peter added. “The obvious conclusion is either drugs in the water or some kind of mind control. Me, I vote telepathy. My first thought was, the plants. But there’s no reason for them to do this. I vote colonist.”

Wendy looked at all of them. “We think it’s one of us. Not us, but someone central. With the ability to be around colonists without them suspecting.” They listened. “A colonist who has the plant’s powers somehow. Remember, we live on Mars.”

“Until we figure out who,” Peter told them, “we first have to be careful about being near anyone we’re not dead certain about. This distracting influence must stop.”

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“I should be direct. The Mayor thinks it’s Newman,” Wendy told them. No time for secrets. “It isn’t only rumours. The police are building a case. Avoid him. Don’t go near him. And be careful around anyone who’s been alone with him.”

“We need to work double hard,” one of the men said. “To make up for the others. Until it’s fixed.”

“Fixed?” one of the men asked. “How the hell can this be fixed?”

“We’re open to ideas!” Wendy and Peter blurted out together.

The team laughed.

Madeline sat at a large table in Water. Seated around the table with the workers’ representatives who now formed the government. She had first met each individually, privately, about the situation. Now a few hours had gone by, enough for them to think. She noted there was no longer a larger chair for the ‘leader.’ All the chairs around the table were the same.

Madeline smiled at that.

By mutual agreement, she was the informal chair—she’d called the meeting. Everyone settled, she tapped on the table. “We all know why this meeting was called. I don’t think we need to go around the table to know that production has fallen dramatically over the past two weeks. And it’s getting worse. And that the cause, for a significant number of colonists is…well…they’re aroused. Very…aroused. Not everyone, to be sure. But enough.”

Everyone nodded.

“We believe,” Madeline continued, “the cause is a colonist who has plants inside him. He, or she, ingested seeds. Now the plants are fully developed. I know of another colonist this happened to.

“He has powers. To influence us. The only motive in disrupting the colony, now that you are in charge of it, is to undermine you. To undermine the groups of workers. We are not sure, the police are working on it, but, frankly, we believe it’s former Councillor Newman. I’ve reviewed the evidence with each of you.

“So problem one is, him. Problem two is what he’s done. We must turn around the

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colonists he's affected. While we're screwing each other, he's screwing us." She paused, seeing their faces. "Padon my English.

"The game's NPGs have suggested a drug, to put into the water. To reduce libidos. They provided the formula. The drug will, well, calm everyone down. We then can work to restore normal."

"Drug the water?" a woman asked. "For everyone?"

Madeline nodded.

"That sounds like something Newman would do," the woman continued. "I can' t agree to drugging the whole colony."

"There's no way to drug individuals," Madeline replied. She could see the representatives around the table shifting, their eyes on her. "You're right. I agree. Does anyone have a better idea?"

No one did.

"We should tell the colonists about the drug," the woman said after a long silence. "Put it to a vote. A colony referendum. We've never had one before but why not? It affects all of us, all of us should decide."

"A referendum," another said. "Agreed."

"Soon," another added. "How about informing everyone today, allowing three days, then a vote?"

"The water isn't flowing," Wendy told them. "How about two days? By the way, the outside pipe is complete. Water starts up it in an hour."

"How about we announce today," Madeline told them, leg aching, "and vote tomorrow evening? And include something that calls for a second vote if this is too fast?"

Quick agreement around the table. After the others left, Wendy stayed. Sally, seeing Wendy's look, left them alone.

Wendy asked about Madeline's experience being pregnant.

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Newman stroked himself looking out the window at the colony. He wondered how many of them were stroking themselves, not working. He'd heard about relationships breaking up, some growing stronger. Arousing them was so arousing.

They were falling apart. He would be the one they must turn to, to put the colony right. The dome would continue to be a problem, he was convinced. Water would always be a problem, until he could fix it. The colony needed him. To make Mars great again. To make himself great again.

He could use help to make himself someone great who needed no help.

George was the obvious choice but demanded the barn. No way. He'd love to see Shallot and find out what she knew. But he was in the barn, with George and the plants. And he doubted Madeline or Marjorie would meet with him, not now, not when they knew about him.

He wished he could enter the game and strangle an NPG. Maybe he should go to the Farm, see George. He might even help with the plants—George *was* human.

Something was wrong.

He looked down.

Limp.

He was shaken. Never before had he gone limp. Never.

He stumbled away from the window, slumped into the nearest armchair. An ominous omen. Newman believed in omens. He slumped farther into the armchair.

He went from stroking himself to feeling dead inside.

43

"Drop dead. You don't care about me. Or Shallot. Just yourself."

"You don't mean that."

"I know exactly what I mean."

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George blocked the doorway, leaning against it. Katie stood in the room, a small, packed bag next to her, hand resting on it, gripping the handle.

“So you’re what, going home?” he asked. “Didn’t you try already? Think that’ll really work this time?”

“We talked on the phone. They were both crying. They want me home.”

“I beet.”

“At least I won’t feel your leering eyes. You’re a jerk.”

“C’mon, I haven’t hit on you.”

“Must have killed you.” She picked up the bag. “You have no interest in your parents? In seeing them?”

“They haven’t come to see me, have they?”

She took a step forward. “You’re blocking the door.”

“You’re different than Shallot. You have plants. I want you here. I know I can’t force you. Please?”

“You’re only interested in yourself. Drop dead.”

He retreated, backing away. “Sorry you feel this way.”

“I bet.” Katie walked past him, out of the room, out of this damn barn. “Stay away from Shallot,” she told him as she opened the front door. “The plants don’t like how you treat her. They like her. You, not so much. They think you have a lot to learn.”

“Oh really.” He watched her stand in the doorway, much as he had stood in her doorway moments earlier. “That’s it? Ever think you have me wrong?”

She closed the door behind her.

He knew she was sixteen but had hoped she would be more adult. As for him, the seeds enjoyed sex as much as walking. Why deny them? He was sixteen. Was not lust natural? Perhaps not so much for Katie or Shallot or many of the Farmers. But

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George accepted he was now different. The same but different.

Her parents were waiting. Home was waiting. She gripped the bag, picking up her stride. Being home was important. She was sick of living in a tiny room in a barn. Away from mom and dad. Away from her friends, except Shallot. She couldn't stand being so isolated any longer. She refused to deny her family or for them to deny her. Marjorie had visited her parents and somehow done something. She hoped she had kept her word about not changing them. She needed mom and dad as themselves.

She met Cary at the front gate, waiting in a cart. She was happy to accept the ride. It would get her back home faster.

She wanted her room. Her stuffed animals. Her bed. Her little desk and the cushion on the desk chair, a stitched small pillow with a cat's face. Mom baking sweets, Dad watching Marsball replays on TV. Katie smiled at the warm thoughts.

As she walked, she looked up. Thick ice covered half the dome. There must be someone on top, directing the spray so it was even. Some holes had burst open in the dome pipe. Not only did they not seriously affect the water pressure, the leaks further coated the dome. In an hour, she'd been told, the entire dome would be covered with two feet of solid thick ice.

She was now halfway home.

Soon she'd be in her old neighbourhood. Katie did not expect to see many people, given what she'd heard about the increasing self-involvement—well, sex—of many colonists, including many of her friends. She thought she would vote 'for' in the referendum. If anywhere on Mars drugs were needed, it was here.

Few of them had been promiscuous… before. While Cary drove them, she spoke briefly with Shallot but the others did not respond. Even in the game their NPGs were at fumbling at work or screwing around there or at home, a few times in a park.

She did not care. She loved her friends but getting home, recovering her life—that was her priority. Although ice covering the dome, still letting through diffused light, was comforting. Which was good because as they drew closer, she grew tense. Unsure of what would happen, this time.

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Her house looked the same. She felt a wonderful rush, encountering the familiar, the fundamentally familiar. She opened the unlocked front door and walked in, worried yet hopeful.

It was quiet downstairs. Hadn't her parents expected her? Maybe they had gone out? No, she smelled baking. She went upstairs, opened her bedroom door and her parents shouted "Surprise!"

Balloons. They wore hats. And big smiles.

Their smiles were genuine. She stepped towards her mom, who rushed to take her into her arms. They held each other along time. Her father watched—she was reassured her family was back to normal.

"I'm so sorry, dear," mom told her. "We were frightened."

"Yeah," her father added. "But Marjorie visited and talked about the plants inside her. She's quite nice. We came to realize you did something to us, hon, but you panicked. You just wanted us to love you. We do."

Her mother added, "We understand. It must be so hard for you."

"We've talked with the neighbours. They understand better, now."

"Yes," her mother added. "Newman. He is not a good person. He did something to your father and me. It was like we were his puppets."

"He ain't pulling our strings no more," her father told her, patting both their shoulders now.

They went downstairs to the kitchen and sat at the table. Mom took the cookies out of the oven and put them on a plate in front of Katie. Her favourite cookies. Even the smell was warming, comforting, delicious. She looked at them as they cooled. It had been weeks since she'd eaten mom's food.

They had no idea how Katie's friends were doing, rarely saw them before, never now. Her father noted there was a lot of sex around them these days, and no one seemed interested in birth control. Or couldn't be bothered. He was angry about it. So was her mom.

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“Although we have been snuggling more,” her mother said. “What about you, hon?”

“No snuggling, mom,” Katie replied. “Shallot’s having snuggling problems, too.”

After the cookie dinner, they went into the living room and watched the news on TV, then a movie. Before, after dinner, Katie retreated to her bedroom or fled outside. Now she sat happily with them. The past was past. She was in the now. She felt so good. Her parents were definitely themselves. She sensed no influences on them, when she probed as they watched TV. They were genuinely upset they had rejected her. Nothing clouded their minds.

She relaxed. Who said you can’t go home again? Probably someone hundreds of years ago, on Earth.

Slowly, shortly after the movie began, Katie realized how bored she was. How she had occasionally daydreamed about running away.

It did not matter in this moment. These days, being bored was good. No pressure, no threats, no expectations. Just enjoy the food and TV.

Halfway through the movie, she hugged them both and retreated to her bedroom. Opened her notebook. Picked up her phone. Texted her friends. Talked with her NPG, who was now also in *her* bedroom, notebook on *her* lap. Now she felt totally herself, totally at home.

Knock on her door. Her mother entered, gave her a mug of hot chocolate, a couple of Fizz pills, smiled and closed the door behind her.

My parents can be pretty cool, sometimes, she typed.

One of Katie’s friends texted back, to see her. So did all of her old friends. In half an hour, they were in her bedroom. With cups of hot chocolate provided by her mom. The girls brought their own Fizz.

They pummelled her with questions about the plants inside her. No problem. Katie realized they wanted to know, needed to know, they were concerned about her, themselves. She talked about the two plants inside her. How it felt, what she had learned, how it affected her sense of self—calmer. Telling them, one day *they* might host a plant. They all got high taking Fizz hits, talking about plants and Mars

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and, quickly, about relationships.

There was a lot of giggling. It became a party and went into the night. Mom only knocked and came in once, to ask if they wanted more hot chocolate and cookies. The girls laughed hysterically, slapping their thighs. Mom looked puzzled but smiled and left.

Shallot's great grandfather sat in his living room with his team. Two friends he was close to had died in the last week, from natural causes doing unnatural things. No one he knew felt good. Something had to be done. It was no longer time for theories and watching. He told them he had to get of his butt.

They all believed Newman was involved. That he probably had plants inside him, despite the Clinic's report clearing him. No one believed Newman would stop—the public needed to know. He had to be disgraced, as he deserved, isolated.

Shallot's great grandfather said he'd already made inroads to trustworthy Clinic personnel. The Clinic's official position was there was no hidden record. If they could prove Newman had plants inside him, that might be enough to turn the colonists against him. Or at least think carefully about him. And, an hour ago, his secret source within the Clinic had finally provided him with the original reports on Newman. Confirming he had three plants growing inside him.

He would set up a press conference tomorrow morning, ostensibly about the controversies over the game. Now he had what he needed to go public.

After they left, he felt not energized but weak. There was always the potential for someone such as Newman. But it did not have to come. He should have prevented it. Hindsight. Hindsight can be kind of stupid, like slapping yourself. He cursed hindsight. But he did deserve punishment. Too aloof. Too slow to act. You cannot always simply sit and watch.

Shallot hoped she had not acted too late. George had been provided his own room by Cary and seemed happy there. Happier being on his own. Good. She needed some distance from him. Distant but not too far.

Bored being by herself, though. Bored staying in the barn, her only real communications through the game. Even the game, her NPG, felt distant—living in another world. Well, they were, but still.

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She abruptly stood, walked out of her room and out of the barn.

Despite the ice coating the dome, it was brighter. Almost like being outside.

Cary saw her and walked up, asking if she was okay. She told him better than before. He looked at her walk off, then slowly followed her, from a distance, worried about her. She walked into the fields, into the new lights, enjoying the warmth. He saw her simply stand for a while among the crops, holding her hands up and out. Enjoying the space and air.

He decided to let her be.

After the cleansing warmth, Shallot walked to the administration building where Farha had an office. Empty. Farha's notebook was open and running, in the game, with a pop-up window on the Farm. A toilet flushed down the hall. Shallot pulled up a chair. Farha walked in and stopped. Pleased. "You've finally emerged. How was the cocoon?"

"I'm faking a cold. He thinks I'm sick, so he's stopped grabbing me all the time. Although I like the grabbing. I like him. He's complicated. A project. He spends most of his time with them, the plants. I can't hear them talk, it's creepy."

"Thank God," Farha told her. "I'm so tired of everyone being aroused all the time. It's even hit some of the staff here. Big pain. Except one guy, Eric in fertilizer. He's hot. We hook up but I've kept it to every few days."

"Is he…influenced?"

Farha smiled. "Nope, he's really into me. We even talk."

They held hands.

"What's it like?" Shallot asked.

"Like nothing before. He's sweet. And strong. And not a jerk. He likes blowing in my ear. Tickles."

Shallot shared her confusing feelings about George.

"He's basically a good guy, just going through changes. He was always self-

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involved."

"So what should I do?" Shallot asked. "I'm tired of being in the barn, talking with NPGs. Could we get some of our friends here?"

They chatted a while longer, then left Farha's office and the building. Shallot felt better outside. Farha chatted as they walked to the fertilizer building, into it and up to a short, dark haired man, almost eighteen. He gave Farha a hug, then turned to Shallot and introduced himself—Eric.

The three stood near the fertilizer vats.

Shallot liked Eric right away. He seemed super quiet, not aggressive. Or maybe he was, in a different way, but Farha's eyes certainly stayed on him. They seemed so affectionate. George could be affectionate. All it would take would be some work. Looking at them, she thought *There's so much potential. They're happy. I can be happy with George*.

Shallot left Farha and Eric to cuddle standing up, returning to her barn. To George. What the hell. She had to get a grip on her life. And right now her life centred on him.

He was not with the plants, in her room or Katie's abandoned room. She found him in his new room. She had avoided it. Now she saw him at his desk, typing on his notebook. She saw posters on the walls—of Mars, of the plants, one of City Hall. She saw a photo of her on a wall, by itself. Her heart literally fluttered.

He was concentrating, typing. She stayed in the doorway, could not see his monitor, but he was not in the game. It looked like he was typing a list, notes. She looked fondly at him. He was dedicated. Working so hard. People like George would help the colony recover.

She stood in the doorway a long time, watching, before he finally noticed her.

Then she gave herself to him.

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