6

Lust And Lost, On Mars

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

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

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

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

She needed a personal relationship which was not… transactional.

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

Madeline had always been a realist.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She liked telling him.

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

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

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

At least she felt something real during sex.

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

“Not just yet, hon.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Do you ever get tired of it?”

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

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

“Can we talk?” she asked quietly.

“’Bout what? Mmmm.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Then what?”

“…I’m bored.”

“Different positions?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

George didn’t care.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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grunted. There was much to do, but he always made time for this. Otherwise, what was the point?

Councillor Marjorie lay on her bed, watching the news, drifting off to sleep. It had been a long day. She felt old, did not mind at all. Tomorrow would be a big day, her first rally. She had to be pumped. She would provide details about her major plank: building escape rockets back to Earth. Now was the time to rest.

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

“You were great,” he replied.

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

He suggested Fizz.

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

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

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

“Thought you never had enough.”

Warren grinned. “Never enough of you.”

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

“Pee. You?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

7

New Mornings

Shallot and Aaliyah and Charlie and Farha and George started the morning waking alone in their beds. Nothing felt different. Shallot got out of bed, determined. Aaliyah and Farah were slower, staying in bed another few minutes, waking up. George looked at the dried stains on the ceiling. The lubricant was where he’d left it yesterday afternoon.

New mornings on Mars.

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Dan and Warren, at the top of the dome in radiation-proof suits, neared the end of their extra shift, looking at the distant sun rise. Morning. Each morning, they knew from the super realistic game, they woke to a life harder—more problems, more uncertainty, more work. They believed yesterday that patching the dome had a reasonable chance. Now they believed it was delaying the inevitable. The dome would fail, probably in their lifetime, as the game predicted. They felt doomed, while continuing to put sealant on an emerging crack.

Dan looked down at the colony. It was waking up, except for the overnight shifts. “Going to vote? Campaign starts today.”

“Don’t think so. It’s all about power,” Warren told him. “The Mayor, someone else. Doesn’t matter. None of them have come up with real solutions. We need change. I think it’s up to us, not them.” Warren looked at his partner.

“Yeah. We’re the ones dangling up here. Ain’t no sugar up here.”

Madeline woke to Mike sucking her. “Mmmm. More, sugar lips,” she murmured.

He began using his hands. “Lots to do today, sweets. Campaign kick off tonight.”

“No one else can protect the colony. Certainly not Newman. Somehow I must fix this mess.”

Aaliyah wondered how Charlie was doing. Charlie wondered how Aaliyah was.

Farah ate a reasonably cheery breakfast with her mom and dad. He wanted her to transfer from the Smelter to the Farm, where he and her mom had worked their whole lives.

George, alone in his room, felt himself get yet another woody. Something was driving him, deep inside. More than one. He thought they liked the excitement of sex. He felt lumps move inside his neck and chest. He tasted something funny when he drew a breath. He looked at his penis, a separate part of him, almost alien, often acting all on its own. Like nothing else in his body.

Instead of fondling himself, George booted up the game to explore the medical information inside the new world. There was plenty of new stuff, which was satisfying but not enough to be helpful. The bug was also a mystery to the NPGs. “Screw this.” He’d had enough of jerking off and being observed. He did not want

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to die. He wanted to live, work, have a life. He would not have it, remaining in this small room.

Shallot's parents woke, showered, went to work and, after an hour, exercised on office treadmills with their colleagues. It was good to work up a mild sweat, clean off in the washrooms, change back into work clothes and continue their day in Admin and the Smelter. They wondered how Shallot was, worried their daughter had such deep concerns. And not only that she was delaying becoming a woman. They had heard rumours she was involved in making changes to that computer game. At work, people were talking about the changes, mostly the colonists under thirty.

Shallot yawned, stretched, got out of bed and looked out the window. The city looked the same. She went downstairs. Her parents were gone. Shallot poured herself some orange juice and returned to her bedroom and spent an hour brushing her hair. That felt good. She liked the ritual.

Fully awake, she had important stuff to do. Finally.

Sitting on the bed, she powered up her notebook and entered the game. Her inbox was full. Everyone knew she was the Mayor's daughter and assumed she had an inside track. Most players were angry, frightened at the alarming situation they found in the game. The NPGs were more upset, having had the past six months altered, giving them plenty of time to think. They were conflicted, programmed to mirror their real-life counterparts but wanting something very different. Their own lives.

In the game's election campaign, there were still only three candidates and zero interest in them. The NPGs felt the election was irrelevant. New leadership was desperately needed. Or a whole new approach.

She left the game. There was someone she had to speak with. She thought of sending a text, then picked up her phone for a meeting. This was personal. She had to start being honest with everyone and knew who she must start with.

The call was answered at the second ring. "Hello?"

"Nan?"

"Morning, onion. What's up?" Madeline sounded a little out of breath.

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“Nan, I did something. With my friends. It might affect the election. You should know about it, but I guess is you don’t. Can I come over? Now? It’s super important, Nan. Can’t tell you on the phone. Too personal.”

She heard Nan’s voice change, entering a combination of Mayor and Great Grandmother. “Of course. If it’s that important, meet me in half an hour in my office.” Nan hung up, saying to someone else, “Gotta go,” who yawned.

Shallot quickly showered and dressed, then hurried to City Hall, a quick walk. She entered her grandmother’s office within the half hour. Nan sat stood as Shallot entered, leaning on the desk. Her cane leaned against the desk, near her. Mike and Sally stood on either side of her, smiling. Both looked frayed.

Shallot walked up to them. “Good morning. I’m here about the colony’s computer game.”

“***Mars and Me***?” Madeline said, looking at her, starting to think she did not have time for this. She thought it was important. Yet Shallot was urgent, and Shallot had always been sensible.

“The game?” Mike asked, alert. “What about it?”

“Yesterday, me and two of my friends created a new saved game. We altered the parameters and set them to start six months go. The game has been updated with information about our problems. Scary information. Now the game is super real. Most everyone my age is playing it. And colonists are upset by what they find.”

“Altered parameters?” Mike asked. His eyes twitched.

“You play?” Shallot asked.

Mike managed a shrug. “Not in a few weeks. It’s diverting.”

“In the new version, the story is tougher than we admit here. The dome will fail within fifty years. Maybe less. But by then the colonists will all have starved to death. The crops are already failing, and in five years or less, no food at all. Pollution will be worse. So far the NPGs want to change but the game mirrors real life, so *we* have to start changing. The NPGS are already changing. They are ahead of us.”

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“Anything else?” Madeline asked, glancing at Mike, who suddenly was subtly anxious.

“Most NPGs don’t take council seriously. The election campaign is vapour. The NPGs believe the election will collapse, replaced by something else. They’re figuring out what to do.

“Each area of workers has created their own union. Farmers, dome workers, smelter workers, underground water workers and administration. Each group lobbies the Councillors for change. Right now, it’s chaos. Each group says it’s most important. Each wants top priority. So far there is a lot of arguing but nothing’s settled. The game shows us our future.”

Shallot paused, looking at them. “I made the changes yesterday, with a few of my friends. Maybe I should have told you first. Sorry. Anyway, everyone I know is playing it. When the colony itself reacts, starts to change, the game follows. Or we may follow the game. It’s all kind of confusing, all the relationships between us and the game are reforming. Go into the game. Talk to your NPG. They’ll tell you.”

“Sure,” Mike said, looking at her, something hidden behind his eyes.

“…okay,” Madeline finally said, looking away from him to Shallot. “That’s a lot to absorb. First, onion, I appreciate your telling me this, coming here. My next thought is, the game uses our most powerful computer. Perhaps we can find some new ideas through it. I agree we need shaking up.

“Onion, being Mayor is hard. Lots harder than I thought before I was Mayor. I’d love to retire. Maybe I can, if together we find a better way, eh? Love you, onion.”

She and her granddaughter hugged. Madeline looked at her grand-daughter proudly. “You’re very grown up, and just sixteen. What’s next for you today?”

“Finding work. I should have a job. It’s part of clearing up my life. I’m seeing my guidance counsellor. Almost all my friends have been assigned by now.”

Madeline patted her shoulder. “You don’t want me pulling strings?”

“Never asked before. This is no different.”

Madeline smiled. “Good luck. You won’t find any work, yes? We’ve talked about

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that. But you have to see for yourself. Call me after, if you want. I'm always available." She wasn't, of course, but she did try to be.

It was a short walk from City Hall to the School, which had shrunk over the years from three schools—elementary, middle, high school—to one, as new births declined.

"Hello, again, Shallot. Have you thought about which entry level position best suits you?" Mrs. Hatherall asked, smiling pleasantly as they sat in her office. Mrs. Hatherall was in her fifties, hair carefully swept into a beehive, dressed in clothing that was older but well maintained. A small fan on her desk moved the still air.

Shallot nodded and smiled her in-school smile. "Water is important."

Mrs. Hatherall smiled less pleasantly. "I am afraid that is restricted. You would require a security clearance."

"I'm the Mayor's granddaughter."

"Exactly." Same smile, less so. "If you insist, I will put in a request. Expect it to take months. You know why."

"No," Shallot told her, feeling argumentative. "I don't. Almost all my friends were placed after they reached sixteen. Why not me?"

Sigh. Mrs. Hatherall had done this ten years, once the regulations were proclaimed. At that time, older workers could not retire before 75. Their replacements came from the high school grades, starting at senior. Most students accepted being forced to work—they had no choice—starting at bottom rung positions until they proved their skills and worked their way up. If not, they were transferred to another work area.

"Dome repair, then?" Shallot asked, tentatively now. Pressuring Mrs. Hatherall was pointless. She could only offer nothing.

"I am afraid you would not meet the physical requirements. Also, there are a limited number of suits, none would fit you. Same with underground work of any kind, actually. Plus the security clearance."

Shallot shifted uncomfortably, sitting less upright. She looked at the small fan on

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the desk, robotically moving back and forth, pushing air. “Marsball?”

Mrs. Hatherall’s lips compressed into a tight pink line. “Shallot, you’re not listening. No one will take you. You are the granddaughter of the Mayor. That was bad enough. Now we’re in an election. No one wants to show favouritism. After the election, perhaps, but you cannot escape your baggage. It’s your birthright.

“If she wins, the situation is partisan, no one will risk hiring you because then they’ll be criticized for pandering to her. If she loses, no one will hire you because it gives them no advantage and many disadvantages. For the same reason there is no volunteer work either. I’ve already asked. I have. I want to see you gainfully employed, dear.

“Wait this out, then I will help you make the best of it. I’m afraid you will not like what will be available. Too many people are unhappy with the Mayor. The best I’ve found, for after the election, is garbage collection.”

“My future is picking up shit?” Shallot was now angry.

“Language, please.” Mrs. Hatherall stiffened.

Shallot stood, said “Thanks, I know you can’t do anything,” and walked out. She did not want to scream at Mrs. Hatherall. The woman did not deserve it. She was only doing her job. Although Shallot wondered whether Mrs. Hatherall had her own personal grudge with her great grandmother, and that was part of the problem.

Underground, Peter’s morning had been long and tiring. He wanted to scream. He’d inspected piping all morning. Last night, he and Wendy were invited to play the new game in ***Mars and Me***. It hit too close to home—it was home. He looked at the water tubes. The game was accurate in depicting them as far overdue for replacement, any of them ready to fail at any time. The water fed a thirsty colony and supplied steam for engines to supplement power from the huge solar dishes surrounding the city.

He could not shrug off the feeling disaster was imminent. The pipes. And now the water itself.

All along, he felt something was wrong about the water. There was the secrecy, suspicious off the top. It made sense in the game that the ‘bugs’ were microscopic Martian organisms in the water everyone drank and used. Organisms he and

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Wendy had absorbed since infancy. He had performed water work responsibly the last ten years. Met Wendy, working the same shift, after his fourth year.

Water was critical so he asked to work there. It provided more than water. It provided hope. Now the precious water was poison. A living poison. Martian germs? A virus from ancient times? Anyone's guess was good.

He saw a large section of pipe feeding the colony, likely to fail in less than a month. He made a note on his tablet.

Wendy walked up. "That section's going to fail." She looked at him when he said nothing. "Thinking about the game?" He nodded. "Thinking about how we help keep everyone poisoned?"

He sighed. The air made a small cloud on the glass of his face plate. "Yeah. It's a career."

They both laughed, a little, and sat together on a large rock. The lava tube was well lit. They looked at the glistening flat frozen river, the heating lines buried in holes cut in the ice, the water extraction tubes. The steady flow of excess steam from the power plant returning from above coated the walls with frozen sparkles. The walls winked like stars in a tiny underground universe. Except they were not stars, they were exhaust glop.

"Think there's those microbes in the steam?" Wendy asked, following his eyes to the walls. "In the air?" She paused. "I've been reading about unions. We need a voice. Water workers should be united, tell the colony what's up. We've been way too quiet. We're complicit if we do nothing."

"Well, team meeting's half an hour. That's what we all want to talk about."

At which point they heard the explosion.

Thirty feet away, across the lava tube cavern, a large water pipe had burst through an aged patch, water forcefully shooting up and out. The whole cavern shook.

Peter and Wendy immediately pressed the emergency buttons on their suits, then ran to the emergency storage. Loud alarms blared. Emergency lights flashed red. Other workers began to rush. Peter and Wendy carried the emergency bags and cases as quickly as they could, but now had to step carefully. The floor was

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dangerous. It was -120. The warm water shooting out of the hole froze as soon as it hit the ground, sheets of water turning into sheets of ice, over ice.

Everyone had to work quickly. The warm water erupting from the pipe created even more pressure on the already weak metal. Wendy and Peter reached the pipe first. They saw the leak was a foot long, an oval growing larger every second as the water pushed through, sucked along through the pipe by powerful devices.

They turned on the heaters on the outside of their suits, to avoid freezing solid. The pump was killed, the water finally began to stop shooting water out. The emergency patches they had were not big enough. Peter grabbed the two largest patches, Wendy the welding torch. Water sprayed on the torch, froze on the metal. It was not heated. She grabbed another torch, lit it, avoiding the water.

While Peter held the patches in place, she began to weld them together. Behind them they heard doors opening, staff shouting, anxious movement. Wendy finished welding, Peter put sealant over the weld. Footsteps running behind them. Two workers in suits helped them put the welded patches over the gushing water. Another joined them. It took all five to force the patch over the gaping hole. As they held it, Wendy began to weld the new patch onto the old pipe after torching away the ice.

The welding was going well when they heard a second explosion.

Across the cavern another water pipe burst.

As Peter and Wendy concentrated on the first break, workers rushed to the second. There was another explosion as the second pipe burst even more, creating a much larger hole than the one Peter and Wendy were struggling to repair.

Peter stepped away from the repair work and tapped the emergency button on his wrist. “Send as much steam down here as you can.”

“You know that means powering down the system,” his supervisor said.

“Two pipes have burst and there’s ice everywhere,” Wendy added. “We can’t work or repair the pipes in this.”

“Gotcha. We’ll cut the pumps. Help is on the way.”

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Peter rushed as best he could in the slippery ice and gushing water to the second pipe. The steady hum of all the pumps stopped. Soon less water gushed from the second pipe, then a trickle. They looked at the gaping hole. Too large to fill with several welded patches. Worse, sections near the hole were stressed and would blow if the pumps were turned back on.

Repairing this would take a day at best, probably.

More workers appeared—all underground suits were now in use—to help with the repairs check the other pipes, urgently searching for what had been missed. Underground was a disaster area. Above ground, all but emergency power was shut off. Water no longer flowed. The colony went into partial shutdown as sirens sounded.

At the top of the dome, Dan and Warren heard. They had just found a new crack, eating its way in. They sent in their own alarm.

It was a very bad start to everyone's day.

No power, no water. Worse, when gamers opened ***Mars and Me***, pipes in the game had also burst—but in the game, yesterday.

When Shallot returned home, to her bedroom, late that morning, she powered up her notebook on its battery, entered the game and immediately saw the change. Mom texted that work in Admin was suspended, without power, and she would be home early. Shallot was puzzled that the pipes bursting happened in the game yesterday. The NPGs were developing their own plans now, independent of the colonists. The relationship between game and colony was growing increasingly bizarre.

Shallot found the mirror NPG Shallot, who also sat on her bed, notebook on her lap.

Are you me? It's me, Shallot typed.

NPG Shallot looked up. *Haven't brushed my hair today*, she said. *Too much to do*.

What's next?

How about a long talk? Everything's a mess. Nan's very upset about the game and the election. My friends are bonkers. Mom and dad are zero help.

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With NPG Shallot, she felt she had found a new best bestie. She no longer felt she was alone. *Of course*, she thought, *I'm still sitting here alone, playing a game*.

Meanwhile, the rest of the colony was frightened. There was a new emergency, the worst ever. They did not yet know about the dome.

8

The Disaster Election

That morning was also the official start of the election. As with any election, voters were focussed on the issues. To them it was the cost of anything, the instability of basic water and electricity, and the increasing concern about the viability of life on Mars. It was an election not focussed on improving life as it was on preventing disaster.

Preventing disaster would improve their lives, of course.

Water was down to zero, for everyone. The steam plant was forced to shut down for lack of water, eliminating all power to the colony except emergency batteries. Water and power were critical, especially in Mars' hostile environment. Heat had to be maintained. The dome would only hold the current warmth for so long. After seventy hours, the temperature in the colony would begin to drop if power was not restored. Eventually, it would drop to -120.

And if the dome developed serious cracks, there was little power to get the workers up to seal new openings.

The ten-member City Council met early, two hours after the water pipes burst. Tension in the City Hall boardroom was thick, almost as thick as the impressive simulwood round table in the centre, surrounded by comfortable padded chairs. The Mayor's charge was largest.

They heard sirens. Out the windows, flashing red lights. Dim emergency lighting cast shadows over them all.

"Here we are again," Madeline began, looking at the councillors and their assistants. Assistants sat on behind their counsellors.

"No," Councillor Newman told her, tapping his fingers on the simulwood. "We've

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never had a double failure.” Newman was heavy set, in his sixties, thick blonde hair thinning, aided by a toupee. His sole exercise was golf—he enjoyed playing against himself, and altering his score on the 18th hole, so he always won. He always dressed well, tailored suits, neat shirts, matching socks. “This is unprecedented. And will get worse.”

Councillor Marjorie added, while knitting booties for a grandchild, “This is the sixth major break in two years. The third time water and power have shut down.” She was the same age as Newman, aggressive in her own way, quieter and without hair extensions. Knitting helped her think. And she liked the image. It helped her think during meetings. “What happened to the improved maintenance?”

“You know as well as I do,” Madeline replied. “Shall I restate the obvious? No money. No tourism from Earth. No exports. Our main funding dried up over a hundred years ago, when Tusk died and his company broke up.”

“I thought funds were diverted from the emergency bank,” Newman said. “That was the Council vote.”

“You all knew there was *nothing* in the emergency bank,” Madeline replied. “We knew we were buying time. We were all involved.”

“No,” Councillor Newman insisted, leaning forward, “it was a delay. Only a delay. It obviously did not work out. But this is stupid. Let’s be honest. The problems we face are not simply a lack of resources. The problem is the direction the Council has taken—mismanaging what we do have–under *your* leadership. You’ve led us to a dead end.” He glared at Madeline.

“Councillor, let’s leave campaigning for a moment,” she shot back, not glaring. “This is a business meeting about water and power. We will be without water and power for at least two days. The Water Department will deal with the current repairs but they tell me much more is on the horizon. The basic problem is funding for overtime for workers. Councillors, there is a major source of funds we have never tapped. I suggest we consider it.”

She looked at them. They looked back. Marjorie stopped knitting.

“*Marsball*?” Newman asked, stiffening. “Take funds from *Marsball*? You can’t be serious.”

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“We’re talking maintaining water and power for the future,” Madeline told them. “We have no choice. Money from Marsball will pay for additional resources from Earth.”

“It’s the only part of living here people love,” Marjorie said, putting down her knitting. “Marsball needs its budget. They get it all from ticket sales, not from us. They have plans for improving the arena. You can’t tax Marsball.”

“Better than bursting pipes. Better than failing crops. I’m talking a quarter of their budget.” Gasps. “I’m just asking, think about it. I’m sure colonists will understand.”

The meeting ended with no agreement, the Councillors and their aides leaving the room, trading looks and muttering. As he was leaving, Newman actually spat on the table.

Left alone, Madeline turned to Mike and Sally.

“Tough sell,” Mike muttered.

“Based on their response, it will tank whatever chance you have for re-election,” Sally told her. “Colonists will end up with higher ticket prices. That’s the way Marsball will cover it. Indirect tax. People will be outraged, just like the Councillors.”

“I figured it would be a tough sell.” Madeline calmly looked at them. “The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.”

“That’s just an old TV show,” Mike said, sitting stiffly. “And Marsball fans are not a few. They’re a big chunk of the colony.”

“We have to figure out,” Sally said, “how to get people to work with this in a positive way. Newman’s our biggest problem. He wants to take over. His TV show about how to manage the colony has gone to his head. Viewers loved it when he fired Administrators. It earned him a base. He’ll win the election. Marjorie, second. You, third.”

Madeline said, “The election no longer feels important. I’m no longer sure we’ll have one. Let’s concentrate instead on restoring the power and water. As permanently as we can. We need to focus on the big picture. There are answers.”

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Mike and Sally shifted in their chairs, uncomfortable. Mike especially. Sally thought Madeline was finally doing her thing.

George was tired of having nothing to do. The Clinic operated on emergency power. There was no TV and staff told him there was limited water and power, possibly for days. One time, thought of working underground. It was important. Water was considering him when he was declared infected. Now, two days later, Water was gone forever.

George was beyond restless staying in his room, being recorded, feeling the lumps move, jerking off. Pointless. And the weird lust was dying down. Perhaps what was inside him was also fed up. Who cared about pleasure anymore? He had to find someone he could talk with. Really talk. To the people around him, the staff, he was a guinea pig.

He got off the bed, went to the closed door, opened it and walked out, feeling, well, firm. He had to do something. Leaving his room was a start.

The corridor was empty, the staff elsewhere, dealing with the power and water shortages. Doors on both sides of the corridor were closed, as always. He opened one. No one. He opened another. An emaciated young man lay motionless on the bed, eyes staring at the ceiling. He turned his head as George leaned in, too shrivelled for George to recognize, perhaps him to recognize George

George could think of nothing to say. He tried to smile. The young man blinked. George closed the door.

He found only empty rooms until the last door, when he opened a door and saw a young woman, his age, sitting on the bed, her notebook open to ***Mars and Me,*** running on batteries. They looked at each other, surprised, he standing in the doorway, her on the bed. Expecting to see someone new was not how they expected to start the day.

The room was the same as his, windowless, clean. Same furniture. Her room was neater. She was neater.

“I didn’t know anyone was here,” George finally said, awkward.

“Welcome to the club,” she replied, equally awkward. “How long for you?”

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“Two days.”

“Three.”

“I saw you in middle school.”

“Yes, we weren’t in the same class.”

They looked at each other. Awkwardly.

“George,” he told her.

“Katie,” she said back. “Hey.”

“Hey. Can I come in?”

She smiled. He entered the room, sat on the bed—not too close. “This okay?” She nodded. “You look, uh, healthy.”

“Feel okay, except for the lumps.”

“You playing the game?” he asked. “The new version?”

“Are we screwed!” She shook her head. “Martians inside us. Dome’s going to fail but we’ll starve first. Us, what do we have? Days?” She shook her head, running her fingers through her long red hair.

He took her hand. It felt warm. “We should do something. Find others here, like us. If there are any. We could organize. Apply pressure. Demand answers. We deserve answers.”

“But there are none.”

“Do we know?”

Katie saw his determination. She wanted that. She was also fed up with sitting in her room. Anyway, soon the battery on her notebook would die, and she could not power up until the Clinic’s full power was restored. She shut off the notebook and they left her room.

Both felt far better than they had minutes ago–energized.

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George and Katie went through the rest of the rooms in their wing. They found no other patients. The door to the adjoining wing was locked. Through the window they saw corpses on tables, covered, arms and feet sticking out from under the sheets, withered, shrunken. George and Katie looked at what could be them for a long time. Neither spoke.

They walked back down the corridor and ended in George's room–his battery was fully charged. He powered up his notebook and entered the game. Their NPG doubles were in the Clinic, in George's room, NPG George's notebook on.

How are you? George typed.

Searching, his NPG replied. *Anything yet?*

No, but just started.

In the game, George searched the wing. In the room with the withered young man, he found his NPG. Also withered, but sitting up. He looked at their avatars. *George. Katie.*

George asked, *You know us?*

Of course. I was in middle school with both of you. We all found new friends and lost touch.

Where is your player?

He died an hour ago. They took him away. Now, I wait to die. The NPG was resigned. *The game takes a little time. Soon I will no longer exist.*

That's horrid, Katie typed.

It is life, natural, *part of the game*, the NGP replied. *You die, in your real life. Except you do not know it is coming. Each of us die when you die. Accident or disease, we linger.*

And you accept that? George asked. *I wouldn't. Not if I could do something.*

Nothing can be done, the NPG replied. *Death is natural, everywhere.*

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And as George and Katie watched, the NPG shimmered, rippled, then was gone, gone forever.

“We have to find a way to contact Shallot,” George said to Katie. “Her great grandfather led the team which developed ***Mars and Me*** thirty years ago. He could help with this.”

“Change the parameters,” Katie said. “Why should an NPG die? He was so aware.”

“I’ll message her, through the game, should have done that already. Then we’ll look up her NPG,” George said, starting to type.

Katie looked at the screen. “They have it worse than us. Didn’t think that was possible.”

9

Great Grandfathered

Outside it was the same as always–no weather, musty air, dim sunlight. She once liked going outside. Now it reminded her only of problems. Shallot was in a residential area, far from downtown, in front of one of the smaller homes. She walked up to it. Two large rose bushes on either side of the front door—it always smelled sweet here. She knocked, opened the unlocked door and stepped in.

“Granddad?”

“Kitchen, onion.”

She found him sitting at the small table, drinking tea made from bottled water. A pot of tea and an empty cup sat near his hands. She had not called or texted, but he expected her. He was old, in his nineties, his silver-gray hair thin, straggly, his untrimmed gray beard a bit too long for anything fashionable.

Granddad never thought of fashion.

He did not walk around much the last few years, due to arthritis and less energy, so she visited him regularly. More than her parents, she loved him. He had always been warm, accessible, loving. Also, he never told her what to do. He left everything for her to figure out–with the occasional hint. His daughter, Madeline,

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was the opposite—fashionable, committed to the Administration where she worked, seeming to know everything, the opposite of her daughter. Both sought the best for the colony, from different directions.

The kitchen walls were covered with photographs of the colony, from its earliest stages, including the original crater over which the dome was built. Two framed photographs were of Madeline, as Mayor, one signed *For Dad*. The walls of his home were covered with carefully selected history. People standing under the completed dome, without pressure suits. He would tell Shallot he chose each one because they reminded him of the early colony, his family, his dreams.

“You expected me?”

He smiled. “In the game, your NPG visited mine yesterday.”

“You sleep?” she asked, pulling out a chair to sit next to him.

“Too much. I’m 98. Sleeping is a waste. Every day is a gift, eh onion? I like being awake, even if it hurts. Worst is feeling sluggish. Short of breath. They tell me it’s cysts on my liver. Go figure. I have more energy if I don’t have to move around much.”

“Granddad, I know I’m lucky. Privileged. Did nothing to earn it. Born into it. Mom, the Mayor. You, the son of an original colonist and architect of our overall computer system and electronics network.”

“That’s me, onion. Have some tea.” She smiled. “Guess you’re here to talk? What’s up?”

“A lot. First, can you do me a favour?”

He smiled. “A change in the game?”

She straightened. “How did you know?”

“I’ve seen the changes to the game. They came from your note book. You’ve caused quite a stir, onion.”

“Oh. Sorry, I should have told you.”

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He smiled, looking at her. “No problem. And?”

“Well, I got a text from my friend George. He went into the Clinic a couple of days ago. You know, the Clinic. So you know why.” He nodded. “Today he texted me. He talked in the game with an NPG whose player had died. The NPG just sat waiting and George watched it—him–die. He knew when his player died, so would he. It was…painful. For both of them. Do they have to die, Grandad? You led the team that created ***Mars and Me***. Can you change it so if a player dies, her NPG doesn’t die with her? Right now, it’s, well, immoral. Inhumane. Didn’t you think about that?”

He shook his head. “Not even remotely. They were only AI.”

“Not any more. Can you change the game?

He looked at the rose sitting in a ceramic vase on the table. Ever since she could remember, Grandad had a rose in his kitchen. She barely remembered his wife, her great grandmother, who had died years earlier. He looked at Shallot, smiling–relieved. “I haven’t talked about the game with you until now. Wanted you to discover it on your own. I knew you would.

“Here’s the exposition.

“To begin, why was the game created? Thirty years ago, Council was desperate. Our water filtration systems had failed completely. Took six months before the water was even basically filtered. Filtration is still not what it should be. And the dome was scarring. And support and resources from Earth had long ago dried up.

“Council thought we needed a diversion. A cheap diversion requiring no serious use of our limited resources. They told me colonists needed an outlet. What they meant was, a distraction. A distraction from being born on an abandoned failing colony millions of miles from Earth. I suggested a computer game.

“I remember when I was your age, how positive my father was. We would create a new world, export valuable minerals, make discoveries. We would see the universe and our role in it.

“In his last years, he was…less positive. By then, dad knew. Knew the problems we were creating for ourselves with poor maintenance and decreasing support from Earth. He and the others wanted the best maintenance of the dome and water, but

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the resources were already not there. He saw the slippery slope and knew we were sliding down it.

“I think I understood the problems and how colonists saw them.

“So I pulled together a team and we developed an unusually comprehensive, free game about living in the colony. We built in infinite possibilities. I made certain we added a page where a player could create their own game within the game, adding facts and information. I thought sooner or later a gamer would use that page not just to fiddle around, but to force true reality into the game. The game was deliberately bland. Council would never accept anything controversial. I decided I could wait to change the game. It took the right time, the right person.

“And you, onion, turned out to be the right player. Congratulations. This is your fate.”

“Fate? Me?”

“Yes you. You’ve noticed the change in the NPGs already.”

She leaned forward, towards him, holding her unsipped cup of tea. “They’re different. They think for themselves. They have feelings.”

“Built into the game, when the right conditions arose. Change was needed. With independent NPGs, the game could help colonists to, well, save themselves. Now the NPGs are motivated. You started this. You have to keep it up.”

“Granddad…I’m *swamped*,” Shallot said, eyes wide. “I mean, whoa. Info dump. I need time to think.”

“Sorry. I tried to prepare you, over the years, without telling you what to do. Prepare you and several others who were promising. But it was you. Very good. Because we’re running out of time.”

“Running out?”

“Less than fifty years before the dome collapses. It will take too long, with the resources available, to build an underground city. The crops will fail in a few years.” He looked at her a long time. She looked back. “Let’s go for a walk,” he said to her, pushing himself up from his chair. “Get out of the kitchen and into the world.”

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He took her outside, onto the street, walking with a limp, occasionally wincing. Pointed up to the dome, to around them. “The only extraplanetary city. Created in a totally hostile environment. People were born here, grew up here, died here. Under the dome. Breathing increasingly bad air, drinking increasingly bad water. We live in a unique achievement, its purpose never truly considered. Turns out, our purpose is to exist.”

“Yeah, all my friends think that.”

He walked with her through the neighbourhood, talking about the people who lived in the houses, had lived in the houses, his father, Madeline, his sole child. His late wife. He described his father as a dreamer awakened by reality, his mother pragmatic, as was their child. It was gratifying when Madeline was elected Mayor. She had done, he said, the best anyone could.

They continued walking. He limped more.

“I love my mom.”

“Love my grand daughter too.” He pointed. “That’s where I used to live, with Mary, where Madeline was born. Couldn’t stay there after Mary died. I’m more comfortable now. Smaller place, less memories. Except roses. Mary loved roses.”

They hugged and walked until it hurt too much him too much. “I’ll make the NPG changes. Good idea. Should have thought of it. So many choices. We can always make the wrong ones, often do, often for the best of reasons.”

They sat in a small park, he slumped onto the bench. No children were in the playground. It was quiet. Above them, teams of workers patched the dome.

“You talk with Nan about this?” she asked.

“Not yet. We do talk regularly.”

“She knows. I told her.”

“And?”

“Well, you know, she takes time to process stuff. And there’s the election.”

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Her great grandfather shrugged. “Given the current emergency, they’d be smart to put the election off.”

“I think it’s already off. All of it.” She looked at him. “I love you, Grandad. You should have told me earlier.”

“You did not seem ready.” He smiled. “I misjudged you.

“You’re stronger than I realized.

“I’m proud of you. You have less of your mom and dad in you, more of me and your grandmother. You’ve made the right choices.”

10

The Campaign Starts and Stops

Three election rallies had been scheduled in front of City Hall that evening—one for Madeline, Newman and Marjorie. Usually rallies were planned. Everyone knew what to expect. Because of shortages—and apparent lack of voter interest–the three rallies were forced to roll into one. Instead of evening, the power shortage forced the rally to begin in mid afternoon. Voters were allowed time off work to attend.

It was a dreary day under the dome. Another dreary day.

All three candidates—Madeline, Newman, Marjorie (not Mickey Mouse, although a man in a Mickey costume was in the crowd, signing autographs)–stood on City Hall’s front steps, behind podiums, colony flags on either side of them hanging limp.

The crowd was modest. Emergency sirens had stopped late yesterday but no one knew when power or water would be restored. Standing in the open square, waiting, the colonists were restless, talking quietly with each other, arguing, debating about the system failures. About who was responsible. About how Council had failed them.

Some sipped bottled water as they stood waiting. Some held signs, most for Newman, significantly less for Marjorie, three for Madeline. One colonist towards the front shouted “When’s this thing going to finally start?”

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Madeline, standing between Newman and Marjorie, tapped her mike, creating a loud sound. Everyone looked at her.

“Before we begin, an update on our power and water. Repair crews are working overtime in the current emergency. A few minutes ago we were told water and power will be probably restored overnight, almost certainly by tomorrow morning. Definitely some time tomorrow. I’m sorry, nothing is definite.”

Unsatisfied murmurs. Inside, Madeline sighed and wished she had brought her cane. Her left leg ached.

She cleared her throat, feeling under siege. “In this joint, shortened rally, each candidate will make a brief speech. We drew straws for who speaks first.” The crowd’s eyes on her were unforgiving. Normally she would be energized, addressing a crowd during an election. Now she fought to appear confident instead of deflated. “Councilperson Newman?”

Newman straightened at being announced. He moved forward, ignoring his podium, getting closer to the crowd. His smile was grim. He glanced at Madeline. “Thank you, Mayor. I’m sure we all look forward to your solutions to these emergencies which keep occurring during your administration.”

Newman had a deep, commanding voice. He used it well. He stood straight and tall, making eye contact with people in the crowd. “Fellow citizens. You know me. Newman. I’m not sure I even have a first name.” Mild laughter. “Because I’ve always been seen as a new man. I’ve been on Council three terms. You know the problems we face. You’re frustrated. So am I. I have tried to make Mars great again, but it has been so uphill. However, fellow citizens, there is a way out. And I have solutions. For our future.”

He had their attention.

“The Mayor says the purse is bare. She’ll tell you she wants to tax Marsball. Yes, they have a profit. They planned to use it to improve the arena. We all know what will happen with a tax on Marsball. Your ticket prices will go up. Way up. Probably it will cost double to see a Marsball game. How does making your favourite entertainment unaffordable make your life better?

“Instead, purse strings in the government itself can be tightened. The City Hall

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swamp can be drained. It is vital that maintenance on our facilities be improved. And the strange plague affecting some of us needs far more research. In addition to cutting fat, I will demand a one-time improvement of resources from Earth. Given our situation, I am certain they will respond. Together, we will make all Mars great again. You will make Mars again, by electing me. I hope I will remain humble."

Laughter.

"It will not be easy. Perhaps life here is in the long run impossible. I listen to the colonists I represent. We must consider realistic options. The best is an escape ship, built here, which we can use to return to Earth. Such ships can be built with our existing resources, supplemented with emergency funding from Earth. Earth owes us." Applause. "But building escape ships to Earth will take years. We probably will not build them in time. Our crops will fail long before then.

"My solution for our immediate future? I urge us all to consider building a city underground. Temporary. We would be close to the water and protected from the radiation and dust storms. The lava tubes can easily be heated. From an underground base, we can restore the colony's surface and dome. Eventually we will return living above ground.

"Under my plan, we have realistic options. We have safety. I'd say more but our time together today is limited. Thank you." He looked almost angry, holding his hands out wide. Then he smiled.

Generous round of applause.

Madeline took a breath. She knew how popular Newman had become. His first two terms, he was considered a bully. But in the last few months, his popularity skyrocketed.

"Thank you, Councillor Newman," Madeline told him. "And now, everyone, your second candidate," Madeline said. "Councillor Allgone?"

Marjorie smiled at the crowd, nervous. She did not enjoy public speaking, only the community work and working behind the scenes at Council. "Good afternoon and thank you, Mayor, Councillor Newman, and thank you especially to the colonists who came here today. I also have served three terms on Council.

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“Honestly, the colony has been relatively well run. The difficulty is we are starved for resources and have been unable to maintain our infrastructure. Life on Mars always was difficult and now grows worse. In a generation or two, we will no longer be able to live under this dome. It will fail. But living underground sounds like a bad idea to me. A waste of what we have and could do.”

Murmurs, but mostly silence.

“Colonists, we have two choices. One is we live in a cave. The other is we return to Earth. If we concentrate our resources, we have enough time to build enough ships to leave Mars behind. Earth has its own problems. In some ways, identical to ours. But at least we could live on the surface. At least we could breathe the air. And their water filters work. We only have to land in a country ahead in the Water Wars.

“Go home. That is my campaign slogan,” Marjorie told the crowd. “Thank you.”

The applause was mild, scattered. Colonists looked at each other. Abandon the colony? Few believed enough ships could be built in time. More important, despite the hardships, few wanted to think seriously about leaving Mars altogether. The colony had always been dedicated to survival. Retreat was a lousy option.

Madeline cleared her throat. “Thank you, Councillor. Now I will make my own statement to conclude this short rally. Thank you, fellow colonists. I appreciate this opportunity to speak directly to you.” She looked at the crowd. They looked back. “Cut administration? We cut that over the last ten years, starting before I was elected Mayor. There are no funds to be trimmed. But Marsball. I propose to amortize twenty-five percent of Marsball’s budget. It will, yes, certainly increase ticket prices. Council has no power over Marsball ticket prices, there is no way we can force them to stay at the same level.

“But it is better than an overall tax and will not affect the games, including the current championship series.”

Boos.

Madeline shifted, keeping her weight off her aching leg. “It is one realistic solution, unlike what Councillor Newman offers. We cannot rely on Earth for help, including resources to build escape ships.”

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“Hey!” one young woman near Shallot called out loudly. “Are there Martians in our water? How long have you known?”

“How long have you lied to us?” another demanded.

Boos.

Madeline looked at the two other Councillors. Newman stepped forward. “We’ve all known on Council, for about twenty years, that something Martian was in our water. I wish there was an answer but under our current leadership, we have no answers.”

Madeline and Marjorie nodded.

“Then what good are you?” a young woman demanded.

The crowd grew more restless. Shallot’s heart ached for her grandmother.

“When will the dome fall apart?” a young man in the crowd cried out. “I don’t hear much faith in it. When will we be forced underground?”

“How can we keep the water flowing when we don’t have the parts? Isn’t that why it’s getting worse? Aren’t we screwed?” a third young person shouted. “We need answers!”

“Isn’t pollution from the Smelter poisoning our crops?” a fourth shouted out. “Isn’t our food running out? We can’t live eating that artificial crap.”

“Isn’t it a daydream we can build rockets to take us all to Earth?” a fifth asked.

“Is Earth any better?” asked a sixth. “It hasn’t fixed its problems.”

Peter and Wendy stood next to each other. Together, they called out: “We work in water maintenance. Everybody, today we formed an organization to protect our water. An organization of water workers. It’s an emergency. We know the water best.”

A man a few feet away spoke up. “I work in the Smelter. Pollution controls will cost our jobs. And the colony needs our production. We feel threatened. Everyone hates us but needs us. So today we also formed an organization of Smelter workers

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to protect our interests. Which are the colony's interests!"

Workers had been inspired by ***Mars and Me***, where such groups had formed the day before.

By now the crowd ignored the politicians, talking with each other. The candidates stepped back, startled. They had expected, at worst, unpleasant questions. Ignoring the politicians was new.

Only Newman smiled.

Shallot stood with her friends in the middle of the crowd, watching. Her besties were near but her eyes were on her grandmother backing away, surprised, upset—hurt. Shallot wished she could do something. But the crowd would hear only the Mayor's granddaughter.

The rally soon broke up, the crowd drifting away, talking eagerly in small groups, the candidates fleeing into City Hall.

Shallot stood alone as people around her left and her friends returned to their workplaces. Everything she knew had changed. Transitioning. All of her life, everything she knew, was in flux.

Her world was beyond unsettled.

11

Unsettled!

Madeline, for the first time in years, felt *unsettled*. She had not felt this way since High School. High School had always been the worst. Challenges were fine. They built strength. She had dealt with challenges forever. Although forever was now beginning to feel like a very long time. She was growing weary of challenges. Beyond any colonist's or politician's experience. Challenges which turned expectations upside down, backwards, twisted.

Indeed, inside, Madeline felt twisted into small, anxious pieces.

She glanced at Sally and Mike, walking with her into the Council boardroom. They looked at her, shrugged. Everyone was anxious. What would come next? Almost

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anything. “He’s going to make his power play,” Madeline told them. “At the next Council meeting. Yesterday and today, it’s so obvious.”

The other Councillors were already in the boardroom. “This is insane,” Newman said, standing when everyone was seated. “No one cared about the election. All my preparation, for nothing. Will we even have one? They already have held *theirs* just now!”

“The rally was…unfortunate. Everyone cannot have power,” Marjorie added. “Society does not work that way. If colonists do not want their current leaders, they should simply vote them out. Vote us out. Maybe they do not want to be led.”

“They’re *not* ungovernable,” Newman snapped. “You saw the reaction to me, compared with you and the Mayor. They responded to me. To change. Then I stopped speaking and it all fell apart.” He glared at Madeline. “What the hell happened?”

“It’s the *game*,” Mike told them, standing behind Madeline. “***Mars and Me***. It’s been changed, by some of the players. To reflect our problems realistically. Very realistically. Most colonists know about it by now.”

“***Mars and Me***? It’s only a stupid diversion,” Newman said to him, abruptly wary at mention of the game.

“No more,” Mike told them. “Confidential information about the water and dome is now in the game. People know what we do about the microbes. The game now is full of new information about the water piping, pollution, even crop failures.”

“People are upset because they know what we know,” Madeline added, “and that we kept it from them.”

“It’s our job to know, not theirs. They’re not supposed to know,” Newman snapped. “Not yet. Eventually, full disclosure. When we know more, they can know more.”

“Councillors, there’s more about the game,” Madeline told them. “The game now has a history of six months of everyone knowing about all this. The game’s AI characters now have a complete history of severe problems. But they could not do anything until the colonists themselves stared to act. It made them kind of…neurotic. And, strangely, very human.

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“They mirror us. When colonists started playing the new version of the game, the AI characters reflecting them began to act. Faster than us. Essentially, predicting what we would do. They’ve formed unions. Started to bypass Council altogether. In fact, in the game, half an hour ago, I’m told the election has been suspended.”

Newman glared at her. “That isn’t possible.”

“My grandchildren tell me it is,” Marjorie cut in. “So what are we going to do? We cannot allow mob rule. I say we start building exit ships now. It would unite the colonists, a realistic escape they can believe in.”

It was quiet for a while, the Councillors staring at each other, looking over their shoulders at their aides. No one had taken notes. No one knew what to say. Politicians depend on elections, after all. Most in the room sat quietly, stunned.

“Elections are one thing,” Newman finally muttered, “revolution another. What the hell. That game. Can it be changed? Get the colonists back to normal?”

“Only if we changed it yesterday,” Madeline replied. “My father led the team which created the game. I’m going to see him after this meeting. Perhaps he has some answers. Or solutions. Right now, I have no answers, nothing to say to the colonists. Do any of you?”

The atmosphere rapidly grew increasingly tense. Newman stood and began pacing. “I went into politics to serve, not to be served.”

Marjorie brought out her knitting, listening. Most of the other Councillors stared at him, giving him their attention.

“We simply cannot hand over control of the colony to the colonists,” Newman told the group, restless. “Their world view is microscopic. Only we have the larger view, the big picture.”

“Yes we have to do something, Newman,” Marjorie said, knitting baby socks. “But how? They do the work. They can go on strike, refuse to work.”

“Make organizing illegal,” Newman snapped. “Impose martial law.”

“Good luck with that,” Madeline told the room.

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“Unenforceable,” Marjorie added. “Also, the wrong direction to go.”

He glared at her, then softened. “You’re right. I’m sorry. Martial law would be stupid.” He sniffled, then blew his nose on a tissue his aide, Jim, handed him.

“I don’t know,” one of the Councillors said quietly. A couple of others nodded. All of their eyes on Newman.

Marjorie leaned back, putting her knitting down. “You have them hypnotized or what?”

“And how could I do that? Don’t insult us.” Newman returned to glaring. “What are you knitting? Gloves because you’re hands off?”

“Booties so we can keep moving.”

“Councillors, Councillors,” Madeline said, her voice steady. “We already had a lot on our plate. We need to work together on this, yes? Not argue.”

Newman reluctantly took his seat, only because he was unsure what to do next. Marjorie put her knitting down.

“Perhaps we should postpone the election,” Madeline told them. “Right now, it’s unclear whether many colonists would even vote. They’re taking direct action. We should coordinate rather than order.”

“Easy for you to say,” Newman growled. “You’re on the way out. I would have won the election. I would have had the power. As Mayor I’d make Mars great again.”

Uneasy silence but most Councillors nodded.

“Okay, we clearly need time,” Madeline suggested. I suggest re-meeting tomorrow morning and see where we’re at then. I’m sure we all want to reach out to our constituents. See first hand what the colonists think. Then we can build a consensus about where to go next.”

“We already saw,” Newman grunted and stalked out, followed by his aide. “This is it,” Newman said over his shoulder, “You know what’s next.”

Jim nodded. “Yes, sir,” his aide said quietly, looking around, uneasy Newman did

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not care who heard. The other Councillors followed behind them, some glancing at Newman and whispering to their aides.

Madeline looked at Mike and Sally. “You okay?” she asked. They nodded. “I have to talk with my father. Take a break.”

“We don’t have time for a break,” Sally said.

“I’m going to my office,” Mike said. “To check the game. I haven’t been in it for a week.”

“You play?” Sally asked. He nodded. “Embarrassed?”

“Of course not. It isn’t just for kids.” He smiled briefly, stiffly, and walked out.

Madeline sighed. “You know what’s up with him? He’s been acting strange for a while.” Sally shook her head. “Well then. Stay available. I’ll be in touch. Don’t worry so much. Maybe the colonists becoming active is positive, eh?” Madeline took her hand, held it a moment, then left.

Sally stood alone in the large boardroom. She looked at her tablet to see what was next. Her schedule was all about dealing with questions and feedback from the rally and arranging campaign speeches. All now scrubbed. Her inbox was empty. She understood that feedback. She went to her office and sat and thought. She so wanted to help Madeline. She believed in Madeline, had faith in her. She loved the six years she’d worked for her. Mike was the sole bad part, an overgrown boy toy.

Madeline left City Hall, driving her cart to her father’s home. Walking hurt too much. Her cane was on the seat behind her. Dad could see her using it, otherwise only Sally and Mike. Optics. She appeared weak enough already.

People saw her drive past. No waves. Two hellos. Madeline felt irrelevant. She hated being ignored but, inside, she felt relief. If she was ignored, she was no longer a moving target.

Her father was at home, sitting at his kitchen table, apparently waiting for her. He always seemed to know. Dad. There was a pot of tea on the table and an empty cup for her. He sipped from his cup. “Good afternoon, kiddo. Take a load off. I imagine it’s quite a load you’re carrying.”

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Madeline, standing, poured a cup of tea for herself, sipped. “Love you too, dad.”

“I’m proud of you. Given the circumstances, you’re the best Mayor we’ve had.” He smiled. “You’ve been wrong lately, of course.” She smiled—Dad. “But mostly for all the right reasons,” he told her. “I’ve also been wrong. Should have acted long ago. We both waited, for what we told ourselves was the best of reasons. Waited too long.”

“Yeah.” Madeline sipped and sat. “Council has broken down. The rally was a disaster. Democracy has fallen apart.”

“Has it?”

“No, only as we’ve known it. The colony is coming together. I like that part. Dad, that isn’t why I’m here, or just part of it. The game. What’s happened isn’t a surprise, is it?” He nodded, she sipped, looking at him. “You never told me. Why?”

He smiled a little. “When the game came online, you were in your early thirties. Games were definitely not your thing. I wanted to encourage you.”

“By lying? It would have been nice to know beforehand the game could be altered that way.”

“Then it would be shut down. Few were ready for serious change. To directly face our challenges. The time had to be right. Which meant, crises.”

“Uh huh.”

“And here we are.”

“Uh huh. Your rationalization mechanism is in overdrive, Dad. You set it up but would not go whole hog. Well, you’ve put us in with the pigs now. There probably won’t be an election. Most of Council is in revolt and confused about what to do. Newman is making his play, to take charge. The Colony cannot be allowed to fall apart. So. Does your game have any suggestions? Do you?”

“Power should be spread and accountable. The time has come for us to be straight with each other.”

“Like not hiding information?”

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“You’re angry. Fair enough. I understand. You should be. I’ll think about what you said. Let’s move on. It’s making me uncomfortable, kiddo.”

“Yeah, given you planted something, let colonists treat it like a game, until someone came along and altered it. Like Shallot. Sorry you’re uncomfortable but we both know it’s because you deserve it.”

He coughed.

“Talk to me.” She sat facing him, poured more tea, for herself and for him, eyes on him.

So he told her. How the game was designed to be, on the surface, a playable, positive version of the colony, a way to try to solve the colony’s fundamental problems. Underneath were trigger situations for the NPGs. Shallot’s changes powered them. Now the game was no longer gentle, positive. The game allowed, now, the NPGs to act in advance of the colonists.

He told her his team’s expectation was that the NPGs would create the best solutions possible, and the colonists would follow. When the game was introduced, the colonists were not ready for change though they were on track. Now they had arrived at the station. He never thought it would take thirty years, but until recently most colonists were satisfied.

“I went into the game once, years ago,” Madeline finally told him, “out of curiosity. I never played. Never spoke with the NPG Mayor but I checked her out. She was me.”

“Very much like you,” he told her.

“So what now?”

He sipped more tea. “I suggest you go with the flow. Talk to the NPG Mayor. Share ideas. And,” he added, looking at her, “keep an eye on Newman. I’ve detected a disturbance in the game about him. We can’t pin it down yet. Mind, there isn’t much left of my team. I need to bring in some fresh blood.”

Madeline stood. “I’m not you. I can’t wait and hope. Go with the flow. Dad, I have to do something and I have no idea what. The colony is evolving. If it works, great. What if any new democracy is a disaster? Where does that leave Shallot and her

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generation?”

“Smell the rose, on the table. That’s what it’s for. Shallot smells it every time she’s here. You never take a moment, give yourself a break. You’ve been punishing yourself for years.”

“Dad. I have responsibilities.”

“To them, also to yourself. Where will her generation end up? Right now, best bet is living in a cave underground. You can help prevent that.”

“Jeez, dad, pile it on. I’m so glad I dropped by for your help. Meanwhile, Shallot can’t find a job. Because she’s my granddaughter.”

Shallot was thinking of her grandmother and great grandfather when her phone rang. She looked at the I.D, expecting it to be Nan. Or a bestie.

“Good morning. Shallot, your name has been passed on to me for employment at Marsball. I’m Sam Mastan, CEO. Can you come over for a talk? Now?”

After blanking out for a moment, she found herself. “Yes. Of course. On the way, Mr. Mastan.”

She stood on the street, cell phone in hand. She had been on her way home. She turned and rushed towards the Marsball complex at the Arena, half a kilometre away. A job! Out of nowhere! Maybe the guidance counsellor had finally helped her! Or perhaps this was totally suspicious. She was told no one would hire her. Yet, her counsellor had mentioned Marsball.

The Marsball administration building, attached to the Arena, was large. Marsball was the biggest entertainment enterprise in the colony. Checking in at the front desk, she was told to go straight to Mr. Mastan’s office, second floor and down the hall. The door was open. She stepped gingerly into his office, trying to exude confidence–and give him no hint of being wary.

Mr. Mastan sat behind his desk, a short bald man whose only visible hair was a mustache. A thin black mustache. “Great. Come in. Please. Pleasure to meet you, Shallot. Sit right there.” He pointed to the available chair in front of his desk, his smile as thin as his mustache. “So. Tell me about yourself.”

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Her walls went up immediately.

She smiled expectantly, seeing him as clearly as she could see a giant open crack in the dome. She energetically (but carefully) told him about herself—her school background, her computer and social skills. She could type. She could file. She could work phones. She finished and waited for the shoe to drop, expecting a thud.

“Very good, Shallot. We could use a high performer. Much to do. We’re in the semi-finals. We need your help.”

“That’s wonderful, Mr. Mastan. I’d love to work here. What would I do?”

“Why did I call you in today? It should be no secret. Something has changed. The Mayor has a key plank of her campaign to take away a big chunk of our profits. We might have to lay staff off. Cancel the finals. If that happens, we would be unable to afford any new hires, including you. Understood?”

“Understood.”

“So you will be in an important, no, vital role. We need to understand her plans for us, especially if she is re-elected. You know what I want or do I have to spell it out?”

“You don’t have to spell it out. You want me to convince my grand mother to back off Marsball. Or, at least, spy on her. Then rat her out.”

He leaned back and sighed. “You have a poor attitude.”

She stood. “I understand why you asked, but you never should have.” And walked out.

He watched her leave, shrugged. Worth a shot.

Outside, Shallot took out her cell, phoned Aaliyah and updated her. Aaliyah, who had been hired by Marsball, told her to go to the coffee shop across the street. Shallot went to the shop, in limited business using bottled water and battery power. She ordered a coffee, though she rarely drank one, and sat at a table. There were few people in the shop. She did not like the quiet. Right now, she preferred noise. Looking out the window, she saw Aaliyah walk out of the Marsball building, into the coffee shop and to her table.

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They shared a long hug.

“That Mastan is a pig,” Shallot said when they sat.

Aaliyah nodded. “Actually, you are the reason he hired me. He called out of the blue. Knew we’re friends. Part of my job is to stay friends with you, and our other friends, so I can rat you all out.”

“And you agreed?”

“Don’t worry, I can work them better than they can me. I won’t tell them anything useful. And I thought, maybe you can feed me phoney stuff to feed them.” She giggled. “If they push too hard, I’ll quit. He leers.”

Shallot shifted, uncomfortable. “I don’t mean to put you into such a situation. Never meant to. What about Farha?”

“Uh, she’s at the Smelter. It’s tough for her, over there. Not just the environment, the suspicion and anger. She thinks she needs to stay away from you for a while. She may be able to get out of the Smelter, go to the Farm. Her dad runs the Farm. She said she’ll call in a few days and she loves you.”

“She won’t talk to me?”

“Text her secretly in the game, she’s up for that. Phone calls and meeting together is for later. For her. Me too, actually. I’m sure I’ll be asked when I go back there. I’ll feed them a line. With a hook on it.”

“I’m bait.” Shallot felt pale. “Great. I feel worse, somehow.”

She hugged Shallot. “You’ve got plenty of friends. Everyone’s scared or needs to see what will happen. Hold tight. It’ll be worth the ride,” Aaliyah told her. “I’m lucky. I can muddle my way through. Nobody cares about *my* family.”

“My family isn’t who I am. I’m not my mom, dad, grandmother or my great grand dad.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

Watching Aaliyah return to the Marsball building, Shallot finished her coffee. It was

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cold.

Is this what creating change felt like? Cold coffee, alone? No water. No power—and not only the electric kind. Everything had become so…personal.

Was she ready?

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