



# Dreams of Mars and Amber

A Short Story by

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I glare at the signature on the research file as if my scowl could erase its existence.

My own ID code from one hundred and twenty years ago. How could I have forgotten? My brilliant new idea, the breakthrough that could lead to large-scale Martian agriculture- tested and disproved, nearly a century ago. By me.

I lean back, my right hand rubbing the corner of my eye, while the left scrunches the flexi with the research notes. I was going to change the world, lead humanity to Mars and on to the stars. Instead, I'm a fly in a maze, flying in circles, chasing the ghosts of my own thoughts.



The city transporter climbs through the shadows of hive-towers, past level after innumerable level of identical round windows, up to where the low sun bathes the clouds in orange glow. I lean to the glass just as the light hits the porthole, revelling in the radiance, not yet the deep red of sunset, but a thick, velvety amber, like liquid resin.

*Out there, on Mars, days are the colour of amber.*

We were going to go to Mars, Jean and I. The two of us, joint leaders in humanity's new space program. The only kids in our district, we were going to change everything. Every school day, we'd ride the transporter, timing the climb so we'd reach the top at that golden moment when the light was soft and yellow, and the horizon seemed ablaze. As the last passengers left and the machine glided over the rooftop to start its descent on the other side of the tower, we'd squeeze into the front seats with only the bulbous canopy between us and the red sunset. We pretended we were on Mars, riding a rover on whatever mission Jean had dreamed up. She was the captain, of course; I was

the scientist, the doctor, and whatever other functions needed filling. Children with imaginations as vast as the universe.

When longevity treatments were first invented, we persuaded ourselves that we didn't need children, that our immortal lives had the most value. Five hundred years later, we all believe that.

I access the net. Five babies were born in the city this year: three girls and two boys. Children used to be our future. Now it's just us: the past, the present, and the future.



The door to our home-cell slides open. I squeeze inside, past the rolled-up bed and the potted fig that takes up most of our living space - Paul's old research project that he clings to in the vain hope the ancient tree will finally bear fruit.

Paul reclines in one of the two chairs at the corner table, food shares laid out for dinner, a sports sim-cast hovering in the air above the plates. He smiles at me through the projection, his blue eyes bright as I slump in the chair opposite. "How was your day? Did you find that file?"

I force a smile and glance at the sim-cast. "Who's winning?"

"The Eagles," he says, as I knew he would.

"Well, there's always--"

"The next year," he finishes, but doesn't laugh. The joke ceased being funny a century ago.

He pushes the plate towards me. I chew the food, the texture over-familiar-sweet and zesty, the Tuesday flavour.

Orange light of the sim-cast plays over the contours of Paul's face. He tilts his head, eyes probing. "What is it?"

He could always read right through me.

I pick at the food, trying to sound casual. "What if we had a child?"

Paul frowns, his gaze questioning, then laughs. "What? Why?"

I shrug. My voice cracks, but I cover it with a cough. "What if things were different? If people still had children?"

"Hypothetically? Sure. I'd love to have a child with you." His smile is warm and lined with longing - though it's gone in an instant, insouciance reclaiming his face as his gaze returns to the sim-cast.

I put my hands on the table, my knuckles white as I grasp the cool glass surface. A wave of fear hits me, icy-cold and razor-sharp. There's no going back. I know what I have to do.



Professor Viktor Morat motions for me to take a seat while he scrolls through histograms on the wall display, red, green, and orange filling the room in bands of colour. I slide into the soft chair, the synth-leather worn with age and the weight of countless buttocks and endless conversations. Viktor's lips pucker and his black brows scrunch in concentration as he scans one graph after another. I wonder if the man's older than this chair. It's possible. He was the chief scientist when I first joined the Institute one hundred and sixty years ago. He'd been over two hundred by then, at least. So, close to four hundred? Impossible to tell, his face as smooth and wrinkle-free as mine, our bodies equally spry.

Our eyes equally tired.

He shuts down the display and turns to me. "Sorry about that. How can I help?"

I plait my fingers, thumbs firm, like scaffolding. "I'm closing my current research."

Viktor's eyebrows rise.

I push my words out before he can voice the question. "I found a previous nutrients study in the archives, virtually identical. It's been done, Professor, with exactly the same assumptions and test plan."

He drums his fingers on the desk. "Unsuccessful, I assume?"

I nod, biting my lip to stop a scream.

"We really should improve our archiving. Especially for failed studies." He snorts. "Which seems to be most of them lately. Whatever 'lately' means. I lose track sometimes."

I don't answer. I'm not sure he'd hear me if I did, his gaze already lost in some corner of his mind.

I get up slowly. The chair scrapes the floor and Viktor's eyes return to me, momentarily confused as if he struggled to remember who I was.

"Don't worry about it," he says. "You'll have another idea soon enough."

I choke on a nervous chuckle that I can't quite subdue. My fingers grasp the back of the chair, nails digging into the leather. "Do you want to know who ran the previous study?"

He contorts his face into an expression of interest. "Was it in this Institute?"

My throat is dry as I force out the words. "Yes. You authorised it. I was

the lead scientist.”

He holds my gaze for a moment, the corners of his lips twitching in annoyance but not in surprise. I close the door behind me, my footsteps suffocated by the soft, red carpet.



I dream of Mars.

Jean is there, and Paul, the three of us in a rover crossing the red desert towards white domes swathed in orange haze. Jean’s still a kid, maybe ten years old, blond curls held back with the fluorescent headband she loved so much. She makes a face and giggles as she points at Paul, all grown up and serious, his attention lost in the equations filling the screen on his lap.

My equations. From my experiment, my great idea that was going to let us colonise Mars. Except it didn’t work, and it never will because *I can’t make it work, I can only retread the worn-out paths of used up thoughts, stuck in my personal time loop.*

Paul looks up, forehead scrunched in an accusing frown as his face begins to glow, first the eyes, then the rest of him, his whole body oozing amber light.

I wake up, Martian radiance dimming to the cool darkness of our home-cell.

Where’s Jean now? She was so sure we’d change the world, determined in a way only a child can be.

I’ll never go to Mars. There’s only this life for me: a fly drowned in amber, a fossilised jewel, immortal and impotent, forever.

Outside, round windows of the neighbouring hive-towers watch me like all-seeing eyes of some unearthly insects. Fifty million people in this city alone. Thirty billion on the entire Earth--a stable population maintained by a simple rule: the numbers must remain unchanged. Few people die naturally, but we still have accidents. If you want a child, you register for the lottery to win a slot.

My fingers move to touch my forearm: the square birth-control chip, barely detectable under my skin. It’s been there for almost two centuries, implanted at the time of my very first longevity fix.

*The numbers must remain unchanged.*

Without a lottery slot, I’ll receive no further longevity treatments and age at an accelerated rate till I die some fifteen years after my child is born.

Fifteen years. Long enough to watch the child grow. Not long enough for

anything else.

Beside me, Paul snores gently under the cool white sheets. *Forgive me. Please, please, please, forgive me.*



The old-fashioned display flickers, then dies. I jiggle the connector; the power circuits are so old I had to use five adaptors to get it to work. It'll have to do; anything more modern would have a net interface. I'm not ready for that. Not yet.

My hands shake so badly it takes me three tries to insert the sample. I hold my breath as the hour glass flashes over an ancient progress bar.

A single word result appears on the screen, and my knees go weak, my breath catching in my mouth. It's done. My life, and my death, rolled into this one word.



"I'm pregnant."

I turn to face Paul, away from the window and the petrified forest of hive towers outside.

He's at the table, surfing the sim-cast for sports news. He looks up, his lips curving into a laugh but freezing in a stiff line as he meets my gaze.

We've been together for so long, I can read his thoughts in the twitches of his mouth, the narrowing of his eyes and shallow exhales. I watch him, passing from incredulity to shock, from denial to anger. He jumps to his feet, pale, his hands shaking.

"Are you insane? You're going to—" He stops, swept under the avalanche of emotions. He takes a sharp breath through open mouth, his eyes wide and unblinking. I wait, but only one word comes out. "How?"

"You're the father," I say, breathless, my hands clasped as if in prayer. "I disabled our implant. I'm sorry."

Paul's brows furrow as he glares, his lips downturned, comprehension hitting him like a blow to the face. "You had no right!"

"I tried to ask... I just... It couldn't not be you. I'm sorry."

"Is this what that conversation was about?"

I nod, trembling. At least he remembers. "Can you forgive me?"

He doesn't answer. His eyes move to the window behind me, ghosts of emotions racing across his face: resentment, disappointment, and finally, fear. He stares at me, fists clenched at his sides. "This is suicide. You'll die. Or do you expect me?"

"No! God, Paul, no." My eyes widen, desperate. How could he even think that? I move to the table, cutting the distance between us. "It's my decision, and my responsibility."

"Right. You didn't give me a choice."

"Would you have let me do it?"

He tries to hold my gaze, but looks away. "That doesn't make it right."

"I know."

He leans on the chair as if his legs couldn't support him anymore. I sit opposite, silent, while the gamecast flashes on in the air between us. The Eagles are winning, I guess. Or maybe we just call them Eagles, whoever wins. It makes no difference.

Paul's knuckles turn white, his face ashen and distant. "Why?"

What to say? I've spent weeks thinking up answers, easy-to-swallow lies and convenient half-truths, knowing full well that I'd never lie to him.

I clear my throat. Shape my thoughts into words. "Remember that research? My brilliant idea that proved to have been done before?"

His frown deepens as he tips his chin.

"I ran that program, over a century ago. I had the same idea, did exactly the same research." I put my hands on the table, steadying myself against its cool surface. "I keep having the same ideas; I always will because it's just me running the same brain cells over and over again."

He tries to speak, but now that I've started I have to go on, have to get it out, all of it.

"We're scientists, Paul. But what's the last big discovery you remember? There's been none, not for three centuries. Improvements, tweaks, but no breakthroughs. We're just oiling the old machine, hoping it won't fall apart because we no longer know how to build new ones. For something truly original, you need new eyes. New blood."

"So you're going to sacrifice yourself for science?"

I shake my head, scrambling for words that'll make him understand. I point to the sim-cast above the table. "Are you sure you haven't watched this game before? Last year, or last century? Nobody cares who wins, this game, my research, anything. There's always next year. If we fail today, we'll win

tomorrow. Except we won't because it's the same us making the same mistakes, following the same paths, again and again."

He leans towards me, his breath hot and his voice sharp. "And you think a child will fix it? Or your suicide?"

"Nobody's done this, not since the first immortals. I'll get on the news, tell everyone —"

"Tell them what? That they need to die?"

My head drops. I suck in air, my chest tight as if I were drowning. "We're not human anymore, Paul. We can't go on like this. I can't."

"It's a child, Syb, not a statement. My child and yours."

I lean back, my hands clutching the edge of the table. I won't say more. He either knows by now or he never will.

*I must make them listen. For my sake, and yours. For all of us. And, yes, for our child.*

*One person won't make a difference. But somebody must start.  
A revolution of one.*



Jean says nothing as she gets up from the chair, the camera following her movements as she walks past an unfinished canvas to refill her cup. She's an artist now, in a co-op tucked in an Australian desert. It took me only minutes to find her, longer to work up the courage to call. But it was this or staring at the door Paul didn't close behind him.

I watch her return, sun dancing on her copper jewellery, the red landscape on her canvas eerily familiar.

"It won't work," she says, her voice scratchy as if the words were catching on something in her throat. "We didn't change the world. Why would your child be any different?"

"It's not just the child. I mean, it is, but..." I trail off but she just tilts her head, waiting. I swallow, the words scolding my tongue. "It's to make people notice. To get the media to listen. I am the change, not her."

"Suicide by child?"

Here it is: the truth Paul wasn't cruel enough to say.

A tear splashes down on my hands. "Am I a monster?"

Jean doesn't answer. She pushes a blonde lock behind her ear, the gesture so familiar the centuries melt into minutes and I'm a child again, the two of us riding the transporter across the red Martian outback.



"I must try, Jean."

Her copper earrings jiggle as she swings her head to the side, staring at something only she can see. "Maybe this is the time for monsters."



The termite mounds of the city's hive-towers watch me with a million eyes, indifferent. A transporter thrums in the distance, its engines revving as it lurches up and up in its unending duty. I dream of the sun breaking the horizon, the clouds aflame in crimson glow.

*On Mars, sunrises are blue.*

My child will be a person once, not just a statement. I'll have fifteen years to teach her about Mars, and amber, and dreams. Fifteen short years. It'll have to do.



I wake up in purple darkness, the chill of night dulled by encroaching dawn. A shadow stands by the door, picking at the leaves of his potted fig. I hold my breath, afraid the noise might scare him away. I don't know if I can hope for understanding, but I do hope for forgiveness.

He sits on the bed, his back to me. I ache to touch him, to feel the warmth of his skin. I make myself wait. Slowly, he turns towards me, his face pale and his lips pressed into a sad line.

"Will they give us thirty years, if we both do it?" he asks, and my heart breaks.

"No, please. It's just me. It was my doing."

"That much is right. You did it. Now you have to live with the consequences."

A drop rolls down my cheek, hot and sticky, like liquid amber. I bite my lip to stop it from shaking. My hand slides towards him across the ocean of cold, blue sheets.

Paul doesn't smile as our fingers touch, but wraps his hand around mine, warm and steady.

"Somebody has to start," he whispers.

A revolution of two.

