Lust, On Mars

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1

Lust, on Mars

Below them her bed, above them the dome, sealing in the colony from the reality of Mars. Completed in 2225, today–a hundred years later—still the sole colony. The reality of Mars intervened in plans for the future.

By now the clear dome had eroded to a light orange/brown, matching the endless barren landscape outside. Cracks required immediate sealing from deadly solar radiation, unbreathable atmosphere and subhuman temperatures (today, -117 (not including the wind chill factor) (and it was windy.)) The air was always stale, it never rained. Polluted smog from the Smelter hung over the city as the less than 400 colonists went about their daily lives—lives of endless work, to survive on a profoundly hostile planet, which clearly wanted them to die.

Naked, in bed with her, he touched her shoulder. “Let’s do it.” Facing her.

“Not yet,” she replied, avoiding looking at him.

“Something wrong? I thought we were good.”

“George–I’m a virgin.”

“I thought you were serious about…*what*? You’re a *what*?” He pushed himself up. “How could you be a virgin? I lost mine when I was fifteen. You’re sixteen!”

She looked through the window, to the huge dome covering the city, to the

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orange/brown sky. To the tiny moon Phobos, barely visible. Without a strong telescope, it was impossible to see the Earth. At the moment, everything felt millions of miles away. More than that, something was wrong with George.

“I want pleasure,” he insisted. “Nothing wrong with that, is there?” He paused. “Actually, Shallot, I don’t know what the hell I want. I…have problems inside. No idea what’s going on. I’m screwed. My life is over. Or will be, soon enough.” He sat up, lean, muscular, attractive but for the selfish gleam in his dark eyes.

“I’m sorry.” She sat up, pulling the sheet over her chest. “This was a mistake. I’m sorry. Yes, I am sixteen. Yes, I have feelings for you.”

“Feelings?”

“But I’d only do it because of pressure. Doesn’t that feel desperate?” She looked at him, gently. “Maybe you should go. I can see you’re upset.”

“I am.” He looked back, stressed. “Maybe I should stay.”

“All you want to do is, well, to do it.”

They were now both sitting up, naked, Shallot covering herself with the sheet, George facing her, keeping his back from her.

“I’m sick of it. We’re dogs, led on a leash, running in circles, chasing our tails. Aren’t *you* sick of it? Hell with this. Let’s do some Fizz.” He reached to his pants.

“Fizz just gets me high,” she told him. Something was wrong with him. “I don’t want to take Fizz and feel high because without it I’d feel dead.”

She held the sheet to her neck with one hand, running her other hand through her long black hair. She got out of bed, pulling on a long, loose dress, covering herself.

He also stood, pulling on his pants, always facing her. He took a bottle from his pocket and popped a small red pill.

Suspicious now. “Are you *infected*?”

“Have to talk with you, yeah.” He walked to the windows, looking out.

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Shallot avoided looking at his back.

She stood next to him at the window, the bed forgotten. The city sprawled many square miles before them, no building higher than two stories, lit by the relatively bright light from the solar dishes surrounding the city. She saw people walk on the streets, none with urgency.

“As soon as I was able to understand,” he told her, “life’s been grueling. Pointless. Day after day with no hope, living in this Martian coffin.”

She heard him grunt. “I agree,” she said. “And?”

He suppressed a shiver. “Okay. I’m ready. Look.”

He turned his back to her. She saw the purple boils. Suddenly she felt cold.

“Started a week ago.”

Without thinking, Shallot picked up her phone and pressed the red button. A white check mark appeared over it. “Anyone know? The Clinic?”

He grunted again, holding his stomach. “Not even my parents. Especially not them.” He croaked a laugh. “Saved it for you.” He coughed.

“They’ll be here quick. They always come fast.”

“Ah yes. They always come fast. Lust, on Mars.” He straightened, facing her, panting, damp sweat covering his body. “Thanks. I knew I had to call in but couldn’t do it myself.” He swallowed, gulped, belched, looking dizzy. “Hope you would.”

“What does it feel like?”

“Things moving around inside me. Lumps. Two of them. Maybe three. Ohhh. Getting high from the Fizz. Feels better when I don’t care.” He smiled as his eyes rolled back. “Love the red pill.”

She saw a small lump move under the skin of his neck, around his Adam’s apple. He swallowed again, coughed, spat up blood. She heard sounds downstairs, footsteps approaching, then two medical officers entered, a man and a woman,

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clothed in white jackets and pants, large red crosses painted over their hearts.

“I’m why you’re here,” he told them, handing over his i.d. They looked at it, checked their tablets, then silently went over him with a tricorder. They examined the purpling boils, saw a small lump move in his neck.

“How long do I have?” he asked them.

“Plenty of time,” the woman told him. “Don’t worry. Plenty of time. Let’s get you to where you’ll be more comfortable.” Like her partner, she was in her early forties. “The new meds deliver lots of remissions. Come with us, please. *Now*.”

Shallot hugged him and could only watch as he left with the two medics. Preoccupied, he did not look back. She stood in the empty doorway, sighed, then took a long hot shower–to feel different.

It did not help.

The purple boils, the moving lump under his skin, meant death. She felt sick for him.

After drying her hair, putting on underwear and the loose dress again, she went downstairs to see what the rest of her day would be like. She felt awful. Like yesterday, she did not look forward to today. And now she had gone from worrying about pressure to have sex from George to worrying about whether he would be alive in a week.

Her life on Mars.

She found her parents in the living room, exercising on treadmills with the TV on. During the week, they exercised at work, along with everyone else. On weekends, they exercised at home. Muscles had to be kept toned in Mars’ weaker gravity. Her father looked at her, concerned, sweating a little. “We spoke with the medics when we let them in. Sorry about George. Nice kid.”

“Yes, he is,” her mother added. “So, honey. Did you finally do it?”

“*Mom*!” Her parents could be *so* clueless.

“Sorry. I’m just concerned about you. Sorry. Tell me about George. Are you going

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to visit, when it's allowed?" her mother asked, continuing to jog, running to nowhere, periodically checking the gauges to ensure her progress to nowhere was good.

"Sure. They don't allow visitors–I've tried with my friends who were infected. They let you leave candy. Never flowers. I'll go with some of my besties. First, I thought I'd see Nan this morning, after the rally. I want some answers about what's going on."

"Answers?" her mother asked. "To what? And, say hi to mom from me."

"Sure. And, answers to all our problems. What are you guys up to?"

"Well, there's the rally, the concerned colonists' protest at City Hall," her mom told her, starting to pant. "Pre-election, lots riding on it. I'm excited. Everyone else from Admin will be there."

"Yeah, Smelter workers will be there too. We feel unloved. And, this evening," her father added, "there's the Marsball final for Region Three. Lots riding on it."

They chatted some more, she wanted to be polite but cared little, then walked out, saying she'd see them at the demonstration. George being taken away–she had no stupid small talk in her. On the street, it was warm and sort of bright, even with the dome's scarring caused by decades of exposure to storms, sand and solar radiation, and to the impact of pollution caused by the Smelter. The sun looked more distant and dimmer than it did when she was a child. Indeed, everything had faded and become worn as she grew.

She wished everything was…as she saw it as a child.

She walked down the residential street, lined by two storey side-by-side homes identical to hers, most built at the same time about one hundred years ago, replacing the original aging buildings. On the opposite side of the street, she saw a woman pushing a baby carriage while typing on her phone. Shallot took out her phone and called her bestie. Then her other bestie. They were all going to the demonstration and agreed to meet there.

"George. I have to tell you about George. He's infected." Gasps. "They took him this morning. He wanted to do it with me, and I wouldn't, and then he showed me. The boils were totally gross." Her besties agreed to visit the Clinic with candy later.

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Aaliyah said she had still had some chocolate, since last month with Alice. Farah said she'd look to see if she had anything.

Even walking slowly it did not take long to reach City Hall. Her parents drove by in a cart, she waved at them. They went towards the old side, Shallot gravitated to the young. Old was over sixty, by far the largest group in the colony. Young, under twenty-five, by far the smallest. In-betweens were in-between.

They all were concerned, most angry.

The demonstration had been called to express colonists' concerns about problems plaguing the colony. The election campaign for Council started tomorrow. The colonists wanted the Councillors to clearly hear their message of discontent. Everyone wanted change–even if no one knew how.

After a few minutes, the Mayor came out from City hall, to stand on the front steps and face the crowd, the Councillors behind her. Shallot watched her address the crowd. Madeline, a tall woman of sixty-five with silver gray hair cut short, nicely cropping her head, waited for the crowd to settle. The Councillors remained behind her, happy to have her absorb the brunt of the colonists' anger.

The colonists held signs: *Elect Councilman Newman For Change. Vote Marjorie She Can Do It.* There were no signs supporting Madeline, the current Mayor.

One sign read *Elect Mickey–A Mouse Would Do Better*.

"I and the Councillors appreciate you are concerned," she began. "Welcome. It is good you are here. Today you shall hear from those Councillors who…were able to attend.

"Council *has* been working hard, in a difficult situation. The new energy conversion programme works," Madeline told the crowd. "The salt batteries should decrease pollution by helping store energy. It will be some time before the batteries can be built, of course. Solar radiation remains outside, the dome is secure, although it is aging and cracks are inevitable. We all want to remain safe. Speaking of that, the new medications have helped many of those with the bug. We are working on figuring out what this disease is, what the bug is that has infected a handful of colonists with such tragic results."

She looked at the crowd. They looked at her. No applause. Opposition signs

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pumped up and down. The air was still. And smoggy. Air quality, because of the Smelter's inadequate filters, was poor.

"What about the pensions?" a girl next to Shallot asked, loudly. "The taxes don't cover pensions. There are a lot of retired workers. Will I have to work forever to support them?"

Madeline nodded, grim. "A year ago, we had to increase retirement age to eighty. Yes, the money is no longer there to support pensions. But we do have a plan. To increase the birth rate."

"How?" someone asked.

"Also," she continued, evading the question, "tourism from Earth is still possible. Council has been working on improving relations. I will provide more details tomorrow, once the election officially begins."

"Why not now?"

"Better tomorrow. It's politics, part of my platform. This is not an election rally, and I respect that." She knew they would not like her platform, felt it better to delay.

Silence. The Councillors behind her glanced at each other.

Madeline kept herself from sighing. "I appreciate your concerns. I am your Mayor, I live here, my daughter and grandchild live here. The colony's problems are not secrets. That's all I can say. I've nothing else today. Thank you." She walked down the front steps of City Hall and began chatting with people in the crowd, shaking hands with those who would, slowly gravitating towards those holding the few campaign signs for her.

She knew everyone's first name.

Aaliyah looked at Shallot. They were both sixteen. "Wanna do some Fizz?" Shallot shook her head. "Yeah, what's the point? It isn't real. George. That's how many of our friends?"

"Too many. Maybe the dome lets through more radiation than they tell us. Maybe it isn't a bug at all. I need to know the truth. About George. About everything."

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“The truth? Who knows?” Aaliyah told her. “We only live to survive on this rock. Make the best of it. What you doing now this is over?”

“Seeing my grandmom after she’s done shaking hands.”

Farha joined them. The rally fell apart. No one came forward to speak. Shallot, Farha and Aaliyha went to a nearby coffee shop. Aaliyah had her notebook, so for half an hour they played their saved game in ***Mars and Me***. The game was created years ago by a team led by Shallot’s great grandfather. It was a realistic version of the colony, with NPGs duplicating individual colonists.

One started a new game with dangerous cracks developing in the dome, the birth rate plummeting and the population increasingly unable to support itself, pollution killing the crops, water filtration problems ongoing. It duplicated the problems of the colony at that time, thirty years ago, just after a massive equipment failure left water unfiltered for months, then poorly filtered after. The bug developed about ten years after the water filtration system broke down.

Shallot’s team with Farha and Aaliyah had succeeded in creating tourist visits from Earth, and the dome was in good shape. Yet the population remained unhappy, the air bad, the water questionable. Building morale was difficult. There was little violence but avoiding suicides was really hard. As colonists aged, they lost hope. The population had begun dropping long ago. The colony in their saved game, despite her team’s efforts, remained depressed and unstable.

The disease remained one issue they could do nothing about, given the programmers themselves had no idea it would exist when they created the game. They added the disease ten years ago, when it became unavoidable, but the cause was still a mystery.

As Shallot played, she believed her life needed to be more than it was. Her counterpart NPG in the game was doing no better, complaining to Shallot about her parents and no one offering her work. Just as Shallot had not been offered employment. When colonists turned sixteen they were assigned to career paths.

It’s all so emo, her NPG told her. *Aren’t you tired of it?*

Totally.

She could no longer sit on her butt. Too much was happening. George had

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triggered deep concerns. What to do, about everything, that *was* a question. She was sixteen. How much time did she have? Every time she played the game, she felt pressure to change the colony itself. The game would never play better until the colony was back on track. But how?

After she left her besties, who had new jobs to return to, Farha in the Smelter, Aaliyah with Marsball, outside Shallot again felt alone, sole, the only one—alone in this world she never asked to be born into. “Enough,” she said to the world.

People walking around her gave her a wide birth, concerned at her abrupt outburst: another young teen.

They all seemed discontented.

2

The Mayor of Mars

In the Mayor’s office there was no room for wavering about life or feeling alone. There was only reality. Which occasionally included wavering about life and feeling alone. Responsible, isolated.

Madeline leaned back in the plush chair, kicked off her heels and grunted, tired. Her leg ached, arthritis, but she refused to use her cane in public. Her EA, Sally, and her Communications Director, Mike, settled into chairs facing her. She sat behind the large, simulwood desk, they next to her, facing her, the desk not between them.

Madeline crossed her legs, rubbing her calf. No one smiled. “Takes?”

“Self-selected,” Sally said. “It was publicized as a demonstration of concern. Most weren’t about to show you any support.”

“Not the best turnout,” Mike added. “Says something. They may not support you, but they don’t like Marjorie either. They want someone different. Newman has built steady support. I talk with him occasionally, see what I can pick up.”

“No one different has stepped forward,” Madeline said to him. “I can only be me. Most people are pissed. Not only with me, with everything. Can’t blame them. We’ve done a lot of this all wrong. In hindsight.”

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The Mayor's office was large, well lit, a penthouse on the second storey of City Hall, windows for outside walls allowing a view of the entire city. City Hall was one of the first public buildings built and occupied after the dome was completed and pressurized. She saw the square in front of City Hall was now empty. Overhead, always, the dome. Beyond, an orange/brown sky partly obscured by wind-driven dust. The tiny moon Phobos was barely visible. A storm was approaching. She saw warning lights around the dome's perimeter flash on.

She opened a bottle on her desk and popped a pill, for the arthritis.

"Easier sitting right now," she said, shifting in the plush chair which at the moment was not plush enough. She looked at the workers at the top of the dome, hanging by ropes, apply sealants to cracks. "How's maintenance?"

"New cracks every day," Sally told her.

She looked at the clock on her desk, an old-fashioned wind-up with a little spaceship that rocked back and forth. "It's time. Time to return to Earth." They moved closer. The large monitor on her desk flashed a series of numbers and codes, then Arnold appeared.

An older man, balding, wearing a crisp dark suit, paper rose in his lapel. Arnold smiled but they knew instantly the news was bad. As usual. A mandated call—it had been a long established practice–because Earth should communicate with Mars, at least once a month.

"Hello again Mars, Madeline and staff," he said, off the cuff, not reading from a teleprompter. "Not much news, apart from what you've already received. The water wars continue, the cancer rate's up and birth rate down. We're still dealing with the aftermath of the Continental Wars.

"Tourist voyages to Mars remain not feasible, currently. No tourist interest, not with the solar radiation and your dome problems. More than that, the disease. No one from Earth wants to visit us and risk it. More to the point, all the Governments on Earth would refuse to accept them back, for fear of contamination. No tourist wants a visit to Mars for two weeks which could last the rest of their lives.

"We're not selling tickets. Even though we put casinos in the transit ships. Those ships are making a profit, going to the Moon. Economically, we have to fill the ship

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for it to launch. You must fix your problems first.

“We wish we had the resources to help you. But our supplies are very limited, as they have been for years. Make do with what you have. We have every confidence you will!

“There remains no market for exporting your minerals, given the cost of transport back to Earth. Our economy is suffering, grants are not possible. The President’s working through his own problems. The attempt to improve the birth rate by making birth control illegal has backfired. Our population imbalance is much like yours. As are our pollution problems. But you know all that. I’ve been delivering the same report for over thirty years.

“That’s all for this week. Sorry it was not better. I doubt you have any questions.” He smiled, the screen froze and went to black.

Madeline stood, wincing, pushing herself up. “I’ll send a response later,” she said to her aides, “when I think of something except telling them to drop dead.” She looked at her cane. Never in public. She had to radiate strength. Well, she was in her damn office. She took her cane and leaned against it. She wanted to stand, just not for it to hurt.

There was a buzz. Madeline looked at the display on her monitor and told Sally, “My grand daughter. Show her in, please.”

The large front doors opened and a short older woman entered wearing a medical coat, large red cross over her heart. Madeline looked at her. “I was expecting someone else. Thanks for coming. Anything?”

“Your granddaughter’s outside. I didn’t have the time to wait any longer, Mayor.” The doctor shook her head. “Four new cases. The cause is clear enough. Martian microbes, disease germs, viruses, not filtered from the water. What they do inside the colonists remains under study. Blood tests remain normal. To date, no infected colonist has lived long enough for us to know anything. Death, after admission, averages two weeks. Of course, the disease is advanced by the time they are admitted.

“The new drugs are failures, they cause no remissions. We remain uncertain why some colonists are affected, most not. In short, no progress.” She paused, looked

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at Madeline, took a breath. “How’s the arthritis?”

“Still there.”

The doctor nodded and left.

Another buzz. “Must be Shallot,” Sally said.

Madeline asked them to leave and send her granddaughter in. “Family time,” she said, leaning on the cane. “She wants support, again. Poor kid. Tough, being sixteen. I’m the grandmom, she needs me.” She looked at them. “Wish I was her age.”

They left and Shallot walked in, closing the door behind her. “Hey, Nan. Love you.”

“Love you, onion.” Madeline smiled. “Saw you and my daughter and Antonio at the demonstration. What do you think? Am I going down in flames?”

Shallot shook her head, then shrugged. “It isn’t that they don’t like you. They don’t like how things are. Too many questions, too few answers.”

Madeline nodded, leaning on her cane.

“All my friends have been assigned work,” Shallot said, looking at her. “Why not me?”

Madeline frowned. “Because you’re my granddaughter. There’s an election. They don’t want to offend anyone. We’ve talked about that.”

“A friend of mine, George, is infected. I was with him this morning. Nan, I’m tired of being in the dark. Not knowing what is happening or what I can do about it. Isn’t it time you told me what’s going on? We always skirt around it.”

She looked long at Shallot, considering her day so far. “Onion, I feel told and tired. And you’re right. I’ve always skirted around our problems. You’re old enough now. I’ll open the doors so you can see it all.

“Go underground. It starts with the water. Then the dome and Smelter.” She picked up her phone.

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“Now?” Shallot blinked. “I thought we would just talk.”

“Time’s run out for chatting. I thought you wanted to act.”

“Now?” Shallot summoned her courage. This was what she wanted, right?

“Now is the best time,” her grandmother replied.

“Okay then. I’ll go for it.”

3

Life Under The Dome

Shallot had never worn a protection suit. The suit felt thin, light, protecting against the cold and Martian air. Suits for underground use were far less bulky than those worn outside the dome—no solar radiation to deal with, no searing winds. Sealed into the suit, she breathed, cautiously at first, bottled air. It smelled and tasted almost as bad as regular air—the suit had filters. She was protected from the deep cold, from the rocky, dangerous ground.

Walking was easier than she had assumed, even with the uneven ground.

She wondered if the suited workers around her felt the same. They wore these suits every day. When she asked her guide, a worker named Wendy, she was told it was part of the deal. She also told her to take a shower after peeling the suit off.

The lighting in the huge underground lava tube came from high intensity lamps on the walls and ceiling. The lava tube was larger than she had imagined. She stood in a circular cavern, seventy feet wide and high. Walls of dark brown rock, towards the bottom melted rock from the red hot lava which created the tube billions of years ago, when Mars still had atmosphere and warmth, before it became a dry desert landscape. The floor was a large frozen lake—the ancient frozen ice of the lava tube, flat and clear, stretching beyond where she could see, into the unlit darkness.

The cavern felt primeval. Shallot felt she stood in something…prehistoric. Ancient beyond understanding. As beyond understanding as were the enormous eruptions which spewed lava, creating the tubes, draining Mars of most of the surface water it then had.

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She looked at the ice, the source of the colony's water, the source of whatever plagued her friends. The ice was clear, hiding nothing. Innocent. Large tubes pushed deep into the ice, heated so they would melt the ice, the water then sucked up the pipes to the water plant above. Madeline told her microbes in this ice was the source of the disease—if it was a disease, and not parasites. The colonists may not be sick—they may be infested. Madeline had been clear the Clinic still had no understanding of what the microbes were. That colonists were infected from the water remained only an assumption.

Wendy was telling her about the water reclamation operation, one of the first projects of the original colonists, as finding water was critical to survival. Shallot looked at the many large metal pipes buried in the ice. Everything about them reeked of age. She saw several workers replacing sections of one pipe. Every pipe was patched. Some had minor leaks. There was no sound, except talking through the suits' radios.

Shallot had never been outside the dome. So this was Mars, the closest she had ever been. The huge lava tube felt…alien. Beyond centuries, beyond history. Then water, probably from the oceans which once covered much of Mars drained into the tubes, forming hundreds of miles of frozen rivers. Billions of years ago. Until she stood on this ancient ice today.

Ancient ice they all drank, now alive in George. It powered the steam plant, producing electricity. It powered their lives. Water was a must have. Microbes? No one knew what else to call them. She shivered. She walked slowly onto the ice. The storms outside were obvious. What mysteries did the ice's apparent innocence hide? What mysteries were inside her?

Wendy spoke eloquently to Shallot about the lava tubes, the cavern, how it was rarely above -100. She talked about working underground. No pipe was completely new, most over fifty years old, well past its prime. She spoke clearly about the dangers of the pipes bursting. Bursting once was rare.

Shallot thanked Wendy as she was led back into the large underground building. In a pressurized room, she took off the suit. Sweaty, feeling dirty, she took a long hot shower. After putting her clothing back on, she rode an elevator up to the surface. Sally waited when the doors opened, led her outside and a few blocks away, to the dome workers' building. "How was the tour?"

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“Scary,” Shallot replied. “The piping has not been maintained properly for years. They’re worried there will be a major break, pipes bursting. Also, it’s kind of creepy.”

“Maintenance became very expensive,” Shally told her. “And Earth stopped sending iron half a century ago. We simply don’t enough raw materials. The Smelter an only produce so much, eh?”

Sally left her in the Dome Workers’ building, where Shallot was eased into another suit—this one thicker, to protect from possible leaks from cracks. She stood on a foot pad attached to iron chains reaching to the top of the dome and rode it up, the chains attached to a powerful motor at the dome’s top. It was a little scary, watching the ground grow farther and farther away. She held tight onto the pulley with both hands.

Two suited workers applying sealants looked down at her as she approached them. When she reached the top, the pulley stopped. They swung over to her from ropes hung from a central metal plug in the dome. “I’m Dan, he’s Warren. Grab that rope and attach the hook in your suit to one of the rings. Don’t worry. We do this every day.”

Shallot smiled and introduced herself as they helped attach her to the rope. They were about a hundred feet up, suspended on the ropes. They told her they had worked on the dome together for ten years. Every day they rode to the top and applied sealant to small cracks before they became larger. Looked for developing cracks. They could do nothing to prevent cracks regularly developing, the dome pounded by heavy winds full of sand and rocks. There was neither enough sealant nor workers.

They told her the dome was not stable but would last their lifetimes—probably. The work was dangerous. The equipment was old, the ropes they hung from fraying. More than one of their colleagues had made mistakes—the last mistake was all it took.

“Just one wrong move,” Dan told her, “we drop like a rock.”

“How do you feel about that?”

“Sucks.”

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Warren added, “But someone’s got to do the sucking.” He smiled.

She told them she appreciated the importance of their work. The three chatted a while longer, but Dan and Warren had to return to patching, so Shallot rode the pulley back down, looking at them growing smaller. They waved, then returned to sealing a developing crack.

On the ground, Sally waited, sitting in a cart. “How’d you like the heights?”

“Scary. They take a huge risk,” Shallot replied. “Only old ropes hold them up. It’s a long way down.”

“Yes. Indeed. I’d be afraid to do that work myself,” Sally told her. “But it’s been years since one of them had an accident. We are running low of sealant. The dome was never built to last this long. Like the pipes below weren’t. We run on what repairs we can manage.”

She drove them to the Smelter. It was on the far side of the city, away from residential areas. Shallot’s father, head of human resources, met her as she stepped off the cart. Newman, one of the Councillors running against her grandmother, stood next to him. He was a tall, thickset older man with thick blonde hair he apparently spent an hour each morning styling.

Sally looked at him suspiciously but said nothing. “Councillor Newman. What are you doing here?” Shallot asked directly.

“Part of my work as a Councillor, Shallot,” he replied, smiling and shaking her hand. She knew he was an enemy of Nan, and felt he was something of a creep. He held onto her hand. “What are *you* doing here?”

“I wanted to find out about the colony. Nan arranged a better look. I want to get to the bottom of things. Try to change things.”

“Good, good. And why do you, or she, want to change things?”

She let go of his hand. “There’s no conspiracy or anything, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

He put his hand in his pocket. “Of course. But there is an election campaign starting tomorrow, yes?”

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Her dad, Newman tagging along, gave her a far better look at the Smelter than she'd ever had. She'd seen the administrative offices, starting as a child when he took her to work. Now the offices looked older and more worn than she remembered.

Most of the Smelter was a manufacturing plant. Iron and other elements were extracted from Martian ore, refined, then turned into what Mars needed—iron for water pipes and dome pulleys, plastics for furniture and building materials. The main floor was hot and smelled bad, with pools of molten metal. Poor air was unavoidable and permeated the big building.

As they stood back at the entrance, Newman said to her, "Yes, it does pump out a lot of pollution. But we need it operating full bore. We're working on improving the exhaust filter but work here cannot stop. The Smelter is where we manufacture everything, eh Tony?"

Her dad nodded, standing slightly behind Newman.

"And the pollution? Won't it cause cancer or something?"

Newman nodded. "We all have to breathe. Me too. The solution? An exhaust hole in the dome," he told her. "Pump the waste outside."

"But then aren't we polluting Mars?"

His thin smile thinned. "Go back and report to your Nan, kid, then find something useful to do."

Sally waited in the cart. As Shallot stepped into the cart, Sally said to her, "You should stay away from him."

"He thinks I'm working for Nan."

"Yeah, his mind works that way."

She drove them across the city, to the Farm. Large, open fields, filled with stunted crops. Cary, the head farmer, greeted her warmly at the front gate. She knew him, he was Farha's dad. He took her on a tour. She saw chickens, goats and cows, everything–except one locked barn. "Mars stuff," he told her. "Secret."

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“That’s where the Martian plants are?” He nodded. “The crop doesn’t look so good. Farha says it’s bad. How’s our food this year?”

“Pollution from the Smelter,” Cary replied, “decaying quality of light through the dome, increasing lack of fertilizer. In four years, we figure, we’ll start running out of enough food to support the colonists. Then, we starve.” He sighed, looked at her. “What do you think?”

She had drifted away, thinking of the Martian plants behind the locked door. Then she thought of George, isolated at the Clinic. If only she could speak to him, apologize for this morning. She hadn’t even kissed him before he was taken away. She returned to Cary. “It sucks.”

Then he held her as she began to cry.

“Your friend, George?” he asked. “Farha told me. I’m so sorry.”

She did not cry long. She had to go to the Clinic. See George. Maybe using Nan’s name would work. No point in having privilege if she did not use it. Privilege got her this tour.

“I’m going to see him,” she said. “No matter what.”

“Is that a good idea?” he asked.

“It doesn’t matter. I…abandoned him.” Her hands fists. “He might be…gone by now. I have to know if he’s still alive.”

4

What Is Inside *You*

Earlier that morning, George left Shallot’s home willingly with the medics. It would be embarrassing and futile doing anything else—he would have preferred running, buying himself some time. Instead, he complied—he would be hunted–and quietly rode in the van to the Clinic. At the front desk he filled out a questionnaire, had blood taken, was ultra sounded, then taken to a modest room with no lock on the door. He was in the wing for new patients. It was quiet, perhaps he was the only patient.

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From what the front desk told him, he understood most of the Clinic was a morgue.

His room had a large TV and a small notebook computer, a bed and an armchair, an adjacent washroom. No windows, plain walls. They told him he was free to decorate the room, and they had available posters. They took his clothing and handed him the off-white robe and pajamas of a patient.

George pretended he was not nervous, not frightened. He knew he was expected to appear calm and compliant. After he was dressed as a patient, with an ID tag around his neck, one of the staff gave him a brief tour of the facility: labs, staff cafeteria, offices. He saw no windows, no other patients. He drew his robe tightly around him, feeling sealed in.

He was allowed no visitors, no phone calls. Several of his friends, over the last couple of years, had entered the Clinic. None left. They showed him the small gym, empty, unused. He was told exercising was voluntary; in fact, everything was voluntary. Nothing was expected of him except to be there. Watched. Every area he could enter had surveillance cameras in the ceiling.

He had a TV and a notebook so he could play ***Mars and Me***. George was told to relax. He received no medications. They told him, for now, all they would do is watch. He was not suitable for the new remission medications.

Great. This was it? His life from now until he died—in a few weeks?

“Our head physician is waiting to see you. He has some introductory information. And your care plan.”

He was taken to a man in his seventies, gray hair tied behind his head in a ponytail. He wore the standard white jacket and pants but over his heart was a smiley face. When George was led in, the doctor stood, shook his hand, then sat with him on a small couch. There were no windows here either. The doctor smiled, not hiding he had sat with a new patient many times.

“Welcome…George,” he began, to his credit trying to make this speech sound different. The patient had never been through this before, the doctor a hundred times. “I know you’d rather not be here. And you think this is a dead end. It is not. Although you should know, off the top, our new medications have not been effective. That’s why you haven’t been given any.” He smiled, appearing

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engaged. “I’m Dr. Thomas Setter. I run the Clinic. I have hopes for you. You may be different.”

George looked at him steadily, hands in his lap, gripping each other. He had already been fed so many lines. “Oh? How?”

Dr. Setter showed George his blood tests, the scans. His blood and hormone levels had reacted differently from other patients. The eventual collapse of the body physically was not occurring in George—maybe would not occur at all.

George listened. “Uh huh. What the hell’s inside me?”

Dr. Setter leaned forward and patted George’s clenched hands. “Martians. They are not microbes. We do not know much. There is no indication of a problem until physical symptoms appear. The boils. The moving lumps inside you. We think the moving lumps are the microbes joining together. What they would form, we do not know. Unfortunately, no one has lived long enough. The tissues we have recovered are…confusing. Human and alien.”

“Tissues? If I die, you dissect me?”

“I’m certain that will not be necessary.” Pat pat.

“I’m becoming a Martian? I’ve heard the rumours.” George shivered.

“You tell us.”

George sat forward. “I’d like to tell you to go to hell.”

“That is understandable.”

“If you can’t help me, what the hell am I doing here?”

“Being observed. Every case is subtly different. And isolation is important until we understand more. We do not believe your situation is contagious, but…” Dr. Setter leaned back, composed. This was going as well as it could. Although George was smarter, more arrogant than most.

“Lucky me. So what do I do now?”

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“Live as long as you can. With our help. There’s no evidence the organisms intend danger. We think they are parasites, trying to use you as a host. But the human body has trouble adapting. The organs collapse first. When it hits, it is quick.”

George put his hands over his face and began to cry.

The doctor gave him some orange juice and a Fizz pill.

George refused the pill. “There’s no one here, in the gym, anywhere. Is there anyone like me I can talk with?”

“There’s one young woman, your age, admitted two days ago, but I don’t think she is ready to see anyone. And there is one, but he can no longer talk.”

Dr. Settler led George out of the office and down the hall. They turned a corner, opened a door to a long, clean corridor. George’s corridor. There were four doors on either side, all closed.

“Eight rooms,” Dr. Settler told George. “The doors are not locked.”

“What will happen to me?”

“One down the hall is wasting away. We don’t know why some are affected and others aren’t. Why you are infected. Clues point to individual DNA, body chemistry, hormones.”

George looked at the closed doors. He thought of opening one and looking in but did not want to see his future. “I want to talk with my friends.”

“Sorry,” Dr. Setter replied. “Isolation protocols are necessary.”

“Uh huh. Even though you don’t think I’m contagious. Thanks for everything, doc. I know you’re doing your best.” George left him and went to his room, closed the door, and turned on the notebook, to get lost in ***Mars and Me***.

He needed to get lost, away. He had too much to think about and nothing he could do but wait.

He shook a little, looked at his hands tremble. Wanted to get up and put his fist through the cheap wall. But what good would that do?

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He looked up and saw a surveillance camera in the ceiling, looking back.

He was in health jail.

He had done nothing to deserve this. All he did was drink water. He had dreamed about his future. Maybe joining the dome workers, theirs was the most dangerous, exciting work. He had never volunteered; his interest was more…philosophical. But he did think about it.

Now he'd never find out.

He was thirsty. He opened the small fridge and spent a long time looking at the bottles of water waiting for him. And a package of simulated baloney.

He wished Shallot was here. He could talk with her, share. He had a real connection with her, before he became sick. Then he went a little crazy.

What would happen if he went a little crazy *here*?

He looked at the walls, alone, wishing Shallot was with him. Maybe she'd find a way. She was resourceful.

5

Mars And Me

While George struggled with his situation, at the front desk of the Clinic Shallot and her two besties dropped off the rest of Alice's chocolate. Alice had died before she could eat the rest.

The woman smiled pleasantly, took the chocolate and told them George would get it.

Then it was quiet.

"I want to see him," Shallot insisted. "Now." Faced with a blank stare, she played the one card she had. "My grandmom's the Mayor. Call her."

"I'm not calling anyone," she replied. "Your friend is in isolation. "You *know* what that means. We do not believe he is contagious but the infection is unpredictable.

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Only staff sees him, for now."

Not now was forever. Shallot looked at the clerk, the clerk looked back. A nurse walking by paused, looking at the clerk, tilting her head to ask if all was okay. The clerk continued: "You will be contacted when the isolation is lifted."

"Has it ever been?" Shallot asked. 'Lifted?"

"Thank you for the candy. I'm sure he'll appreciate the sweets. He'll know they came from you."

"Can I give him a note?"

"No."

Shallot could either scream or leave, so she left, her besties with her. Standing outside, frustrated, worried, Shallot said, her voice now even more determined, "We have to do *something.* Something where we can not be stopped. Something that will affect the whole colony." She looked at her besties. "We can't change anything *here*. How about in ***Mars and Me***?"

Mars and Me. The computer game played by almost every colonist under 30. Instant agreement. They went straight to Shallot's bedroom—her parents were out—opened her notebook and entered their shared saved game. Farha and Alliyah took out their notebooks and soon they were together, in mind, soul, the game.

Mars and Me was an open ended, free game created thirty years ago by a team led by Shallot's great grandfather. Colonists needed a realistic diversion after the collapse of the water filtration system. It perfectly mimicked living on Mars, in the colony, populated by NPGs, including those of real colonists, and avatars for players. Each player had a corresponding NPG, who reacted as the player did to events in the colony, in real time.

Real events influenced the game.

Constantly updated, ***Mars and Me*** invited community engagement, including allowing players to create new rules, at least for their saved games. Players could add new information to their saved game, and could forward it to anyone playing.

Mars and Me was a constantly evolving experience. Yet the fundamental

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problems—polluted air, failing dome, bursting water pipes, poor crops—remained, as in real life they had not been solved. Players could not change those basics, even in a saved game: they had to deal with the difficulties to succeed.

Shallot told her besties she would input the truth about the colony—the reality about the water, the dome, the weird microbes, the Smelter exhaust and the crops. The game would accept and incorporate those changes, in their saved game. They all stared at the *options: new additions* screen. "Let's do this for George," Shallot said.

"Yeah," Farha said. "Start with the bug."

Shallot entered the screen. She could not delete that there was a bug, but she would change the information about the bug in the game and replaced it with:

The bug is a living Martian organism, not a disease. There is no information about the organism other than it is alive and drains the energy of its hosts. We ingest it when we drink Martian water. Colonists were infected starting thirty years ago, when the water filtration system failed. The Martian organisms draw energy from their hosts, who so far cannot tolerate the drain and die. Colony leaders have knowingly lied about this.

Aaliyah said, "Maybe the game can come up with something we can use. It's better at modelling than anything City Hall has."

"Dad says there's no help with the crops, our food," Farha told them. "We should talk about that. But first the pollution."

Shallot typed.

Aaliyah added, "NPGs should feel life sucks. No one should pretend to be happy anymore. Can we do that?"

"Let's find out." Shallot steadily typed. They watched the words appear on their screens.

"We need the NPGs to make it urgent," Shallot said, writing. "This has been in place six months. Plenty of time for the game to reflect the changes. They'll live in a bit of a different colony. And let's add what's realistic about the Smelter and the crops and the dome. And the water supply." After more typing, she hit enter.

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“Here goes nothing.”

Absorbing amendments. Please be patient.

Have you exercised today?

It took ten minutes of the game incorporating the changes, an unusually long time. Finally the main screen reappeared and they were back in the game. They found their NPGs sitting in NPG Shallot’s bedroom, playing the game. Shallot and her besties had mostly ignored their NPGs. They had never done this before. They asked their NPGs how they were. They all replied, worried.

Shallot sent her avatar to the street. Around her NPGs rushed, with purpose. Shallot stopped one, a stressed bald man wearing glasses. He looked like a man in the colony who worked in Water, an NPG version of him.

What’s up? she asked.

“*Union meeting*,” he replied.

Questions then appeared for Shallot to click on:

–Which union?

–I want to join you.

–You should be arrested.

“Whoa,” Shallot said, reading. “Uh, what’s a union?”

Farha entered the saved game. “It worked. It’s all in there. The game colony has really changed. Everyone feels threatened.” She opened a box and hit a key. “I’m sending invites to our friends, to use this saved game instead of theirs.”

After gossiping with an NPG, Aaliyah said “The game says the dome has fifty years. By then, perhaps sooner, it will fail and flood us with solar radiation and Martian air and sand. We’ve really done something.”

“Yeah,” Farha said, “an NPG buying an Americano told me the pollution makes the dome worse, plus the cancer rate’s up. Unlike the colonists, they want to do

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something. I think the game still reflects the colony, so they can't do anything. They're frustrated."

"And the water pipes are overdue for a major burst," Shallot added.

They spent the next few hours playing the game, inviting their friends in, their friends inviting *their* friends in. Soon half the players on Mars were in the new version. Shallot, Aaliyah and Farha created an interactive town hall, where the real players could talk with each other—and with the NPGs. Shallot explained how they had altered the game's parameters and why.

Most everyone knew George and was concerned about him, along with other friends who had never left the Clinic. No one was sure yet how to contact George. Did they even let him have a computer? Shallot's NPG said she'd been trying. It was an eerie feeling for Shallot, chatting with her NPG. Before, the NPGs reflected colonists, but felt like only mirrors. She never sought out her NPG to see how it was doing. It was doing what she did. More, it was not alive. It was a computer generation.

Today, the NPGs in the town hall were alive, acting differently from their real life models. They had personality. Change, the desire to directly confront the colony's problems, had arrived.

By late afternoon, Shallot knew what a union was.

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