

# The Colony

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It is kind of hard to get excited about tending the compost heap when you know you will meet your future wife in a few hours. We will be Alex and Laura Foster. I just hope that when I go to meet her the smell of the compost doesn't stick to my clothes.

This isn't *exactly* an arranged marriage—not officially, anyway. It'll be a while before I do get married (I'm only fourteen, Earth years) and no-one has so much as mentioned the M-word (no grown-ups, at least). But let's be honest. Laura is just a little younger than me, she is the only girl my age in the whole world (literally!) and they didn't get around to shipping her family up here to Mars until my brothers and sisters and I started seriously complaining about how boring it was getting with just our parents. And *her* siblings are the same age as mine! With genders reversed. You get it now?

Ok, I think this compost will be good for a few more days of fermenting before it needs more attention. It's my own fault I got stuck doing this, actually—I gave my cooking duty to my brother Chad so that I could get an outside chore. We take any chance we can get to go outside, since we don't get much variety living in a habitat of 350 square meters. That may sound like a lot—it's bigger than a whole lot of Earth-side houses—until you realize that most of it is for growing food plants. We would like to build another addition, but we haven't had enough materials from Earth to do much construction.

The ship that brought Laura's family last week will help a lot on that, I'm sure. When the U.S. government sent my parents here 8 years ago (Mars years), they promised to keep us supplied, but naturally bureaucracy and budget crises got in the way. We've gotten several re-supply missions, but not what we would need to live comfortably. It costs a *lot* to send something to Mars, so we try to be as self-sufficient as possible. We grow all of our own food and make our own clothes from the plant fibers that are the byproducts of the farming. The cloth isn't very high quality or very comfortable, but then we usually can't keep the habs warm enough to allow us to go without clothes.

Which reminds me, I should probably work on some mending. It's either that or do my Chemistry homework, and I'm a little too wired to study right now.

This Mars colony was begun in the wake of the first discovery of extra-terrestrial intelligence. Scientists had earlier found plenty of circumstantial evidence of life on other worlds, mostly through spectral analysis, but then they finally picked up some radio signals. There was an enormous surge of public interest in space and exploration, along with grand predictions about the learning and advancement that would result from friendship with the ET's. But pretty soon it was revealed that the radio signals had been traveling at least 10,000 years, and that the civilization that sent them was less advanced than ours and more unstable.

Kind of hard to have a real conversation with the aliens that way. By that time the U.S. government had already committed to starting a colony on Mars.

So, with public interest in space fading, and no golden age of technology and exploration on the horizon, we have had to beg for every shipment of supplies. We have been living pretty poorly, but things should get a little better from now on. Laura's family arrived a few days ago with fresh supplies, and they have been working on setting up their own habitat about 300 meters away on the other side of a hill. I guess the thinking is that we will be close enough to visit, but not so close that we get sick of each other. Their hab will be a full 500 square meters when it is done, but until then both habs will be pretty crowded.

One of the limiting factors is electric power, actually. The past few years we have barely had enough to keep warm because the original solar panels have been failing. We have been working on building our own panels from the elements in the Mars soil, but it is a lot of slow work and the process takes a lot of electricity itself.

One hour to go before I head over to the other habitat and meet Laura. I think I've earned a nap, so I pick myself up off the dirt floor and look for a soft spot of ground to sack out where I will be out of the way of the younger kids.

I decide on sleeping under a small lean-to I built a while back for just this purpose. It gives good shade from the afternoon sun, which is shining into our habitat through the clear plastic film that makes up the roof. This part of the hab is on slightly lower ground than most of the living area, so that the any water will drain this way, toward the plants and ultimately to the collection pond at the bottom of the slope. Keeping the drainage and filtration system working is a major headache, because it is easy for bacteria or moss to get out of control. It needs to work just right or we won't be able to clean our wastewater. Actually, I should probably check on the pond tomorrow.

My thoughts turn to Laura and her family. I've never talked to them, but my parents have, and I have seen some videos. *They've* seen videos of us, of course—Earth had to get something back after sinking so many billions into this project. Laura is pretty, but I don't know anything about her personality or interests. Actually, I don't know so much about my own personality—other than my own family, I'd never met anyone in person until a few days ago when some of the younger kids came over from the new ship. I don't know how to talk to a girl at all.

My mom especially has been trying to "manage expectations," I guess you could say, about how Laura and I will get along. She keeps telling me that I shouldn't worry about anything, because we will all have lots of time to become friends with each other.

I wonder sometimes if it will be too long. I know I should feel privileged to live on Mars, to be the first human born here. I know there are plenty of people who would love to trade places with me. But when I think about spending the rest of my life here, without variety, I wonder how long it will be until we give up and go back to Earth.

The thought scares me and intrigues me at the same time. I have seen too many videos and read too many books to not know what Earth has to offer, to not know how this world compares. Earth would, of course, require skills that I have never learned. Drive a car, go to work, pay bills. Yet Earth also means food and open space in abundance. Warmth. Wealth beyond what I will ever enjoy here. Here, we have to be careful with every scrap of paper, every piece of electronics, even our water and air.

I have read the speeches the politicians gave when my parents set out across the solar system. There were comparisons to Columbus, to the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock. But I know better. Mars is not big enough to hold a significant oxygen atmosphere, so Mars will never be like Earth. Because of that, people here will never be truly independent from Earth. There is nothing here! Some dirt and rocks, a little sunshine. It would be more practical to build a colony on the South Pole of Earth, or the ocean floor. No one does that—or if they do, they lose money.

I haven't told my parents all of this yet. I'm not sure myself if this is the right answer. Maybe it is just important for humanity to know that there is someone on Mars.

Come to think of it, my parents may have the same questions.

I hear some commotion near the air lock. My mother calls out to me, telling me that Laura's family had decided to come visit our hab. I stand, wishing I had known that they were coming. I am suddenly aware of my long and tangled hair, the dirt on my hands and face, my bare feet, the odd-looking clothes, the too-long fingernails.

Well, perhaps she should just get used to it.