

MarsAchieved

You sigh at the thought of yet another day working on the farm. The dusty red desert outside is all you've ever known; you were born inside the MarsAchieved facility. You have no doubts you'll die here, too, probably of boredom.

The sun is eye-wateringly bright by the time you've pulled on your overalls and had a quick breakfast of cornbread. As you step outside your pod, you marvel at the structure that towers over the settlement. Thick metal struts link and separate to form a vast honeycomb dome three-hundred feet in the air. Each section is securely covered with inch-thick glass, coated to reflect the most harmful rays of the sun while keeping the atmosphere inside at the optimum temperature.

Normally, several other farmers are wandering about at this time, heading to their own plots to tend their crops. Something is different this morning. The streets are empty, the air silent. In fact, you realise, the air actually is silent. Even when everything else is quiet, there is always the gentle, rhythmic hum of the enormous fans. Every minute of every day, they slowly remove the build-up of carbon dioxide, while their twins on the other side of the dome draw in the fresh oxygen from the generators. Now, they too are silent.

The feeling of something creeping up on you overwhelms you, and you spin around. There's nothing there, but you can't shake the sense of unease. You suddenly realise that, no matter how quickly you turn, there is always some part of you exposed.

Check the fans. The thought rises in your brain like a bubble. Something is wrong, but the fans are essential. Every child had that drilled into them at school: always maintain the fans.

Red chalk fills the air and chokes your lungs as you sprint towards the nearest fan. You know it well, it stands tall over your own plot of land. Sure enough, you notice that the large blades are static. You turn and carry on running to the next, and then the next. They are all still; a pale imitation of their usual blurred image.

Another thought, dark and straight out of a nightmare, stalks you. *Now the blades have stopped turning, they are basically holes in the wall. What might come in?*

There have been rumours lately of strange animals trying to break through the dome, alien creatures that had more arms than legs and more eyes than teeth. Nobody believes them, of course. MarsAchieved has been here for nearly eleven years now with no alien sightings. But, part of you can't help but worry. *Where is everybody else?* you ask yourself silently.

Overhead, the sun drifts behind a cloud, and the dome falls into shadow. *There are no clouds on Mars, there is no atmosphere,* you remind yourself, and curse your imagination.

Tentatively, you turn and look up. Something big, or maybe it's a swarm of many things, is scurrying across the top of the dome - the inside of the dome - and is blocking out the sun. One of them opens a mouth filled with teeth and howls. Behind you, close enough to feel its breath, another creature replies.

VOCABULARY FOCUS

1. What does the phrase "eye-wateringly bright" tell you about the sun?
2. Use the description of the dome to draw a labelled diagram.
3. Find a word that means "to look after".
4. What does the phrase "Red chalk fills the air and chokes your lungs" tell you about the surface?
5. Write 3 synonyms that would work in place of "tentatively".

VIPERS QUESTIONS

- I** How does the character feel about living on Mars? What tells you this?
- E** Which narrative person is this text written in? What effect does that have on the reader?
- R** What is the settlement called?
- R** What has stopped working?
- I** Why does the character think something is wrong?

Answers:

1. It is very bright and makes you want to close your eyes
2. Accept drawings that show an understanding of the words vast and honeycomb.
3. Tend
4. It is covered in red chalky dust that is very light and easy to breathe in
5. Slowly, cautiously, nervously, carefully - accept relevant alternatives.

I: The character is bored. They think they will die there of boredom.

E: Second person - it directly places the reader into the story. Accept answers that talk about the personal impact of this.

R: Mars Achieved

R: The fans

I: There is nobody about when there usually is, and the fans aren't working.