

# Mars Is No Place for Children

by Mary A. Turzillo

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*Kapera Smythe, her diary, Smythe Farm & Laboratories, Vastitas Borealis, Summer-January 31, 2202:*

Mother and Dad asked me what I wanted for my sixth birthsol, and I said the antique wrist computer we saw in Borealopolis a couple sols ago, at the flea market. So they sent for it and here it is! I deliberately picked out one so old it won't network to the house computers, and I can have some PRIVACY at last.

A diary. So this is my diary. It doesn't have direct retinal imaging, and it's broken so I have to do text only. But it's mine, and only mine! I used to keep a diary on the house net, but now I need to keep my thoughts to myself. This will stay always on my wrist or under my pillow, and they'll never read what I really think, or what I plan.

They're going to send me "home."

To them, home is a little star I can see in the morning and evening sky. They say it's blue; to me it's just a white star with a smaller white star always near it. A double planet. The bigger of the twin planets is the one they call home, which, to be fair, is reasonable, I guess, since that's where they were both born.

Home is also where my precious older brother went, the one Mother always talks about when she says, "Oh, Sekou learned to read when he wasn't even two," or, "Remember how Sekou was so good about doing his chores?"

When I was less than a mear old, they sent Sekou back to Earth because he had some disease that the hospitals here can't treat. They have one picture of Sekou and me. I had my hair in cornrows, decorated with little red beads. Sekou, about two mears old, had really short hair, almost none at all. He was darker than I am, really cute, if a little bit skinny.

My mother is the worst with the Saint Sekou stuff. Dad is more sympathetic.

I get jealous of Sekou sometimes, but I think about him and wonder what it would be like to have a big brother to play with. It's not worth leaving Mars, of course, but it would still be really great.

Maybe I should keep this diary so Sekou can read it.

Dear Sekou:

Our parents say they came here for their freedom, because the streets of every city on Earth were unsafe for Kiafricans. Because Kiafricans after four centuries of legal freedom were still treated like second class citizens, sometimes even lynched. But if they wanted freedom, why did they have to buy it with so many mears of slavery (oops! they don't call it that term) *indenture*—to the Martian megacorp? And, as it turns out, why am I not safe here on Mars? On Earth, the danger was violence. Here, it's another kind of

death hanging over our heads.

If they bought their freedom with nine mears each, eighteen mears together, of labor, if this is what they had to pay for freedom, why am I not free to stay on the planet I love?

\* \* \* \*

*Smythe Farm and Laboratories, Summer-February 2 , 2202*

Dear Sekou,

It's harder than I expected getting time to record in here. I have to pretend to record in my diary on the house computer, or Mother will get suspicious (Dad's the trusting type).

I think I'll record a little bit about why I love my home, because if I get sent back to Earth I'll want more than pictures to remember Mars.

Let's see.

Our home. My bedroom, with its skylight so I can check on the wind and sun and stars anytime, even in the night. The greenhouses full of Mother and Dad's experiments. The frost flowers we grow in the low-pressure greenhouse. The patch of oxygen-conserving, antifreeze plants, amazing blades of green in the sun from Summer-February until Summer-November. Antifreeze plants grow outside on the naked soil, but unfortunately they don't flower. We have to propagate them from root cuttings. But they impress Polaricorp, which is the corporation which runs this part of Mars.

The sky. The Winter-June sky, so full of stars. We live near the pole, and for three hundred glorious sols each mear, the sky is full of jewels so thick I just have to make up stories about the King of the Universe, who spilled them into our Martian sky.

The slow summer sunset and sunrise, such a delicate blue against the pink sky. The sols in Summer-June when the sun doesn't bother to set, just floats on the horizon like a glowing silver medallion on a string of invisible stars. The moons, bright like silver coins. Last mear there was an eclipse, and we waited until Deimos almost glided over the sun, then stole a peek while one bright bead (because Deimos isn't very round, it has valleys and humps) sparkled for a moment.

Sekou, you know Earth doesn't even have moons. Well, yes, it has the other planet, which people from Earth insist on calling The Moon. (Do you call it that?) Can't they see it's way big? It's a planet, called Luna, for heaven sake!

The huge valley, Valles Marineris. Oh, wouldn't I love to explore the bottom of that one. Maybe that's where they'll find fossils, little stony pieces of bacteria or (here's a word I learned last week) *diatoms*. Maybe I'll go there when I grow up. Maybe I'll be on a team that discovers fossils.

The great high mountains, bigger than the ones on Earth. No one will ever walk all the way to the top of Olympus Mons, Mother says. But maybe she's wrong. She doesn't know *me*.

But of course I'm not going to grow up on Mars. They're sending me back, unless I can stop them.

Mother asked me where "the little wrist computer" is. Meaning this computer, my diary. She's not stupid. She probably figured I'm keeping a diary. So I told her it was lost, I couldn't find it. Ha. As if anything could get lost in this biome. Every every solar cell, every drainage pipe, every pane of glass, every fork, every wrench, is in its place, almost like we worshipped them. Because they were either manufactured by Martians in Valleston, or else (hard to imagine) brought from Earth. Like this, my old-fashioned, antique, flea-market wrist computer.

Our house computer is sort of an antique, too. We're not like some city people that have contact lens chips or headplants so we can watch the news or listen to music twenty four point five hours a sol. Or Earth people who have Mars-knows-what nanotech junk, which is dangerous anyway after what happened to that town in Scotland on Earth.

It's in my pocket. I always hide it when I take a bath or change clothes.

But maybe I better not record just yet what my plan is.

\* \* \* \*

*Smythe Farm and Laboratories, Summer-February 5, 2202:*

Dear Sekou,

I didn't feel very good for a couple sols there. That stupid doctor from Earth gave me some kind of pep-pill, supposed to kill the bad cells and pump up the good ones. At least that's what they said. It made me feel worse rather than better.

But let's talk more about Earth and why I'd rather *die* than go there, even if it's where you live, Sekou.

First, I wouldn't mind it so much, despite the awful things my Mother and Dad already told me about how they mistreat us Kiafricans. The gravity is bad, I know, but you spend some time in a station where you exercise every sol with big elastic bands and get strong so you can survive, plus they give you calcium-magnesium vitamin D pills, and anyway I'm not quite through puberty, so maybe when my hormones kick in (yeech, it feels icky to talk about this stuff), they'll grow me bigger muscles and bones so I won't feel the gravity so much.

It would be an adventure. Plants grow outdoors all the time there. I've read they even kill plants they don't want—weeds. Weeds? Imagine. I would feed them to the iguana, who would love them and get all fat and juicy.

Although they don't have high mountains, apparently they do have huge thick clouds and weather with lots of liquid H<sub>2</sub>O coming down out of the sky, which sounds weird but fun. And I'd love to see a live river or ocean, since ours are all dead. Animals. They have animals running all over free. People keep some of them for pets.

One of the girls in my on-line math class claims she has a pet cat. Obviously she's lying, just trying to impress us. Everybody knows cats eat meat, and her family isn't going to keep something around that lives that high on the food chain without paying its way. I saw a cat in the zoo in Polaris a mear ago. It was all hairy, just like the holograms. They also have dogs, and ferrets and squirrels, and an alligator, but nothing really huge, nothing that eats a lot, like whales or elephants or dinosaurs. However, somebody was planning to bring a baby cow to Mars while it was still small enough to transport. They have hundreds of other different kinds of animals on Earth.

Yes, I would love to go to Earth for a while. To see you, to find out how you grew up.

But I could never come back. That is, unless I was able to sell myself to one of the megacorps, like Mother and Dad did. But you have to have special skills and training, like bioengineering, to get yourself bought and your passage paid back to Mars.

Dad and Mother say I'm gifted. They mean different things by it, of course. Mother says I'm intellectually gifted, I have a high IQ, meaning I do well in the on-line school. Dad says I have hoo-doo. I can divine. Dowse for water, that means, in the form of underground permafrost deposits.

You might wonder why anybody would need to dowse for H<sub>2</sub>O here in the arctic circle, where the permafrost is only inches from the surface. Of course, the Smythe family would have all the bad luck! The homestead Mother and Dad were sold has a really thick crust over the permafrost, some place as much as three meters, and before I was born, they really needed somebody who could find places where the covering layer was thinner. Somebody who could dowse.

Well, I can. Mother says that's because I have some sort of undiscovered organ, like birds, which helps me locate minute disturbances in the electrical field, which might result from the action of heating and cooling water.

So I'm "gifted." I don't think that's going to get me passage back home to Mars.

So, no thank you. I'll stay here.

If I can figure out how.

\* \* \* \*

*Smythe Farm and Laboratories, Summer-February 5, 2202:*

Dear Sekou,

My name, Kapera, means something, and I never even realized it until I got sick.

I don't know if I have the same sickness you had, but getting sick caused me to find out the meaning of my name.

I eavesdropped on Mom and Dad, who were in the low pressure greenhouse, putting the faceplates of their environment suits together to talk. They thought I couldn't hear, but I have really good hearing. If I listen closely, I can hear people talking in their suits, even when we're out in the Mars sky.

Dad thought it was growing pains. Mother said I'd be all right just as soon as I got my first period. She didn't know when that would be, because there weren't enough Martian-born girls to collect statistics on what the Martian environment would do to make us grow up faster or slower.

I thought it might be the flu. Flu usually comes to the homesteads through Polaris, from new immigrants, and I thought maybe that was it.

Finally, they took me to the hospital in Polaris.

The doctor looked pretty young, for a doctor. He was Kiafrican, like us, but light-skinned. He had a funny accent—must have just come to Mars. But I bet it wasn't going to take him nine mears, like my parents, to pay for his passage and homestead. Doctors make a lot of money, because we need them so much, and the members of the megacorp give them a big discount on passage and everything.

"You're how old?"

Six, I told him.

He kind of gawked, then remembered that we counted Martian mears, not Earth years. "You have leukemia," he said. "Do you know what that means?"

I felt like throwing up. "It's a disease Mars children get because of the cosmic rays. Because the atmosphere is so thin it doesn't protect us. It's because I go out in the environment suit all the time and stay upstairs in the greenhouses, isn't it? If I'd been more careful—"

“No,” he said.

I just looked at him.

“No, Kapera. I've been here almost a whole Mars year, and I've seen childhood cancer, leukemia, and Hodgkin's Disease in children who lived entirely underground.”

Cosmic rays. Radiation. We studied that on line, of course. It was one of the reasons scientists think life might have arisen on Mars even before Earth, because it makes molecules change rapidly. But it also bonks DNA in cells, so it causes cancer. Especially children's cancer.

The doctor got up and gestured for me to go sit in the waiting room. I did, but I could still hear what they were saying. “The company insurance will pay for chemotherapy, supportive nutrition, and of course psychiatric counseling for the whole family. I'd recommend a hospice in—”

“How good is the chemotherapy and supportive nutrition?” asked Dad.

“What do you mean, how good?”

Mother spoke up. “Our son had Hodgkin's Disease. They recommended much the same for him.”

The doctor paused, waiting for her to go on. When she didn't he said, “I see. Well, it's the best we have to offer, and it does work for over half the children with this particular leukemia. You do understand that strict compliance with the chemo and diet regime, plus affirmations and uh, if you are religious, prayer, can really up your chances—”

Dad said, “Doctor, are you a company man?”

“A company—You mean, does a member of the syndicate own my contract at present? Yes. But the syndicate still extends health insurance to Martians who are freemen, you know. You're definitely eligible.”

Dad smiled kind of sadly. “If this were your daughter, and you had—extensive resources—what would you recommend?”

“Oh, I'm not allowed—” Then I heard his chair scrape on the floor, like he'd moved closer to them. I had to strain to hear him. “I'd send her to one of the Middle Earth Orbit hospitals. The nanotech reengineering they do there is still experimental, but I'm satisfied that it works.”

“How many—”

“Ninety five per cent cure rate. But there's no use breaking your heart. That's way beyond your means, or mine, for that matter.”

“How much?”

“Well, it's the passage to Earth that's really unaffordable. The treatment is, uh, well, maybe a mear's salary, if you're a freeman. If you have that much saved up.”

I listened as hard as I could, but nobody said anything for awhile. It was what they call an embarrassed silence. I remember everything, so clearly. Maybe if I put it in text, then I can forget it.

“Kapera,” said the doctor, as he ushered them out. “That name, *Kapera*, means *This Will Be the Last One*, doesn't it?”

“Yes,” said Mother. Her voice was hard.

He turned away. “Mars is no place for children,” he said.

That's what my name means.

I'm so tired, Sekou.

\* \* \* \*

*Smythe Farm and Laboratories, Summer-February 5, 2202:*

Dear Sekou,

Rereading what I wrote about that doctor, I'm angry at him. He made our parents feel helpless. He shamed them because they didn't have the money to send me to Earth and back.

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*Smythe Farm and Laboratories, Summer-February 6, 2202:*

Dear Sekou,

Dad keeps trying to make me eat something. He killed one of the chickens and cooked it in jalapeno sauce. Mother made ice cream out of the soy slurry and flavored it with banana. It all seemed like a good idea, but I just didn't feel like eating more than a few bites. I said for them to freeze it; maybe tomorrow or in a couple sols.

Mother said the shot the doctor gave me must ruining my appetite.

\* \* \* \*

*Smythe Farm and Laboratories, Summer-February 15, 2202:*

Dear Sekou,

We went back to the doctor. His name is Pinkerton, I found out. A real Company name. Dr. Pinkerton gave me another shot, but this time there was a tonic of some kind, too.

I told him how awful the chemotherapy makes me feel. And he doesn't even guarantee it will work. Obsolete, like most Martian stuff, chemotherapy, that makes your hair fall out and you barf all the time. He didn't mention the neotenizing nanotech they do in the big expensive Earth orbital hospitals. “Frontier remedies for frontier heroes,” he said. Big deal. That's not the kind of hero I want to be.

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*Smythe Farm and Laboratories, Summer-February 10, 2202:*

Dear Sekou,

On Earth, they claim people dream in black and white most of the time. Maybe that's how you dream, but I dream in color, and I have dreams of being an explorer. Dreams in red.

I got thinking about heroes and about the history of Mars. About all the Earth people that were so dedicated to getting to Mars that modern people call them “the first Martians,” even though it was a whole century before Jeffrey Allan set the flag of Polymet Mining on the face of the planet, and another fifty years before Sagan City was founded.

I got thinking about Sojourner Truth. Not Sojourner the first independent rover to land on Mars;

Sojourner the woman. We don't study much Earth history, but I searched the free network to find Earth-based histories of the African American race (the old-fashioned Earth term for Kiafricans). What happened was that the North America government declared slavery illegal, but this one woman's master refused to obey the law. So she ran away. She changed her name to Sojourner Truth. She became a famous lecturer, traveling all over in the name of truth.

You probably wonder what all this has to do with Sagan City and Polymet Mining, but when they were first exploring Mars—not with people, but just with robots and stuff—they sent this rover that looked at rocks and stuff and told what our atmosphere and soil was like. The very first human thing on Mars that was truly independent. They had a lot of ideas to name it, including an Amerind scout's name, Sacagawea. But in the end, they had a contest, and the name that won was—Sojourner Truth. There were dozens of other exploring rovers to follow, of course: Rocky 7 and 11 and 13, and Athena, and Robbit, and—you must know about those.

I thought that was really cool. I made a little model out of broken solar panels and your toy cars. (Well—you didn't take them with you.) I keep it under my skylight so it can look out at sky all mear long. Somesol I'll get around to hooking it up to some good solar cells so it will really run. In Borealopolis, the Polymet Mining Museum has what they claim is a piece of a solar cell from the original Sojourner. I'm not sure how they got it, since the original rover has never actually been found. It's probably a piece from a prototype, donated from Earth.

Anyway, rich people collect Mars memorabilia. Like, guns used in the Antitrust War of 2139 are in museums in Polaris, and probably in a lot of other big cities, but sometimes rich guys have collections—replicas and even the real thing.

I can understand this. I have a home-made replica of Sojourner. I bet some rich executive in Polaristech would pay millions and millions for the real Sojourner rover.

But nobody would ever be able to find it. It was programmed to wander around and sample rocks after it lost contact with Earth. It's buried in the sand by now.

Millions and millions. Enough to travel to Earth and back, with lots left over.

\* \* \* \*

*Smythe Farm and Laboratories, Summer-February 11, 2202:*

Dear Sekou,

Well, my hair has almost all fallen out. Before I went to the doctor, I had it all done in dreads. It looked really sophisticated. Now I look hideous. Mother says, "Cheer up, it'll grow back."

When we realized my hair was going, Dad took a holo. I was cutting back some morning glory vines and saying, "Farming is hard work."

I'm so glad Dad understands. Mother just has a cold heart.

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*Smythe Farm and Laboratories, Summer-February 11, 2202, later:*

Dear big brother,

Why are our Mother and Dad so nice to each other these sols?

\* \* \* \*

*Smythe Farm and Laboratories, Summer-February 14, 2202:*

Dear Sekou,

I guess this disease makes you paranoid. I've never actually known anybody who was paranoid, but it is mentioned a lot in history books, particularly of the twentieth and twentieth first century. I think I'm paranoid.

They broke it to me (big surprise) that I'm going back to Earth. Or anyway, they're going to *try* to send me back to Earth. But there's something else. Dad traded a packet of our best bean seed stock for a bunch of useless squash blossoms he got from the Watson family.

He made this bouquet of them. Put them in a jar on the table. Mother cried when she saw them. I hope she appreciated them; Dad's so generous.

She left them there two whole sols before we stuffed them with beans and baked them for dinner.

What's going on? Dad was never the type for romantic gestures. Is Mother going to get pregnant again? I told you before "Kapera" means "the last one," but maybe now they changed their mind. It makes me feel kind of shuddery. Like they were planning to replace me.

\* \* \* \*

*Smythe Farm and Laboratories, Summer-February 14, 2202, later in the sol:*

But that's okay, I decided. They need somebody to go on. Dad is a good parent, and I guess Mother's heart is in the right place, even if they're wrong about sending me away. And maybe I *will* go to Earth, and survive, and grow up. Then when I come back to Mars (because hell or high winds I'm going to, no matter how much studying and work I have to do to be able to sell my services to the Companies), maybe I'll have a little brother or sister.

I'm beginning to feel a little better. But Dr. Pinkerton says I have to feel rotten to get at the cancerous cells and make them feel even rottener. So I suppose I'll be going in for another round.

\* \* \* \*

*Smythe Farm and Laboratories, Summer-February 17, 2202:*

Dear Sekou,

They came out with it. They're sending me to an Earth orbit hospital that takes Martian patients. I'll be treated there, *cured*. And then rehabilitated to go to Earth to live. My grandmother (whom I've seen pictures and tapes of) will take care of me as I acclimatize to Earth gravity, although I'll never be very strong, according to Mother. Being preadolescent will be an advantage.

They want to do this soon. They showed me the letter from Dr. Pinkerton, and he says it has to be done before Summer-May. He says otherwise I won't survive the six month trip, and anyway that's the travel window.

We're leaving the time of long shadows, the low barometer sols. By Summer-May, the shadows will be growing shorter, and so will my time on our home world, Sekou, on the only home world I ever wanted. Goodbye polar caps and long starry winters, goodbye pink-amber summers when the sun draws a platinum ring all the way round the sky. Goodbye my chances of searching for fossils in Valles Marineris, of seeing the top of the biggest volcano in the solar system, of finding the Sojourner Rover that won Earth's heart to make Mars a human place. Goodbye to my few short sols of happiness; hello to endless "days" as an eternal exile.

I'm so ashamed to be weak and cry like this. This wrist computer is so old it'll probably get tears in it and stop. I hope you, and I, can still read this—when I get to Earth.

\* \* \* \*

*Smythe Farm and Laboratories, Summer-February 21, 2202:*

Dear Sekou,

Mother and Dad have been fighting. It's probably Mother's fault. She's so bossy about everything. It had something to do with money, I tried to listen, but they shut up all of a sudden and went out to the greenhouse. They're out there now. I listened to them a little while—but though I could hear their words, I couldn't understand what they were talking about. They know a little bit of some other languages—English and Japanese and Baduma. I finally got too tired and went to bed.

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*Smythe Farm and Laboratories, Summer-February 22, 2202:*

Dear Sekou,

I found this creepy letter addressed to Mother and Dad from something called the Personality Preservation Software Corporation. I shouldn't be spying, you would probably say, but I bet you'd do the same if you were still on Mars, and Mother and Dad were acting so weird.

The letter says that for umpteen thousand franks they can make a record of a person's voice, thinking patterns, knowledge, training, their whole personality, in other words, and then download it into an autonomous rover to explore Mars. They called this an Eternal Memorial Reconstruction Rover.

Sekou, I have this horrible feeling this has something to do with me.

\* \* \* \*

*Smythe Farm and Laboratories, Summer-February 23, 2202:*

Dear Sekou,

How I wish you were here, big Brother, to tell me what I should do!

I admit it. I've been eavesdropping again. I stayed in the greenhouse after teatime yestersol, and sure enough, they came in, arguing just like last night. At first, I couldn't figure out what the disagreement was. Then Mother said, "It's settled, Joseph, I'm going with her and you're cashing in. We can get the most money for you."

Cashing in can only mean one thing, Sekou. Maybe you didn't learn this before you left Mars, but people sell themselves to one or another of the companies to come here, and then earn their freedom and their homestead, if they choose to live outside the cities, by working it off. Mother and Dad earned their freedom when I was less than a mear old; then they started saving to buy our homestead from the company.

Dad's voice was so low I almost didn't hear what he said next. "There has to be another solution, Miriam. I can't bear thinking I'll never see you or her again."

"In the name of heaven, tell me what it is!"

Dad didn't say anything.

I'd so much rather it was him that was coming with me.

No, Big Brother, that's wrong. I can't bear that I'm going at all. A family should be together. There has to be another solution.

Meantime, I have a fever. I had a headache all sol, so I took my temperature. And I looked in the mirror. I look gray and skinny. Maybe it's the spring light.

\* \* \* \*

*Smythe Farm and Laboratories, Summer-February 24, 2202:*

Dear Sekou,

I slept all sol and they didn't even wake me up, just left some greens and frostwheat groats by my bed. I used to like greens.

Then when night came, I couldn't sleep, so I went and snooped some more. I found what I was afraid of. In the computer are ticket numbers for my Mother and me to go to Equatorial City, and then to Earth Orbital, a hospital station. There are also open-end ticket numbers to go to Earth surface. No date.

Mother and Dad will never see each other again. I will never see my beloved father again.

How can they do this to me? How can they do it to *us*?

Brother, help me!

\* \* \* \*

*Smythe Farm and Laboratories, Summer-February 27, 2202:*

Dear Sekou,

I'm going to do this. I won't record it until it's done, because Mother might get suspicious. She's so snoopy, she has no respect at all for my privacy.

But if I'm going to do it, it will have to be before we go to see that stupid doctor again. And I will eat my greens and even those yicky yams the way Mother cooks them, and the verre de terre souffle and the works. I sure will need my strength.

\* \* \* \*

*Somewhere in the upper atmosphere of the Northern Hemisphere, Summer-March 5, 2202:*

Dear Sekou,

I made it! I made it! I'm on a rocket plane.

The last week has been exciting enough to keep me from feeling sick very much. I wrote down the numbers for the travel tickets my mother reserved for us and put them in my school bag. I took my books out of the bag and hid them in the bottom of my closet. Then I packed some clothes and seeds for trade in the bag.

Do they teach you about Martian history like we learn about Earth history? I feel awful that you know so little about your home planet. We'll have to discuss this when I become rich and pay your way to Mars.

I'm going to do that, you know.

The biggest difficulty was not the tickets, or even ID. My passport was in the databanks just like Mother's. So, since I was using my own ticket, I could travel without Mother.

It was almost like Dad knew what I was planning. Mother has stopped involving me in the sol-to-sol operation of the greenhouse or the naked environment plants, or even consulting me in the care of my own little plots. Dad is, of course, more considerate; he keeps up the pretense that I have a future on Mars. But yestersol he took Mother into the old middle-pressure greenhouse (the little one they built when they first arrived here) and got her involved in a long discussion. I tiptoed away, grabbed the bag I had packed, and off I went.

No, I didn't go hiking off in an environment suit like some crash victim. I stole the rover and drove it to Polaris, to the launch station.

I programmed it to come back to the homestead, of course. And I left a nice note, so they won't think I was kidnapped.

Mother will never be able to trace me. I didn't go to Equatorial City.

I'm on the rocket plane to Sagan City.

The launch area was pretty exciting. I was so surprised at how adult they treated me, as if I knew all the safety procedures, which of course I do—in theory. I mean, I study these things in school. The rocket plane is launched on a precise arc to land at its destination. When it gets there, it deploys parachutes to brake, and then the wings extend to guide it to the landing field.

I'm excited about the landing. It'll be night when we get there, and I'll be able to see all the city lights. The launch was impressive; lots of noise and acceleration, but not much view because we gained altitude too fast for much of a view of Borealopolis.

Ares Vallis will look different from how it would have looked to Pathfinder. The area is still a flood plane, of course, with rocks from all over. Before the landing, according to stuff I looked up when I got interested in Sojourner, all the scientists were arguing over whether it was a flood plain, or whether the pattern was from a volcanic eruption. Of course they learned right away when the pictures came back that it was from flooding. Which made Mars much more interesting to those old Earthlings who never considered anything interesting unless it was like Earth—wet.

I'm on my way.

And even if Mother decides to follow me, she'll have a hard time, because I gave her electronic ticket numbers to a new immigrant in Polaris.

\* \* \* \*

*Sagan City, Summer-March 6, 2202:*

Dear Sekou:

I had some windowplant seed I used as cowrie to get a bed last night. The hosteler didn't know what they were, but he accessed his net, he found out how unusual they were, and was glad to take them.

The hotel was cheap, but a little scary. There were two immigrants there that got to Mars and wanted to renege on their contracts to Manifeast-Frostline Company. At first they were very quiet, but somebody in the bar recognized them and called the city police, who of course wouldn't enforce a company contract, but did tip off the Manifeast enforcers. There was almost a shootout.

Breakfast was lettuce, onions, and squash simmered in soy milk. They use a lot of Earth plants here; quite exotic.

I'm into my environment suit and off to the Pathfinder site. It's less than a kilometer from the city biome.

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*Pathfinder Site, Summer-March 6, 2202, later in the sol:*

Sekou,

This isn't working out as I expected. A kilometer is a long way to walk in an environment suit. When I got here, there was just the plaque, which said ON OR AROUND THIS SITE, THE HISTORIC PATHFINDER MISSION LANDED, JULY 4, 1997. THE LANDER HAS BEEN MOVED TO THE SAGAN MUSEUM ON FIRST STREET; THE SOJOURNER ROVER HAS NEVER BEEN FOUND.

That's all I'm going to record tosol. My stomach hurts and I think I better head back to the dome.

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*Sagan City, Pathfinder Trust Museum, Summer-March 7, 2202:*

Sekou, my dear brother,

Elder Adelia has finally gone to her room and I feel safe to bring out my diary. Oh, boy! If I was afraid of Mother getting ahold of it—if these holy guys here ever saw what I've got planned, I'd be freeze-dried, fried, and hung out to flap in the fines.

I just reread what I wrote on Summer-March 6. "My stomach hurts"—what an understatement. I realized my leukemia was making me feel bad, so I figured maybe tosol wasn't the sol to go digging in the fines for Sojourner. I thought I'd go back to the hotel and use the last of my cowrie to get another room for the night.

On the way, though, I noticed people staring at me. I had heard that Kiafricans were uncommon in some Martian cities, but some of the people staring and pointing were also Kiafrican.

Then it hit me. I needed to hit a news equiosk, fast. I didn't dare use my account, that is, the Smythe family's account, to pay for the jack, so I looked for a public library. I don't know how it is on Earth, big brother, or for that matter Luna or the orbital colonies, but on Mars most of the public libraries are run by Mormonite Jesuits. In fact, the Sagan Memorial Museum is run by Mormonite Jesuits. I forgot—you probably don't know about ancient religions. To make a long story short, the Mormons and the Jesuits were both really very sexist, meaning they didn't let women do much of the leadership stuff. If you studied history in the Earth school, they taught you that sects like that had a lot of computer trouble in the middle twenty first century. Something called IRS was tapping their money files. I think IRS was a computer virus. Anyway the people in those religions got a bad case of IRS and the law wanted to arrest them and put them in quarantine. So the leaders of the Mormons and the Jesuits decided to come to Mars and set up colonies for religious freedom. Neither group had enough money to launch a large-scale emigration and settlement mission, so they pooled their resources.

The funny thing is that once they got to Mars, they were separated from their home offices so much that they got to electing their own padres and CEOs, and now there are more madres running their show than padres. Which proves something, I forget what.

There are private libraries, but they run by subscription, and you can't jack in unless you have an account.

And the private libraries don't like the public libraries; they say it's unfair competition.

So I couldn't find a public library at the hotel, or in the biome the hotel was in, and I had to spend more precious cowrie (the seeds) to chute into the cavern section of town, which is where I ran in the library, ignoring the human attendant, grabbed free goggles, and got the daily news. There was my picture, one my Dad had taken. I was pruning some vines, and I turned to the camera and said something stupid like, "Farming is big business on Mars." I don't remember ever saying anything *that* stupid, but I must have, because there was the video. And a big headline, IF YOU SEE THIS CHILD.

Oh, no! This is the absolute first time I'd appeared in a public posting, and it was because I had done something wrong! I wanted my first appearance to be there because my experiments with bloodplants had won a Westinghouse Award, or because I had located a major new aquifer.

I had been reported missing, of course. My mother was videoed holding back tears (insincere tears, no doubt), saying I had been kidnapped and the house robbed too. The kidnapper had taken undisclosed equipment and used an open ticket to Soochow.

Sekou, if I ever meet you, I'm sure you'll laugh and laugh at how stupid I had been not to realize they would report me missing. It's nice that they missed me, of course. But of course they were legally bound to report me to the company; though I was a born freewoman, still the company has first rights should I decide to become indentured. And the company would spread it on the newsnet, even if they hadn't.

I crossreffed all the majors in the posting, and nowhere was it mentioned that I had leukemia. I don't know why they left that out.

Sekou, I have to tell you the most awful thing I did. When I left home, I stole Mother's environment suit. She was going to get me a new one, because I had outgrown my five-year suit. Still, she would be caught short without this one, and it will take all summer to order up a new one. I was sharing this one with her, which was awkward, because when you come in, you know, you have to throw it in the deduster, and it takes just hours to get most of the dust out, and if you don't, it wears out very quickly at the seals and seams.

On Luna, they are developing ones that have their own onboard dedusters, some kind of nanotech thing. But you know Martian bureaucrats, no nanotech frills for "our people"!

Geez, I must be better, or I wouldn't be gabbing away like this.

I went out to the Pathfinder site in Mother's environment suit. I sure was glad I had obeyed her and put it in the deduster right after the last time I wore it. That was the night they were in the high-pressure greenhouse talking about me. It fit fine, worked fine, but kept reporting problems with my vitals. It wasn't telling me anything I didn't know. I started back to the tramway (there's a little rail car that takes you to and from the site) and the next thing I knew—

You know, it's hard to sit down in an environment suit, and a good thing, too, because you're likely to run out of solar energy and just freeze to the ground.

I kept telling myself, "Kapera, get up! Make your daddy proud of you! You can do it!"

But I couldn't get up. The suit was kind of heavy and of course hard to bend around the knees. I started crying, and my nose ran and I couldn't wipe it, and my faceplate got all smeary.

Pretty soon two people came up, squatted beside me, and pressed their faceplates to mine. The one with the woman's voice said that the park site was closing for the sol, would open tomorrow at nine. I tried to

get up, though I didn't have any idea where I'd go. The woman asked me if I was okay. Well, did I *look* okay? I mean really!

This gave me the energy to get up again, because I thought they would surely connect me with that girl who was missing from Smythe Homestead near Borealopolis, and turn me in. I didn't say anything, but got up. I was standing, and then I fell over again. This time, I just couldn't get my legs under me.

The woman said, "Oh! Careful! You'll rip your suit."

Which was silly. Who ever heard of a Sears Roebuck environment suit ripping? Cheap ones, maybe, but my parents buy quality when it comes to equipment.

The woman pulled me to my feet and let me lean against her. "What's your name?"

I didn't know what to do, so I very carefully used my toe to draw in the dust: SEKOU.

I figured she couldn't see through my face plate, and anyway with my hair all gone she'd think I was a boy. Sorry I used your name, big brother, but I had to think fast. I wanted them to leave me alone, but I was afraid if they did, I wouldn't have the strength to make it back to the platform from which the tramway ran.

"Walter, this poor child is hurt!"

That was when I noticed the blood on the inside of my face plate. I must have gotten a nose bleed. Darn it!

I focused on their nameplates. They must have had something to do with the museum because they had names over their hearts, ELDER ADELIA and PADRE WALTER.

Oh, *great*. I had fallen into the hands of a bunch of missionaries.

By some miracle, they weren't the sort that had head computers tuned sol and night, so they hadn't seen the "missing or kidnapped child" appeal.

I suppose that's the religion thing, or maybe they're just poor.

Anyway, they took me back to the museum, which is inside its own small biome, and the padre made me some kind of home-brewed liquor with herbs in it. Called it Hyper K.

"The original shroom was from Earth, but Mars gravity and mutations have changed it. I call it 'Papa Mars Welcome Wagon gift to humanity.'" He had a little nip himself, and seemed much happier after that.

It tasted sweet, but with a bubbly bite to it. I felt like sleeping after I drank the Hyper K, and when I woke up, this is what I heard:

She: "He can't be. The kidnapped child was a girl."

He: "Are you sure he's a boy? Sekou is a boy's name, but you know how those uplanders are. They got some gritty weird customs."

"Sekou is a boy's name. Look it up in your database."

"You're right. And the missing child's name was Kapera Smythe. Still, maybe he, she, whatever, is afraid to tell us the real name. Maybe Sekou is afraid the kidnapper will come back. Or maybe Sekou wasn't

really kidnapped—”

There was a pause while they both reaccessed the newsnet. Finally, Elder Adelia said, “They seem pretty sure it was a kidnapping. I still think we should call Solaranics and pass on the information about this child.”

“I guess. Still—the kid was bleeding. Maybe the parents—or owners—were cruel and the child has run away for a reason.” He took another swig of the Hyper K. I knew it was the Hyper K, because I could smell the sweet-biting smell all the way down the hall.

“That stuff is making you paranoid! Let's let the poor boy sleep and hear his story at breakfast.”

Sekou, I'm sitting here scared to death. What kind of a story can I feed them that they won't send me back home?

Maybe I should go back home.

I have time to sleep, though. My stomach hurts. My nose won't stop bleeding. Why do I have to be sick?

I can't go home. They will be so angry at me. And Mother and Dad will be split up forever and I'll have to go to a stinking orbital hospital, and then live on Earth the rest of my life.

My life—

\* \* \* \*

*Sagan Memorial Station Museum, March 7, 2202, I think:*

Dear Sekou,

I don't know how you expect me to record a diary when I'm so sick and confused.

Oh, all right, I guess it was my idea in the first place.

I fell asleep for a little while, but my stomach hurt so much I woke up early. I heard them talking again.

She: “Sekou is a boy's name all right! Sekou is the name of Kapera Smythe's brother.”

He: “All right, all right. So we call Celltechnio, who owned the parent's contract. Or should we call our own company?”

She: “I say talk to Madre Naomi. We've already taken too much into our own hands by keeping this from the Mission. You and I may not see eye to eye on doctrine, but we have a responsibility to the Mission. And we can't keep him—or her—in the Museum dormitory without letting somebody in authority know.”

He: “Um, why don't you call. I'm not sure I can face up to this.”

I heard enough, Sekou. I figured in a minute, they were going to come in and pull down my drawers to find out if I was Kapera or Sekou. I got out of the hammock, stuffed my environment suit into the backpack, and peeked out the door.

They were standing in a low hallway. It looked like we were in a part of the building that had a soil roof, though the Museum itself is an independent above-ground biome with its own greenhouse, attached to the city biome with a long inflated tube. I hate those things; the pressure is always way too low and it

hurts my ears. And they're cold!

She was saying, "Padre, I know you're crazy about kids, but this isn't a stray iguana some farmer lost that you can make into a pet."

"I just worry about why they want him back, Adelia. What if that wasn't really his father? Suppose he's a company child?"

"Don't believe everything you access on the yellow sites, Padre."

I tiptoed back into the little cell where I'd slept. The nap had made me feel a lot better. I noticed a backpack hung on a hook on the back of the door. While I could still hear voices, I very quietly took the backpack down and went through it.

Oh, Sekou! Please don't be too ashamed of me, going through a stranger's things, and a good person's too, who helped me when I was in trouble. I know I condemned Mother for trying to violate my privacy by accessing my diary. But I had to figure out a way so they wouldn't turn me in, so I had to find out as much as I could about these people. I was desperate!

The backpack belonged to Elder Adelia. In an outer pocket was an old-fashioned plastic smart plate, and I was pretty sure it would have the key codes to all the rooms in the museum.

I hung the backpack back up and thought fast. The way to leave was blocked; Elder Adelia and Padre Walter were standing in the hallway. Elder Adelia was saying, "Well, then let's just talk to him. If he's a runaway, surely he'll tell us why, and we can check out his story." And I heard their footsteps shuffling down the hall.

I shoved the smart plate in my jumpsuit pocket and lay back on the bed, trying to look as if I had just waked up.

She spoke first, "Sekou, are you rested up from your nap? You want some more soup? We wanted to ask you a few questions."

I didn't say anything.

He said, "Elder Adelia and I wondered if you were maybe lost. Can we help you get back to your parents?"

I still didn't say anything. I had an idea.

"A boy your age alone, of course we wondered if you had got separated from your family," Elder Adelia continued soothingly.

But I wasn't soothed. I said nothing.

"Maybe he speaks Amtrav," said Padre Walter. "Sorquel vwey a habin tey?"

I stared at them.

He tried several other languages, including English, which I do know pretty well.

He apparently had one of those quick-study chips, or maybe he had done a lot of deep learning. He certainly knew a lot of ways to ask questions that were none of his business.

Finally Elder Adelia chipped in. Between the two of them, I bet they tried twenty different languages. I

just stared at them.

“Do you understand us at all, honey?” she asked.

I stared at them, then nodded yes.

“Oh my stars! Can you talk, Sekou?”

I slowly shook my head: No.

I tried not to giggle at their expressions.

“What do we do now, Walt?”

“I think we have to take him to the Madre Generale. Sekou, gather your things. We're going to take you to a lady who can help you get back with your parents.”

“Ask him about why he ran away.”

“You ask him.”

I looked at them with the biggest eyes I could manage.

She said, “Sekou, were you kidnapped, or did you run away?”

I looked at her and shrugged.

“You ran away? Why? Were you afraid of someone or something?”

I nodded emphatically.

Well, Sekou, it was true. I was afraid of leukemia, and afraid I'd be sent to Earth Orbital Hospital.

I knew I was in trouble if I ever got to see Madre Naomi. She didn't sound like the type with the warmth of solar kindness in her heart.

So I followed them down the hallway, and into the tube. Once we got to the city, I waited until we were at a busy intersection: people and mini-rovers all going every which way. I chose the darkest corridor I could see and ran like Phobos.

They were old people, and although I was sick, I was young and small. When I thought I had lost them, I put on my environment suit and slipped out an airlock.

Where am I now? you wonder, big brother.

Well, I'm right back at the museum. I waited until dark—there's been a local storm that blocks most starlight, and neither of the moons were up, I told you I was good at divining. Dad says I have this magnetic sixth sense. I found the door to the Museum in the twilight by following the edge of the main biome, then the connecting tubes. I figured they'd never look for me outside. I huddled in the shadow of a model of the Face, hoping my power wouldn't give out before dark.

It didn't.

I'm inside the museum.

\* \* \* \*

*Sagan Memorial Museum, Summer-April 3, 2202:*

Dear Sekou:

I'm in the museum, but I'm also in serious trouble.

To start with, I'll have to leave and find somewhere else to go in about seven hours, when the Museum opens to tourists.

But worse, they turn off the airhandlers at night, which is not a huge threat; I've spent time in our medium-pressure greenhouse and got no more problems than nosebleeds. But there are two other problems: One, the outer dome, the flydome, sort of collapses in on itself; during the sol it's like a big fat balloon against the low outside ambient pressure. At night, it's still inflated, but it's not blown up as big. It kind of drapes against the front entry and I can't get out. If I should want to. Second, there is no heat! I'm shivering already, despite making a tent out of every blanket I could find in their dormitory. I suppose it won't get down to Mars ambient before morning, but it will surely be cold enough to freeze H<sub>2</sub>O.

And it will surely freeze *me*.

\* \* \* \*

*Sagan Memorial Museum, Summer-April 3, 2202:*

Dear Sekou,

I wrapped some of the blankets around me—even the hammocks, which I took down from their hooks—and searched the whole museum for some way to keep from freezing. I was a little worried about low air pressure, too, but I figured the museum couldn't be that leaky.

My teeth were chattering, and to tell the truth, I didn't feel very good, either. This leukemia thing comes and goes. Sometimes I get hot and cold, hot and cold.

Like now.

So anyway, I went exploring.

I made a discovery.

As I emerged from the preparation rooms, which is where the hammocks were strung, the first thing I saw was a giant picture of Carl Sagan and a bronze inscription explaining why the city was named after him. In case you have not heard of him, apparently he was an Earth man who pressed for exploration of the solar system back before the space age. Then you come into a central hall, and my heart almost jumped out of my chest. There was Sojourner, right next to its lander. I thought: There goes my plan for discovering the historic rover.

I wished like heck that the docents weren't turned off for the night so I could hear what they had to say.

But I had more important problems, so I prowled around in the dark. You'd think they'd leave enough heat on so the water pipes in the preparation room wouldn't freeze up, but I'd looked, and they kept their water supply in insulated containers. They must truck the waste back into the city to be recycled.

Then I got a funny idea.

Maybe some of the batteries in the rover were still alive, and I could get enough juice from them to stay warm somehow.

That was when I discovered that the rover was just a model. It must have been built from photoimages and blueprints sent from Earth. Not the real thing.

I kind of wondered how dim these people were. Couldn't they do some kind of computer modeling from orbit to find dust patterns that might be covering the two crafts?

But I figured this wasn't the time to give up. I went to the gift shop and found a souvenir poster they sold to tourists. I had to find a skylight to read it by; fortunately Phobos was sailing along overhead right then. They said the lander actually had been located; in 2088, a photographer from Solar Geographic had noticed the camera and antenna sticking; the rest was so covered with dust it looked like just another funny-shaped rock, but the rover had wandered around so much that nobody knew where exactly it might be. The lander site was marked with a bronze tablet, but they didn't want to spoil the site by excavating for Sojourner. I tried not to smile: they would never find it. I would.

Well, if the lander was real, maybe it had some power in it.

But it didn't. It was old; it was for history and education only.

I was thinking of putting my environment suit back on and trying to stay warm that way, although the batteries would be drained long before solbreak. Or I go back the way I came, try to get back into the city dome before I froze or my batteries ran down.

I was feeling like I wanted to throw up, and those hot-cold spells were coming again. The whole museum smelled like ozone dust and cold, and then I caught a whiff of something else, something—organic.

It was Padre Walter's Hyper K. Maybe I should have another swig of that. I hadn't eaten anything for hours—hadn't been hungry, with the nausea. But maybe the Hyper K would help me think.

I didn't even need the light of Phobos through the skylight. I just followed my nose.

One of the offices had a huge glass jug, almost a meter tall, with a spout at the bottom. It looked like it would hold about fifty liters, and somebody had painted SOL TEA in funny old fashioned letters on it. I went through the desk drawers and found a cup, then drew myself a mug of the yicky stuff.

I was about to raise it to my lips when something made me stop.

Why was it still liquid?

Surely it didn't have that much alcohol on it. Dad used to give me phoboshine for toothache when I was little, and that was really strong. Even that might have frozen on a cold night in a museum.

I sniffed, then tasted.

It was warm.

Of course! It was fermenting!

I chugged the whole cup down, then held my hands over my mouth to keep from upchucking it. Gradually, the heat of it warmed my belly and hands and even my toes.

I didn't need any more clues. I went back to the preparation room and got all the blankets I could find, then made a nice little tent by draping them over the Hyper K jug.

It took a long time for the tent to warm up, but I had a few more glasses of the Hyper K, and fell really deep asleep. Then I got up and raided the food vending machines in the lobby. I had to use the Smythe

family credit number, but it'll be a while before my parents think to look at that, and by that time—ta DAH!

Did I mention that your little sister is a brilliant dowser?

And now I've got to go. I hear their computer has turned on the air handlers.

\* \* \* \*

*Pathfinder Site, Summer-April 4, 2202, early morning:*

Dear Big Brother,

Well, they were right. Sojourner isn't here.

I walked all over the site, using my dowsing sense. This was my whole plan: if Sojourner had even a little bit of juice left in its batteries, I might be able to sense it just as I sense the presence of water in the soil around our homestead.

But I felt nothing. Nothing

Where did you go, little Rover?

I'm tired. Tosol is the beginning of the week, and tourists will start pouring in from all over Mars and maybe even very rich people from Earth. If I wait here in the open, I'll be spotted.

Or I could mingle with the tourists and hope those two religious numbers don't come out here to the site every sol. I guess I have to wait until night, then go back to the museum. Maybe tosol.

\* \* \* \*

*Sagan Memorial Museum, Summer-April 4, 2202:*

Dear Sekou,

It's night now. I'm in big trouble with Elder Adelia and Padre Walt, but that's the least of my griefs.

After I finished my previous diary entry tosol, I figured I'd just wander around and pretend to be a tourist. If Elder Adelia or Padre Walter turned up, well, I'd just hide behind a rock or take a long hike. My suit was charging in the sun; it was dusty, but not actually leaking, and I could wait until the end of the business sol. Food and water was a worse problem; the suit is pretty good at recycling fluids, but I was getting hungry, despite the queasy feeling in my stomach.

I kept trying to get a feeling about what was under my feet—you know, like a little buzz from the battery of Sojourner. But all I felt was that the place was empty, hollow.

I knew it was a bad idea to sit down—you can tear your suit, and the insulation gets compressed and robs your body of heat—but I just had to rest. I closed my eyes for a few minutes, and when I opened them, I saw—Sojourner!

No. I saw *two* Sojourners. No, three. Five. Oh, no, bunches of them.

And they were the wrong size. They were little teeny ones, small enough for me to pick up in two hands. And the solar panels looked wrong, too.

They were very modern high efficiency solar panels, like the ones Mother and I saw at the Polaris commercial fest, and said we couldn't afford.

I staggered to my feet and chased one down. It put its APXS on me, then backed away, as if startled. I grabbed it and looked it over.

It had a name and number engraved on the frame: Hamm Munnix Herzberg, 2190-2196.

I let it go and chased down another. This one backed away from me, and if it had been an iguana, it would have been hissing. But it was much the same, except this one was Anna Li Markham, 2179-2184.

I probably would have looked at every single miniature Sojourner on the site, and there were probably thirty of them, except that a heavy hand fell on my shoulder.

I was spun around and nearly dropped the miniature rover I was looking at just then. Two familiar voices came over my radio, “What are you *doing* here?” and “Poor kid; he looks confused.”

They babbled together so much I couldn't make out half they were saying.

“Why did you run away?” Elder Adelia asked sternly.

“Let him be,” said Padre Walt. “Can't you see he's totally disoriented? Probably dehydrated, and half-frozen, not to speak of dazzled by too much sun.”

“Yeah, and by a couple quarts of your hooch he snitched last night, too. Walt, we've got to get him back to the Madre before you turn him into an alcoholic.”

Padre Walt started dusting my suit off with his hands, as if that would do a bit of good. “Tell us where you came from, big guy.”

I wasn't anybody's big guy, and I wasn't giving away any secrets, or admitting I could talk. I just shook my head, which isn't easy in an environment suit.

“Come on with us,” said Elder Adelia. She grabbed my hand firmly. “You can't bring that inside; it's looking for its big sister.”

How could I be so dumb? Of course they would be looking for the Sojourner rover. They must be using these small units for that. The tourists would love that.

I had a lot of questions, but I still thought I was better off pretending to be mute.

The minute they got me back inside the museum, they dragged me back into the office. Elder Adelia undid my face plate and yanked my environment suit off so hard I was afraid it would tear. She undid her own face plate, and said. “There! You'll have a hard time running away again without this!” And before I could react, she and Padre Walt swept out and slammed the door shut. In fact, locked it.

I've been in here all sol. Trying to work up the nerve to jack into their files for a while; did so finally; found out nothing except that they're using those little rovers to look for fossils as well as for the original Sojourner. Which I had already figured out.

Padre Walt came back twice and brought me sandwiches and a mug of Hyper K. I'm beginning to like the stuff.

Kombucha, I think he said. The starter “shroom” somebody brought from Earth was called kombucha.

I feel pretty good, but I'm sleepy.

\* \* \* \*

*Sagan Memorial Museum, Summer-April 4, 2202:*

Dear Sekou,

Well, I did learn this much: Hyper K gives you gas. Somebody told me gas was no big thing on Earth—the atmospheric pressure is so high. But we keep our buildings at about the level it would be at four thousand meters above the surface of Earth, so gas is really—explosive.

I woke up with stomach cramps, and at first I thought the leukemia was doing its final number on me. But then I heard my stomach rumble, and I burped and farted and that made me think about fermentation, and—well, I think I'm okay for the moment.

Think I'll go through their private files after all. Elder Adelia seems to use the same key for the door and for the jack.

\* \* \* \*

*Sagan Memorial Museum, Summer-April 4, 2202:*

Good bye Sekou.

I believed in you.

I believed what they told me. They said they sent you to Earth.

I was curious about the little Sojourners, see, about what they had found and why they couldn't find the real Sojourner. So I innocently—oh boy, so innocently—started scrolling through those files.

It's called the Personality Preservation Software Corporation. The rovers are Eternal Memorial Reconstruction Rovers.

You know what a euphemism is?

I think they meant to download *my* personality into one of these rovers.

No, I didn't find you among the forty Sojourner miniature rovers. You're on a Rocky 13, rolling around the South Pole, counting layers of ice and dust, trying to date the polar cap.

Only it isn't you. It can't be. Even the orbital AI scientists haven't got to the point where they actually can reconstruct a person's mind and personality. They just used your voice and some of your personality quirks. I found out, for example, that you were quick to jump to conclusions, and that you loved tilapia with spice berry sauce.

So the Rocky 13 that has your name on it—oh, give me a break!

You, my brother, my real brother, died in 2197. On the way to Earth. By yourself. Mother didn't volunteer to go with you as she has with me.

And now I'm going to die, too. Alone.

Someone's coming to get me.

\* \* \* \*

*Sagan Memorial Museum, April 4, 2202, late night:*

But I might as well keep recording. My thoughts are important to me, if to nobody else.

They found me, of course. Mother and Dad, I mean. There's a dust storm starting, and the reception was poor, but they scolded me and said they're coming for me. Mother really ground it in that they would have to leave the experimental window plants and maybe lose the whole crop, and somebody from Watson Farm would have to come in and feed the fish. And if they can't get through the global storm by sol after tomorrow (because all sky traffic is grounded, and most rovers, too), I'll miss the window to Earth. And on top of that, I squandered two perfectly good, very expensive tickets that were supposed to take us to Hellas Spaceport. Dad didn't say much. He just shook his head.

I felt so miserable.

“Why?” Mother asked.

I didn't say anything.

Elder Adelia had been skulking around the room, and she piped up and said, “You can't expect the poor mute dear—”

“She's not mute!” Mother barked.

For the first time, Dad said something, “Girl, what kind of nonsense have you been feeding these poor people? First you tell them you're your older brother who's gone to Earth, then you pretend you can't talk.”

It was too much. I felt my chest heave, my throat knot up. “He didn't go to Earth! Stop lying!”

Dad looked directly at the camera. At me. Very sad. “Kapera, believe me, he's gone to Earth.”

Everybody was very quiet for awhile, and the picture started to break up. Global dust. Elder Adelia skulked back to her chair and pretended to be interested in a button computer on the desk.

“Kapera, we're coming for you. Both of us. I know you love your father more than you do me, and so he's coming to see us off. We'll bring your things to Sagan City and proceed from there to Hellas Spaceport.”

I got up and hit the monitor with my fist. “I'm not going to Earth! This is my life.”

Mother looked very stern. “Kapera, you are a minor in the eyes of the Polaris corporation and under pan-martian law. Your father and I have discussed what is best for you, and you are going to Earth to be treated for your disease. You will live either in Earth orbit or in North America after that.”

“I want to stay on Mars! Mars is my home!”

“If you had been meant to live on Mars, you wouldn't be sick, Kapera.”

Dad had walked away from the camera, probably trying not to get all excited. Now he came back. “The signal is breaking up. Try to keep your chin up.”

Mother was calm and grim. “We're coming to get you, just as soon as they open the rocket plane terminal in Borealopolis.”

The light flickered, and they were gone.

Padre Walter came and put his arms around me, and I tried not to cry. Elder Adelia just kind of sniffed, and said, “Well, we can't take her back to the monastery. I'll stay here with her over night and hope they can get a rocket plane in the morning.”

“No, please!” I said. “I can stay alone!”

She smiled sadly. “You little rascal. You had us convinced. But we're on to you now.”

“I'll stay with her,” said Padre. Which was okay, because I liked him better. “Override the vitals cycle so she can nap in the office.”

“That costs money, Padre. But—okay.” And she voiced some commands. I heard the air-handlers speed up.

Elder Adelia stayed too, and I thought she'd stay all night, glaring at me. But she started yawning about midnight-and-a-half. The dust was swirling outside; you could see it through the skylight, because there were lights on the roof. It was beautiful. Mars is beautiful, even when he's angry.

“Okay, you stay. I'll go back and talk to Madre again.”

“Please,” I said. “Would you leave my thumblight?”

She looked at me suspiciously. “What for? It's not like the electricity will go off. We've got power backup for sols.”

“If Padre Walt turns out the light, and I wake up in the night, I'll be scared.”

She plunked it down on the desk, and left.

I snuggled into the hammock they had strung in the corner of the office. “May I have a little more of the Hyper K?” I asked politely.

Padre was propped up uncomfortably on a chair. He looked at me from under heavy brows. “Sure. I'll join you in a drop.”

And so we did.

“Please, just one more?” I was feeling it, but I figured I could stand a little more.

He was much less generous this time, but he took another mug himself. After a while, he excused himself to go to the lavatory. I looked around the office and located the closet where they had dumped my environment suit.

Padre's mug was almost empty, and mine was still almost full, so I switched them.

He came back and finished that.

“Just one more?” I begged, though I was almost crosseyed with the stuff.

He looked at me. “You're a hard drinker for a tiny thing.” So he gave me a finger's worth, and had more himself.

And now he's dozed off.

\* \* \* \*

*Sagan Memorial Museum, April 5, 2202, early morning:*

I'm outside.

\* \* \* \*

*Sagan Memorial Museum, April 6, 2202, afternoon*

So they found me.

By the time they found me, though, I wasn't outside. My environment suit was getting really gritty, and I was getting cold, and my suit batteries were almost dead and so—

They found me huddled in the little portico where they kept the micro-Sojourners.

“Oh my stars,” Mother said. “You look like a mother hen with a bunch of mechanical chicks!”

Dad just came over and tried to pick me up. I resisted, I mean how embarrassing, even if he is my dad. But he carried me into the museum public room.

A whole bunch of people were following us. Padre Walt and Elder Adelia were in their khaki clerical jumpsuits, and there was an old woman in a dark red jumpsuit with a black veil over her head, and some other people in clerical khaki.

Mother and Dad looked really dirty and tired. I unfastened my faceplate and said, “You lied to me. Sekou is dead.”

Mother said, “There was no reason to make you pessimistic about the future. Your brothers—”

“Brothers?” I exploded. “You mean there was more than just Sekou?”

“Kapera, sweetheart,” Mother whined. I hate it when she uses that tone of voice.

“You actually had three older brothers,” she said, in that reasonable tone she gets. “Did you think it was easy for us to conceal that from you? Did you think we did it for some selfish reason? I mean, I destroyed all the holos, wiped them right off our net. The only images I have of my first two children are on your grandmother's computer in New Jersey. We kept the one of Sekou and you together. I couldn't bear to destroy it.”

She made kind of choking noises and then was quiet.

After a while, Dad said, “Your mother and I thought you shouldn't always be thinking about depressing things, shouldn't worry it might happen to you.”

“It *did* happen to me!”

“Not yet,” said Mother coldly. “We have found a way to send you to Earth Orbital Hospital, the best in the solar system.”

“But I can't come back!”

“That is a small sacrifice we have to make. Get your things. Oh, look at that suit! I'll never get it dusted.”

“I'm not going to Earth,” I said. “I have other plans.” I was still amazed at how diabolic she could be.

Dad said, “Kapera, why are you smirking like that?”

“Is there enough charge in that suit to go outside? We'll need shovels.”

\* \* \* \*

Mother had to borrow a suit from one of the Madres. She and Dad followed me, along with a whole

parade of clerics from the museum.

The storm was still raging, but there was a little sunlight, and we wouldn't need it for long. I just prayed that the dust hadn't covered the little rover I had placed to mark the spot.

I almost missed it. It hadn't moved, of course, because I'd heaped a pile of dust over its solar cells.

"You need to dig here," I said.

At first they didn't believe me. And I thought, what if I made a mistake?

But it had to be. I *felt* it, under my shoes.

Ares Vallis was indeed in that path of a giant flood in ancient times, as everybody now knows. But the old Earthlings who thought it was the site of a volcanic eruption were also right. There is a lava tube, just one, under the site.

I knew Sojourner could not have traveled that far. So where did it go? Aliens didn't snatch it. It wasn't eaten by mutant iguanas.

It had to be underground.

Dad and Mother were both wrong about my dowsing ability, too. I can't feel electrical or magnetic fields. What I have is extremely good hearing—or maybe it's not even sound I hear, just vibrations. Heck, I can hear people talking outside in environment suits. So of course I can feel vibrations as I walk that indicate the density of the soil through my boots.

And I felt a hollow place under this spot on the landing site. Right here.

They're still digging. Elder Adelia insisted I was crazy, but Padre Walt convinced the Madre to let them keep digging. Mother and Dad are digging, too.

Mother said I looked sick. She made me go back in the museum. So here I am, sipping Hyper K and trying to spy on what's happening.

They came back to send to the city for pick axes. It's getting dark. I sure hope they break through before night fall.

\* \* \* \*

*Sagan Memorial Museum, April 6, evening:*

I was right.

I was right!

Of course I was right.

It was almost nightfall, and I had nodded off. Suddenly I knew I better get out there. Something told me. It was as if I heard a different rhythm to the digging, which is silly, because how could even I hear anything outside in the Martian sky?

I put that dusty old suit on as fast as I could, hoping it wouldn't suddenly spring a leak from all that grit. It was charged from its sol in the sun, thank heaven. I slipped out the lock and ran over to where I saw seven or eight people in suits pitching dust in the air. The storm had died down; spring storms are never as bad as summer.

I pushed my way among the diggers and got there just as somebody said, “Hey, what's this?”

A long, straight pole.

Good little rover: it was still right side up. The long straight pole was the antenna.

Elder Adelia said, “Oh my golly. We better call in a team of experts to excavate this, before we ruin the whole site and destroy the relic.”

Walt said, “The site is already messed up. But, whoa, that's part of the story, isn't it?”

They could only see the antenna, but something—my auditory hoo-doo—made me feel I was seeing the whole thing, not corroded by time and dust and wind, but whole and as new as when it rolled down the ramp and first sniffed Martian rocks. The first independent thing on Mars.

The Sojourner rover isn't mine, I realize. It belongs to the Museum. It belongs to all of Mars. But there's a story there. I could write a book. Hey, I already started a book, right? Sekou, big brother, wherever you are?

I have to stop recording now. Some reporters are coming to see me. And Walt says I shouldn't talk to anybody without getting a contract.

The minute he said that, the ICNN guy ephoned his office and came up with an offer.

I tried to be very nonchalant about it, but it was more money than Mother and Dad I'd need to get to Earth and back, plus some to pay for our stay in Earth Orbital Hospital.

Still, Padre Walt said maybe I should talk to a lawyer or an agent or somebody that knows about these things.

Mother told the reporters that I was very tired and they must respect my privacy and to come back in the morning with proper offers drawn up, and then we'd see.

I was so amazed to hear her say those words—respect my PRIVACY—that I gave her a big hug. I'm beginning to think she's is a pretty good mother after all.

Polaris Corp also sent a representative. They'd heard a lot about me, and wanted to buy my contract. I'd get an education at the Areological Institute in Granicus Valles, then when I graduated I'd have my own homestead, completely equipped with three interconnected biomes, livestock, flora, the works.

But I'll have to think about that, too.

Independence has its attractions.

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