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Zora and the Land Ethic Nomads

a novelette by

by

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Zora let them in, of course. How many friends do you have when you live in the Martian arctic? And they were friends, after all, despite their smell (days, weeks, in an environment suit did not improve the cheesy odor their bootliners emitted).

They seemed more like friends because they were young, just kids, like her. In fact they seemed even younger than Zora. None of them had given birth. She remembered the innocent kid she'd been before Marcus, before the contract with the Corps, before Mars. And before the hard hard work of making a place to live in the cold and tenuous atmosphere of a place where she was a pilgrim and a pioneer.

Even if they had been strangers, you don't turn away travelers through the faded orange desert of Mars. To do so is tantamount to murder.

Yes, it taxed her family's own systems, because of course she and Marcus had to offer to let them use the deduster and recycle their sanitary packs. Her family's sparse larder was at their command. She had to offer them warm baths and hot drinks, even

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before their little Sekou had taken his bath. They needed the bath much worse than Sekou did.

Smelly and needy as they were, they were society, animals of her species in a dangerous world of wide, empty skies and lonely silences.

It is said that Martians can take any substance and ferment it into beer, cheese, or a bioweapon. When she and Marcus first came to Mars, she naively believed they would bring their ethnic foods and customs with them. More than that, that they would revive ancient Kiafrikan traditions. They would drink palm wine from a calabash, they would learn to gengineer yams to grow in the artificial substrate that passed for soil on Mars, that they would tell old stories by the dim light of two moons instead of one bright one.

#

Somehow learning Swahili takes a back burner to scraping together a life out of sand and rock and sky.

What she had not counted on was that all the Kiafrican culture that would ever come to Mars was embedded in hers and Marcus's two fine-tuned brains, and that even researching their mother culture wasn't going to be easy over thirty five to a hundred million miles from home, three to thirty light minutes away from the electronic resources of Earth. And when you're that far from home (or when your home is that far from Earth), your culture consists of the entity that you owe your life to, that controls even the air you breathe, and the few humans you meet, your neighbors several tens of kilometers away, who are kind enough to tell you how to pickle squash blossoms stuffed with onion mush, how to sex cuy, and what to do if the bacteria in your recycler go sour.

Not that there aren't traditions. One of them is the toy exchange, and thank Mars for that. Zora managed to exchange a perfectly useless sandyfoam playhouse for a funny little "authentic" camera. Somebody had bought a carton of them, along with

the silver emulsion film and chemicals they ate, and Sekou, less than three years old, had been entranced with the flat images he could make of her, Marcus, and everything else inside the hab.

If he had been old enough to wear an environment suit, he probably would have done portraits of the rover.

Marcus couldn't understand why anybody with enough brains to stay alive on Mars would make such a thing, but it turned out it was a way of getting rid of an unmarketably small amount of silver mined from what the manufacturer had hoped to make a fortune on.

Sekou was beside himself with excitement when the Land Ethic Nomads had turned up. Not only were they new subjects for his photography hobby, they listened to his endless questions about the world outside the hab .

Listened, not answered.

The Land Ethic Nomads had different ideas about Mars than Zora and Marcus, and sometimes Zora worried that little Sekou would absorb them and want to run away with them when he was older. Zora and Marcus Smythe believed that humanity had an imperative to go forth and know the universe. One time Zora had heard a Catholic child reciting something called a catechism: Why did God make me? To know, love and serve him.

But how do you know God? By knowing the universe. And you can only know it by exploring it.

That was why the Smythes were on Mars.

The Land Ethic Nomads had a different idea. They believed the land, meaning the surface of planets, moons, and asteroids, was sacred. Humans could try to know, to explore, But they must not destroy. If life existed on Mars, if it had ever existed, or had the potential of existing, humankind must not impose its own order over the land.

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Land was sacred. All land. Even the surfaces of stars, even the spaces between stars were sacred.

Humans, they said, did not belong on Mars.

If asked why they lived on Mars, most Land Ethic Nomads would shrug and say it was their mission to convince people to go home, back to Earth.

Tango and Desuetuda pretty much left Sekou alone. Hamret liked to play with him, and admired the camera and the toy rover. But this new nomad, Valkiri, sat for long hours reading to the boy, telling him tales.

"The earth is so beautiful. And she was so sad when her children deserted her to go to the cold, dim sky of Mars. Can you draw a picture of the sad sad Earth? Let me help you. Here's her eyes, all full of tears."

Valkiri's voice faltered. She was aware of Zora standing over her. She turned the slate over and began to draw flowers (flowers!) on the reverse.

#

"Marcus," Zora whispered when everybody had retired that night, Sekou asleep on a bed of blankets at the foot of their bed, ostensibly because the nomads needed his room, but more because Zora didn't trust their guests entirely "Marcus, they were preaching at our son."

"Let them preach," Marcus said shortly. "Children know what they see, not what triflers story to them."

She curled against him, wanting the solace of his taut, warm body. She loved him better than life, angry as he sometimes made her with his silent deep thoughts. She didn't want to outlive him. She wanted to lose herself in his body, but but she knew Sekou was old enough to notice if his parents made love. She listened a long time to the soft singing in the rooms below. Valkiri making a silky music on a polished drum, Tango's rough bass, gruff in his Mars-dry throat, Desuetuda's voice too soft to hear much of the time, soaring in emotion. Sweet the contrast between Tango's

damaged harshness and the sweetness of the two women and the drum. Propaganda songs.

Zora turned to him and put her hand on his chest. "Marcus, why do we have to keep them here? Couldn't we give them some consumables and tell them to leave?"

"In the morning, Zora. Tomorrow early, I'll invent some reason to make them leave. Tell them Sekou has an Earth virus, that should shift them out of here."

She traced the ritual scars on his cheek. "That's a good plan, baby. Play them for the fools they are." Though she liked Tango and Desuetuda. It was the new one, Valkiri, she didn't much care for.

"Is it just playing? Listen to the boy breathe. May have a virus, right enough."

Zora fell silent. Pleading illness, her mother always said, was inviting the devil to supper. And, having lost Earth, and her family, and so much else, she sometimes wondered if Mars were enough recompense.

Sekou seemed so fragile. Nobody wants to outlive her own child>

She slept poorly and woke early.

#

But the solar flare subsided in the night, and while the radiation count went down, the nomads bustled around packing. Zora had a chance to talk to Desuetuda, when the two were exchanging hydroponic stimulants recipes they didn't want to trust to electronic mail. But Desuetuda, almost an old friend, wasn't the problem. It was Valkiri.

Marcus helped them drag their equipment back to their rover, and when he took his helmet off after returning, Zora could see he was scowling.

"Not much cooperation there," he said. "I don't think that new girl, that Valkiri, will last long with the tribe."

"Where'd she come from?"

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"Lunar nomads. Last of her tribe there. Rest gave up, sold themselves to a cheap labor outsourcer on Earth -- you can't live off the land on Luna." He made a small disapproving sound in his throat. "I wish I could talk to this group's tribe chief. The rest of the tribe's rovers went ahead a day. Tango says they hunkered down and rode the storm out with free radical repair drugs."

"A good way to die young."

"But painless. Stupid. And the drugs also reduce their use of consumables by about fifteen percent. Anyway, Valkiri jumped all over me. Implied we were child endangering just to have little ones here, on the Pharm. Hoped Sekou would beg us to go back to Earth."

#

When visitors leave, there is always cleaning up to do. Environmental parameters on oxygen and water consumption must be recalibrated to the normal settings. The hab must be tidied. Reports of the visit must be logged in and the balance sheets of consumables must be recalculated so that things will last until enough energy is generated by the solar panels and the nuke.

So Zora didn't notice the anomaly until after fifteen hours.

#

She had just put on the top segment of her environment suit, ready to recheck the entry airlock, which she always did when there had been visitors, because once Chocko, a nomad from a different tribe, had left so much grit in the airlock that it froze open. When she looked at the detector in the airlock, she almost dropped her helmet.

The radiation warning was going off like gangbusters.

She looked around wildly for Sekou, who was playing quietly in the high pressure greenhouse. Well, not playing so much as trying out an adult role -- he was clumsily transplanting a frostflower.

The sensor for this airlock showed a lot of radiation, an alarming level.

Cautiously, terrified, she grabbed a handheld sensor and ran to the airlock of the greenhouse where Sekou was humming to himself and getting his hands dirty

. Thank Mars the shrilling of the alarm didn't crescendo when she moved toward him.

But it didn't get any softer, either. That meant there was a tremendous beacon of deadly radiation coming from some distance, else moving would make it rise or diminish.

Where, where, where?

Think. If she grabbed Sekou, as was her instinct, she'd have to know where to move him, and quickly. Most likely the cooling system of their nuke, the hab's power source, had sprung a leak. She'd heard of such things.

But knowing that didn't help. She closed her eyes to concentrate and, unbidden, an image came to her of a slow trickling of radioactive water seeping into the clean water supply that heated the house.

"Marcus," she called in a shaky, low voice. Then she gave in to instinct, cycled through the airlock between her and Sekou and scooped him up into her arms.

They had no environment suit for him. He was still growing too fast. But if she couldn't find the source of the leak, she'd have to get him out of the hab, out into the environment.

Marcus appeared beside her, a sudden angel of rescue. Deliberate and measured movements. Competent. She exhaled a breath of gratitude. as he encircled her and Sekou in his arms.

"It's coming from all over," he said, as if he had read her mind. "Hard to know what could cause such a failure."

"There has to be a safe place in the hab," she said reasonably.

"Look," he said, and broadcast his picture of the hab's health and life systems

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monitor to her wrist com.

"Sekou -- "

Sekou had at first been curious at his mother's urgency, but now he looked scared. He knew what radiation was; children had to know the dangers of their environment, and knowing the signs of radiation, though it was a rare hazard, was just as much a part of their early training as learning to heed airlock failure alarms.

"It will be fine," said Marcus, putting his hand on the boy's head. And to Zora: "I'm looking now at all the sensors in the hab. If there's a safe place, I can't find it. I left an evacuation ball in the main entry. Let's go."

#

Sekou didn't like the evacuation ball. "Mama, please, it hurts."

"How can the evacuation ball hurt?" She tried not to grit her teeth as she waddled the limp, slick surface around him and tried to force his legs to bend so she could seal it.

"It hurts my stomach when I have to put my knees up like that."

"It will just have to hurt, then!" She tried to pry his left shoe off, then decided he might need shoes -- wherever they ended up.

Marcus intervened. "Take a big breath, my man. Big breath. Hold it. Let it out slow. Now, pull your legs into the ball. See?"

Sekou, half enveloped by the flaccid translucent thing so like an egg, nodded through tears. His puckered little face, trying so hard to be brave, stabbed Zora's heart. It occurred to her for the hundredth time that Marcus was just better with children than she was. Marcus winked at Sekou as he pressed the airtight closure shut.

The transparent ball, designed for animal use, had two handles so Zora and Marcus carried it between them. If only one person were there to carry, it would have been rolled, not a pleasant process for the person inside.

"Go ahead," Marcus murmured. "I'll do the minimum shutdown."

"Marcus, I can do it. Sekou wants you."

"Sekou wants both of us. Go, girl. I can do it faster and we'll all be safer."

#

The rover was ready to go, its own nuke always putting out power. She bundled Sekou inside it and fumbled to embrace him through the pliable walls of the ball, finally settling on a clumsy pat on the top of his head.

"Where to go?" Marcus asked.

"I don't know, I don't know. The Centime's pharm is within range, but are they at their winter place?" Zora was shaking from the shock of being jerked out of her comfortable hab and, worst of all, seeing her little boy in fear and pain and danger. She fingertipped their code and got back cold silence, then the Gone Fishing message.

"Strike out for Borealopolis."

"We need somebody to sponsor us there. Even if we have enough credit to buy consumables, we need somebody to vouch for us."

"Call Hespersion." Hespersion sold them small electronics and solar cell tech.

They did so, and explained the radioactivity problem. The image on the screen was wary. Hespersion said, " He sighed. "I wish I could tell you what to do. There's a big decontamination mission near Equatorial City -- "

"Our rover would take twenty days to get there! And we would run out of consumables first."

"Let me get back to you on this." And Hespersion was gone.

"The Centimes," Zora said. *This couldn't be happening. Couldn't. it was a crazy nightmare, and soon she'd wake up.* "We'll contact the Centimes at their summer habitat and ask them to let us use their Pharm. They can send us codes to unlock it."

Krona Centime's face, on the monitor, looked distracted and her hair was sticking up as if she hadn't combed it in several days. Maybe something had happened

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during the Centime's trip to the southern hemisphere to derange her mind. "Yes! Yes, of course. No, wait, I ought to ask Escudo." Without waiting for an answer, she logged off.

Marcus was staring at a life-support monitor. Some of the rover's functions ran much better when the sun was in the sky, and it wasn't up very much in Winter-March. Zora pressed his hand, a gesture he could barely appreciate through the thickness of their gloves.

Sekou's voice cut through the silence like a tiny flute. "Those people have a little girl. Could I play with her?"

Zora had forgotten that Sekou had a com with him when she'd scooped him up to evacuate the hab. Now she was glad -- it might come in very handy. Especially if they were to become homeless, landless people in a Martian city where they would be forced to scrape or beg for the very oxygen they breathed.

"She won't be there," said Marcus, and patted his head through the thick membrane. "But I'll ask if you can play with some of her toys." The Centimes were known as spendthrifts and were rumored a vast store of luxury items and gadgets. Zora hoped they were also generous.

Escudo Centime's dark, strong-jawed face appeared in Zora's monitor. "Help yourself. I sent a command to the entry airlock to let you in. It should recognize your biometrics."

And so, in the cramped rover, confined to their environment suits with Sekou in his rescue bubble, they set off.

#

Centime Pharm was almost invisible, most of it underground, its sharp angles softened by sand settled out of the tenuous atmosphere.

"That's it, thank heaven," said Zora.

Marcus said nothing, just drove the rover toward the hab entrance. Zora could

read nothing of his expression through his helmet.

Sekou's voice broke the silence. "When can we go home? I want my Croodelly."

The Croodelly was a piece of worn-out shirt Zora had fashioned into a stuffed animal of indeterminate species. She wished once more that they had had time to pack.

More time? They had none at all. She was totting up in her head the costs of decontaminated the hab and discarding everything damaged within. Their experiments would have to go; the radiation would start mutations and blight even the most vigorous plants and bacteria.

Marcus, reading her mind, said, "Rehabilitation may be possible. ."

"If it isn't done properly, we'd be in danger. In the end, we'd shorten our lives and our science would be suspect."

"Or it may be impossible. We can't know now. Here's the airlock. Get ready."

Zora waited for Marcus to approach Centime Pharm's outer airlock. It was silly to be afraid of an empty hab, but she thought, irrationally, of creatures, runaways, ghosts, inside.

Marcus opened the rover hatch and slid out. He plodded a few paces from the rover, then turned and looked back, his suit dusty under the low autumn sun. He couldn't have seen her face through her faceplate, but he stood stock still and looked at the two of them, his wife and his son, standing out in the Martian desert. His voice came through the com. "What are you afraid of, Zora?"

"You feel it, too, don't you? I keep thinking there are things on Mars -- no, people on Mars -- who don't like us. It's so cold out there, and that hab -- it seems haunted."

Marcus turned back to the hab and plodded on.

Zora said, "I know it's irrational, but the darkness -- we're so far from New Jersey, aren't we?"

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Marcus spoke softly, still marching toward the dark hab entrance. "This was a decision we made. Can't unmake it. But for your sake, if I could, I'd change."

"No, love. We're here. We wanted this, both of us. However it turns out, we'll play it as it lays."

But Sekou, she thought. Sekou is the innocent passenger.

"Mama," he said. His voice sounded near, even though a thick plastic membrane separated him from her.

"Hush," she said. "Papa's trying to get us a place to stay." Sekou couldn't see the readouts. They had enough consumables in the rover to get back to their own hab, but what good did that do? If they went back, they'd fry.

Because she was watching the rover readouts, she didn't notice at first that Marcus had turned and sprinted back toward the rover. Then she heard the shrill alarm relayed through his com.

He pushed through the rover door and sat down facing forward, not looking at her. "Radiation there, too."

She stared at his helmeted face, in shock. Then she laughed, shakily. "What is this, an epidemic?"

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" he asked.

"Yeah. Our visitors."

"Might could be Hesperon has something for us," he said. He accessed the contact, and Hesperon's assistant answered the call.

"How could this have happened?" asked the assistant "You think your nomad visitors had something to do with it?"

Zora shook her head. "It could be. There was a new woman with them, Valkiri. No last name, of course. She seemed more -- fanatical than the rest."

"New? You know some of these people from before?"

"We trade with them.," said Marcus. "Chocko, the one we know the best, he

wasn't there, but the other three, except for this Valkiri, were -- "he hesitated.

"Friends," Zora said.

Hesperon's assistant looked glum. "So you could be carrying some nanosaboteur or even a big chunk of something radioactive -- "

"No, no, the rover has no signs, except of course for the power plant -- "

"There could be a problem with your suit sensors. The radioactive contaminants could be traveling with you."

"The rover sensors -- "

"The software in your suit sensors could have damaged that." The assistant smiled a phony, nervous smile into the screen. "Why not just go back to your hab and wait. I'm sure if you contact your corp they'll have some advice for you."

Zora and Marcus stared at each other. The Corp that owned their contracts was the last entity in the world they wanted to contact right now. The Vivocrypt Corp had paid for four intensive years of education on Earth for each of them, equivalent to doctoral degrees, then financed their journey to Mars and bankrolled the their hab and Pharm.

This was not charity on the part of the Vivocrypt Corp. The microbiology courses they had taken were very specifically oriented to engineering certain useful substances and organisms that could survive only in extreme conditions. The Vivocrypt Corp had very specific uses for these discoveries.

And Zora and Marcus, who had married and started a family with the prospect of living off the Corp, had allowed their science to take some twists and turns that didn't lead directly to what the Corp wanted. Because the training they had received on Earth had aroused in each of them a fierce, shared delight in science for science's sake.

The Vivocrypt Corp would not be pleased that the expensive hab and Pharm was no longer of any use as a research and development extension of the Corp.

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Zora looked down at Sekou, who was rocking back and forth in the rescue bubble hard enough to bang it against the bulkhead of the rover. His face seemed to be just two big eyes. "We can't go back," she whispered.

"Call the Corp."

The computer avatar that was their usual communication link with the Corp appeared: a young woman dressed in a black suit. She was pretty and imperious. "Your hab is destroyed? Do you have the funds to cover this?" This computer avatar was apparently programmed for heavy irony. The Smythes were so deeply in debt that only a major technological breakthrough would get them in out of the cold again.

Marcus sent a private message to Zora. "Think they know there's a problem? Their satellite imagers might have seen us carrying the bubble."

Zora exhaled sharply. "If the corp saw something like that, they'd think we were running, maybe planning to sell out to another corp. We'd be talking to a live human corpgeek, not this avatar."

Marcus unmuted the com and spoke to the corpportion avatar. "We're in trouble, honcha. We need shelter and atmosphere."

The avatar smiled brightly. "We suggest you go back to the hab and see what can be salvaged. Of course the Vivocrypt Corp values you highly, but your laboratories contain priceless equipment shipped from Earth orbit."

"We'll be fried!" Zora hadn't expected quite this level of cold-heartedness.

"Corp estimates your life expectancy will be shorted only by about fifteen years, on the average. That's just a statistical average. One or both of you might sustain no more damage burden than you suffered in the trip to Mars."

"What about our son? What about our future children?" Marcus was shouting.

The avatar's smile broadened idiotically. These things were so badly programmed, Zora wanted to scramble the software that ran her. But the avatar was mouthing Corp policy. "No guarantees are made as to reproductive success in Corp

hires, as you will find in your contracts. My memory provides me with a vid showing that you were advised of this policy when you originally sold your contracts to Vivocrypt Corp."

Marcus voice was low and dangerous. "Let us speak to a human corpgeek."

"Of course," said the avatar, nodding gravely, like a cartoon character. The image froze for fifteen seconds, then she came alive with renewed joviality. "I have consulted with Bioorganism Resource Assistant Director Debs. She confirms the advice I've given you."

"We want to talk to this Debs geek."

"One moment, please." The avatar froze again. Then, "I'm so sorry, Assistant Director Debs is on the toilet and will return your call tomorrow or the next sol. Thanks for calling the Vivocrypt Corporation. May father Mars and the bright new sol bring you fresh inspiration to serve the Corp." The image vanished.

Zora fingertipped furiously to link again to the corp, but access was rejected.

"I hate that religious stuff about father Mars," she said to Marcus. "Avatars don't believe in the supernatural, or in having a 'bright new sol.'"

"Corp doesn't either. Using spirituality as mind control. As if they need any more control over us."

"They hope we'll stop thinking, just go back and work until we die of cancer or radiation burns." She noticed that Sekou was listening to them on his com. "We gave them our time, our whole lives. They owe us at least shelter."

Marcus's tone turned flat and almost brutal. "Machine minds. Machine hate. Use us as if we were the machines. We run down, they dump us."

To her horror, she realized she was starting to cry. She turned her face so Sekou would not see it.

"Mama, I have to go."

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Startled, she turned her face back to him. "Go where?"

"You know. Go potty. "

"Darling,, just wait."

Marcus seemed to be deliberately holding his helmet so she couldn't see his expression, but her guess was that it was grim. He said, "I'm calling Hesperson again."

The assistant answered again this time. "Mister Hesperson said he was working on your problem, trying to come up with some ideas. Meantime, he said to proceed as we discussed before."

"We have a child with us, Mister -- " Zora couldn't remember the assistant's name. She stopped, took a deep breath and said, "We have credit, you know. And equity in the Pharm and hab, because it's held on a lien in our names. Our Corp purchased twenty years of our labor for each of us, and that's gone to pay for the physical plant. We can borrow against that -- "

The assistant held up a hand. "If it were only that, Dr. Smythe. But Mister Hesperson has information from Krona Centime that somehow you've contaminated or infected their Pharm and labs."

"How could they know -- ?"

Marcus spoke up. "The Centimes must have remotely read the reading on their outermost airlock. But it was hot before we got here."

"Still, you seem to be carrying something -- "

"What crap," Zora broke in. "This is not an contagious agent. This is a problem with the coolant in our nuclear power plant. I don't know what the Centimes told you, but we are not 'carrying something.'"

Marcus said, "Get Hesperson. He will talk to us. He's no trifling fool to hide behind his hires."

Hesperson came on. "It's beginning to look like something happened back there, something to do with those Land Ethic Nomads you entertained overnight."

"Didn't want to think that," said Marcus.

Zora bit her lip. "Not all of them. That Valkiri woman."

"She may have done something to the nuke at the Centime's Pharm, as well, Dr. Smythe. You understand the implications of this."

Zora squeezed her eyes shut, then opened them and blinked to clear her mind.

"Yes, ombudsman Hesperson. There's a killer on the loose."

He grimaced and nodded. "Exactly. And it seems you are not her only victims."

Marcus said, "Then best shelter us until she's apprehended."

Hesperson continued smoothly. "And draw fire here? If this woman follows you into Borealopolis, several thousand lives will be at risk. The entire population of our city would be endangered." He leaned into the viewscreen. "Let me put a proposition to you, Drs. Smythe. Bring me this woman, give her up to us, and we will allow you shelter. Perhaps I can even persuade the Borealopolis citycorp to reward you somehow."

Marcus said, "How? How can we stop her?"

Hesperson made a cage of his fingers and looked over it at them. "I assume you have the usual homesteader's aversion to visual monitoring of your hab?"

"We left Earth to avoid that kind of violation." Zora snapped.

Hesperson's mouth twitched. "Then let me remind you that you are the only ones who have seen her face."

#

Zora felt exhausted. The sols were short this time of year, and the sky had darkened several hours before. Sekou's whimpers cut her like little blades, and she herself was getting hungry. "My brain is shutting down, Marcus. What can we do? Land Ethic Nomads are many of them unregistered. We don't know Valkiri's last name, or even if she was born in a place where she would be given one. Valkiri is

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probably an alias. We don't even know the legal names of the tribe members we've sheltered and traded with before."

"We've seen her face."

"Yes, briefly and in bad light." In respect for the Land Ethic Nomad's desire to conserve resources, the lights in the hab had been dimmed. Of course, that served Valkiri's purposes very well. "But we could download face reconstruction software and create a picture. Or -- "

"Mama," said Sekou quite reasonably, "I really have to go now. Can's we go home now?"

"No, honey."

"You promised we could go visit Mr. and Mrs. Centime and that little girl. Please, mama. They have a bathroom, don't they?"

Zora turned to him. "You'll just have to hold it! This is an emergency, Sekou."

"Mama, I can't!"

"Well, then you'll have to go in your pants. We have more important problems."

"Mama -- "

She turned to Marcus. "We can't pressurize the rover just to let him urinate. We just can't." The rover passenger compartment had no airlock. It took a long time to pressurize and they might have a much greater need later to pressurize, if for example they had to consume water or food. Of course they'd have to find water and food, which they hadn't had time to pack.

Marcus squatted down in his cumbersome environment suit and looked at Sekou, bent in a cramped ball inside the bubble. "Listen, Sekou. Your daddy and mama understand. We ran into a problem and we're trying to solve it fast. Now, take a deep breath and tell me if there's enough air in there."

Sekou made a great show of inflating his chest as far as was possible while bent

double, then blowing out. "I think it's okay, Daddy."

"Good. That's a good boy. Now close your eyes and keep trying the air in there. Breath big deep breaths, that's right."

"But if I -- ?"

"If you have an accident, we can clean it up soon as we get where we're going. Okay? Are you a big guy?"

"No, Daddy."

"Oh yes. Big, brave guy. Breathe again, let's see you puff out those cheeks."

Sekou breathed in and out again, eyes closed.

Zora felt again the pang of being not very good with kids. When a girl leaves her family at fifteen and the earth itself at nineteen, as Zora had, maybe she doesn't pick up the knack of being good with kids. "He'll pee himself if he falls asleep," she sent on a private channel to Marcus.

Marcus said, "Yeah, and what harm is there in that, considering the ice we're on?"

That crumbled Zora's sense of reality, and she began laughing, in a kind of relief at having let go some of the pettier fears of their situation. Then something occurred to her. "We could use the photograph that Sekou took."

Marcus turned his eyes to her. "Use -- "

"To find her. If we have an image, we don't need to try to recognize her face. We can upload it to Marsnet and let their biometrics identify her."

"Girl, I thought I married you for your pretty face, but I'll love you forever for your brain. Wait, though. What if she's not registered?"

"She won't be, probably. But Earth shares biometric data with Marsnet."

"Still won't tell us where she is on Mars. I like the idea -- "

"Even Land Ethic Nomads can't stay out in the sky forever. Send out biometrics, including the photo itself, and tell Pharmholders to check when travelers seek shelter."

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"Yes, yes, Daddy, Mama, we can go home then?" Sekou was not asleep, it seemed.

"Yes, little habling, yes, but close your eyes and go to sleep like Daddy said."

"Okay. But I have to go so bad!"

Marcus patted the top of the bubble with his gloved hand. "Remember what I said, now. Close your eyes. Mama and Daddy have to talk some."

Zora said, "There's one problem. I have no idea where that photo plate is."

"Ask Sekou."

Sekou heard his name and was instantly awake, sensing some how that he could be part of the solution to the family crisis. "Mommy! Mommy! It's in my bedroom. I tried to show you when you read my story to me, only you made me go to sleep."

Zora felt a shudder of fear and hope. She knew Marcus would volunteer to go back into the hab and retrieve the camera and the photo plate. She knew it was dangerous, but she made an instant calculation: life without Marcus would be hell, and life on Mars without Marcus would be worse than hell.

Marcus had already turned the rover around. She bit her lip. She was going to insist on being the one to go into that hot hab. But she wouldn't make her bid until the last possible minute. She'd surprise him, force him into letting her do it before he could think. The entire ride was silent. Maybe Marcus was making the same calculations.

#

As they neared the hab, Sekou's tired little voice piped up. "Can we go back in now?"

"No! Stop asking! Mommy and Daddy are just trying to protect you," Zora snapped.

Marcus said, "Sekou, my big smart man, you remember about the radiation sensors? You know what bad rays do?"

"Yeah, Dad. I just hoped maybe they went away."

"Not yet, son. We may have to move to a new hab."

"Can I take my toys there?"

"You'll get new ones."

"But you'll get my camera?"

"Yes, but I'll tell you straight up, we have to keep it."

Zora had been wondering why Sekou no longer clamored for a bathroom, but a glance at his overalls revealed a dark stain on the front. Sekou, noticing her glance, said, "It kind of smells bad, and it's all cold and wet."

Zora murmured, "Sorry, baby." And then, trying to think what Marcus would say, "It's okay. Don't worry about it."

Marcus stopped the rover about thirty meters from the hab entrance. He untoggled the rover door and began to open it.

"Marcus," she said.

"Don't, Zora. You can't do this."

She had thought very carefully about it. "You're stronger, I know., But that's exactly why I should go in and find the camera. If something happened to me while I was in there, you would be better able to care for and defend Sekou than I would be."

"Zora, suppose you're pregnant."

"I'm not. I'm having a period. It just started." This was not strictly true, but Zora felt like her period was about to start, and anyway, she used a colored-light cycle regulator had never failed her, both in conceiving Sekou and in preventing subsequent conceptions.

"Zora," he said tiredly, "you playing me?"

She felt a flush of outrage. "You want me to take off my environment suit and show you the blood on my underpants?" Even though actually, come to think of it, she was playing him.

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What could she do? If Marcus died, if he got sick and died, her life on Mars without a mate was too horrible to envision -- she'd be meteor sploosh, she'd be forced to sell herself, she'd be dead. Mother and child, she and Sekou, would be like naked bacteria in the harsh UV sky of Mars. But it was even worse than that. Without Marcus, she wouldn't want to go on living. Not even for Sekou. It would be better to venture everything, live or die now, than die slowly as the widow of Dr. Marcus Smythe.

"Let me do it, Marcus." She heard the pleading in her voice, and the sharp knife of desperation under her groveling.

"Zora -- "

"Oh, never mind! You always want to charge ahead, the big bull rover, like some stupid big male animal from Earth."

Even through the helmet she could see him wince.

She realized just then that they hadn't turned their coms to private channel, and that Sekou was listening intently.

Marcus said, "How you doing, big guy?"

"Okay," said Sekou very softly. Then, louder, "It's wet and icky and smelly in here. How long before we go home?"

Zora closed her eyes and thanked whatever gods controlled their fate that Sekou was in a bubble, because she was very close to hitting him. "We aren't going -- "

Marcus swiftly and seamlessly interrupted her. "Sekou, here's a trick for getting over the bad parts. Make up good thoughts. Like, if you wanted to invent a toy, what would it be?"

"A camera to take three-dees," said Sekou promptly.

"Those pictures you took, those were good," Marcus continued. "Maybe help us get a new home. Your Daddy's going to get the camera."

"Can I take more pictures then?"

Zora focussed on the back of Marcus's suit. "When did you tear your suit?" she asked.

Marcus wheeled around and looked at her. "Playing me, girl? My indicators say the suit's fine."

"It's not torn through," she said reasonably. "But it has a weak spot. That's bad, baby."

"Slap some tape on it."

She rummaged the storage compartment and got out the tape. "I can't handle this in my gloves," she said.

He was quiet. "Have to pressurize the rover cabin then, to mend it. That what you want?. Mend it."

She tried not to smile. The nearly invisible spot she had seen on his suit was not likely to cause problems. . "You can't go out into the hab in a weakened suit."

Marcus stared at her. "What kind of jive is that, Zora?"

"No, Marcus, no! Sekou, tell Daddy he's got a little tear in his suit."

Sekou tried to crane his neck, but of course he couldn't see anything.

"Girl, I know you're playing me. I know this."

She threw the tape at his feet. "Be a fool, then. Get us all killed."

"You're counting that I can't take the chance." He stooped slowly and picked up the tape.

Zora continued, as if she had just thought of it. "You can pressurize the cabin and fix your suit. But it'll take awhile to pressurize. A half hour at least. I'll go get the camera with the photo while you the atmosphere builds up."

"When you come back, we'll lose all that good atmosphere again."

She looked at him blandly. "It can't be helped. You can take the opportunity to get Sekou out and cleaned up. We have no clean clothes for him, but ten minutes over

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the heater will at least dry his britches."

Marcus stared back unsmiling. "You're a jive fool, girl. You get serious radiation sick, I'll kill you."

"You saying don't go?"

He stared longer. Then, "Go."

#

Zora didn't look back at the rover as she loped awkwardly in her environment suit to the front airlock of the hab. Once inside, she felt a sense of unreality, her family home having turned alien. Odd to fumble to open the door to Sekou's tiny room, not to feel the softness of his blanket through her thick glove. Everything was changed, charmed, deadly.

Her com still connected her to her child and her husband back in the rover. "Sekou," she asked, matter of fact. "Tell Mama where the camera is."

Sleepy, Sekou's voice came back, "Under the bed."

Environment suits aren't built for crawling on hands and knees. Under the bed Sekou had stowed all sorts of things, pitiful toys made of household scraps and discards. A whole fleet of rovers made of low quality Mars ceramics with wobbly wheels that only a child would consider round. A doll she had made of scraps of cloth, and upon which he had put a helmet made of a discarded jar.

And way back toward the wall, where her clumsy fat-fingered glove could scarcely reach, the camera.

"The pictures is still in the camera, Sekou?"

"Yes, Mama."

She felt a flash of fury for not having paid more attention to her own child's plaything. "How do you get the pictures out?"

"You have to develop them."

"Say what?"

Marcus broke in. "It's a chemical process. The film emulsion is sensitive to light, you apply chemicals to fix it. You unload the film into the chemical bath in the dark."

Sekou had done this by himself? Mars god almighty, her boy was going to be something fine as a grown man. "Why can't we just give the camera to Hesperon? And why can't we do the developing in the rover?"

"It needs water, if I understand correctly. And I'm not sure Hesperon has the chemicals."

Sekou's voice broke in, excited. "They're already all mixed up. Look behind the sanitizer. And Mama, it has to be way dark or you'll spoil them. Take them in the bathroom."

Marcus added, "It's nineteenth century technology, Zora. Just do as the boy says."

"Nineteenth century," she said. "What game are you two running on me?" She felt the fool. She had a Ph.D. in biochemical engineering. How could she not know how to work a nineteenth century gadget? But then she couldn't weave cloth, or knit, or make a fire with flint, either.

"Turn off your helmet light, too," Sekou added.

#

Thirty minutes later, she was staring at film negatives. "Why is there no color? Insufficient band width? And how could anybody be recognizable?"

"I think any computer could deal with that. Try it on your com."

She scanned the tiny transparent images into her com and was rewarded with a bright, colorized image of Valkiri. After the com had thought a minute, it added a third dimension to the colorized image, although both color and third dimension looked a little off from the memory she had of Valkiri.

Marcus's voice in her com startled her. "Bail out of there, woman. You've

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absorbed enough REMs to light up Valles Marineris."

#

Marcus was back in his suit, Sekou in his bubble, and the pressure in the rover falling rapidly when she got it.

"My suit doesn't show a radiation load," she said.

"Something wrong with it. They probably sabotaged our suits, too. Let's book for Borealopolis."

Sekou didn't even ask to see the picture. "Those guys that stayed in my room," he said, "they did something bad, didn't they?" Through the haze of the bubble's surface, she could see betrayal written on his pinched face.

"I'm sorry, Sekou. I think it was just the new girl, the one with the frizzy blonde hair. But we can't trust them any more."

She had stopped trusting her conviction that she wasn't pregnant, too. She'd have to find a machine and test herself the minute they were safely inside the city.

#

Hespersion greeted them inside the city's outer airlock. His assistant took the image "We'll run a biometric search on this, right away."

"And you'll take us in," Marcus asked. "We need consumables. Can't live like Land Ethic Nomads, running from hab to hab, on charity."

Hespersion smiled warily, "The city management of Borealopolis can offer you a nice cubicle, plus free air, water, food, and utilities for up to a year.

"Marcus," Zora said, "We'll have to contact Vivocrypt corp about renegotiating our contracts."

Marcus looked grim. "They'll want another ten mears of work, no lie."

Hespersion took them to a cramped, body-smelling holding area where they could unsuit while he arranged for temporary quarters. Zora wanted some hot tea, but she had to find out something first. She slipped away and found a cheap medical

test machine in a dark corridor. It looked battered and she wondered if the lancet that nicked her skin was even sterile. Bu in two minutes, it told her what she wanted to know -- or didn't want to know. She was pregnant.

She stood in the corridor in the dimness for endless minutes. How long had she been in the radioactive hab? Her suit com would have the information, but she didn't want to know, really.

What difference would it make now?

She willed herself to walk back to the holding area.

#

Should she tell Marcus she had lied? Or should she quietly go and abort the fetus? He had lied about the rip in his suit, he had forgiven her that lie. But could she compound the lie, saying she was sure she wasn't pregnant, a further betrayal?

Her mind was a welter of horror and confused thinking.

"-- and you can run routine quality tests on our water treatment until we find you work more suited to your backgrounds," the assistant was saying. "Any questions?"

Sekou looked up at her and whispered "Can I ask how long before we can go back, Mama?"

And all the stars help her, she had all she could do not to slap him.

#

Hesperon hustled back in, smiling. "Then there's a break in the search for Valkiri. The image your little boy recorded with matches the face of a Land Ethic radical who had jumped contract from Equatorial City two years ago. Her name was Estelle Query. She was a nuclear engineer in charge of developing ways to maximize heat production in large urban nukes."

"Figures," said Marcus.

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"What a smart little boy you have here," said Hespersion. "Somebody will pay big franks for his contract someday."

Zora was already feeling horrible guilt over nearly losing her temper with Sekou. This just made her want to cry.

"Would you like a nice clean pair of pants?" the assistant asked Sekou. He nodded eagerly and cast an only slightly worried look at Zora and Marcus as she led him out to get cleaned up. Zora buried her face in her hands.

Marcus pulled her hands away and searched her face, perplexed. "Girl, we're vindicated. They can't say it was our fault any more. This Valkiri-Estelle bee has as much as admitted she did it."

"But we can't go home, Marcus. And Sekou deserves better than a cubicle two meters square with only minimal utilities."

"Would be good if we could sue her, or her former corp. But there's no hope there." He pulled her to him and stroked her shoulders. "Girl, there's something worse wrong than that. Call it my hoodoo sense, but you're grieving a bigger grief than our happy ex-home."

She sobbed for several minutes into his shirt, then pulled away and said, "I lied, Marcus. I am pregnant, and I've stupidly murdered our baby. It can't live after the dose of radiation I took. It might spontaneously abort, but we can't take the chance. A damaged infant on Mars -- the corp will take it away and kill it."

He grabbed her shoulders and looked hard in her face. Then he shook his head sadly and hugged her close. "Zora, girl, don't blame yourself. I should have known. Truth be told, I did know there was no rip in my suit. I just thought you wanted to be the big woman. I thought I'd let you have your pride, be the heroine. But you were storying -- I knew that."

She tried to pull away, but he held her tight. She sobbed some more, then said, "You're so damned intuitive. Did you know I was pregnant, too?"

His embrace loosened, and she saw his sadness. "Truth be told, I think I did. Something in your eyes. Your skin glowed like it did before, when you were big with Sekou. But I told myself, you're tripping, Marcus man. Didn't want to think it, straight up." His voice sank to almost inaudible. "Didn't want to think you'd lie to me about that."

After awhile, she said, "And can you forgive me?"

He let go of her and leaned against the cold marscrete wall "Forgive you, forgive myself for not being the man and telling you right out not to play me."

She could scarcely make her voice loud enough to hear. "Where do we go from here?"

He shrugged. "The medical for the abortion is cheap. Medbots are clean and fast. And as far as surviving here, what we've got in our brains is enough to sell to some corp."

"Sekou," she said. "They'll put him in a group school her. But he needs to go back to the on-line school. More than that, he needs a real home. "

"Sekou needs to hear the truth, which is that he's a smart kid, and strong, despite his minor ills, and he'll sell high to some corp that likes his brain as much as Vivocrypt liked yours and mine. Now I'm going to find that sorry assistant and ask what we have to do to get a meal around here." Marcus pushed the door further open. "Whoa. Look who's here, in all new clothes."

"Mama, you think I'm smart, too?" chirped a little voice.

It was Sekou, wearing a jumpuit that had probably been blue when it was new. At least it was clean.. The assistant had apparently brought him back and left.

Marcus rubbed the top of Sekou's head, then continued down the corridor.

Zora bent over and hugged Sekou. She ran over in her mind what they had been saying. How long had the child been standing there listening? She turned from

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Marcus and hoisted him up into her arms -- a heavy bundle though he was a skinny kid. "Mama thinks you're way too smart for your britches. Where did that jumpsuit come from?"

"I dunno, " He opened his hand, revealing a bright twist of paper, "They gave me a candy. Can I eat it?"

"No! Bad for you!" She resisted the idea that candy might become part of the Smythe family diet now that they were going to live in Borealopolis. It would be hard to adjust to prepared foods from the refectory after having lived primarily for years on cuy and chicken and stuff from their own greenhouses.

He looked at the candy fondly, then put it in Zora's outstretched hand. "Mama, what does 'big' mean?"

"What? It means not small. What are you talking about?"

"I thought it meant like when some lady is going to have a baby."

Oh no. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I thought maybe you might have a baby in there." He patted her tummy shyly.

"No." Her stomach twisted. "No baby."

Sekou dug in the pocket of the jumpsuit and brought out a tiny action figure, a boy in an environment suit. "But Daddy said -- "

"You shouldn't be listening when Daddy and Mama are talking privately." But would there be any privacy once they had settled in to Borealopolis? Even the best paid city hires lived in quarters not much bigger than the passenger compartment of their rover. Speaking of which, they would probably have to sell the rover. What use do city people have for such a thing?

"Sorry." His voice was very soft.

She had some credit, and she noticed the holding area had a tea dispenser. "Would you like some mint tea? I think they can put sweetener in it."

She figured she had lied to Marcus, it would be a bad thing to lie to Sekou, young though he was.

When they had gotten their tea, which did indeed come with sweetener, she sat opposite Sekou on the little bench and then, in a rush of affection, moved over and grabbed him in a hug.

"Mama was going to have a baby, but something bad happened. You know about radiation, about the accident."

"Yes. I've been thinking. I wanted to ask you something."

She had been poised with a careful explanation, but Sekou's question threw her. "About what?"

"About my camera."

"The camera." She was momentarily at a loss, and then, before he opened his mouth, all in a rush, she guessed what he was about to say.

"Mama, the camera works because light turns the chemical into something different, so it looks black after you develop it."

She dropped her hands and stared at him.

"Mama, radiation comes in different kinds. Light is one kind. But the radiation from our nuke, that would turn the chemical all black too."

She began to giggle.

"Mama, the picture took. So there wasn't any radiation."

Zora's giggles shook her body until, if the fetus was developed enough to be aware, it would have gotten the giggles too. She fingertipped on her com and called Marcus.

#

How had Valkiri done it? How had she ruined every sensor and monitor in the whole hab and pharm?

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They never found Valkiri, of course. But when they went back to the Pharm --- cautiously, of course, because who trusts the reasoning of a child? -- they found Valkiri -- they couldn't believe the other two had abetted her -- had dusted the surfaces of every sensor, including the one in Marcus's environment suit, but not her own, with Thorium 230 powder. It had been imported from earth for some early experiments in plant metabolism. It was diabolic.

It cost a lot of credit to have everything checked out. Several other labs that had been contaminated made vague threats about suing the Smythes for not notifying them, as if they could have known any earlier what happened. But the fact that Sekou (Sekou!) had solved the mystery and pushed back the specter of death made the other Pharmholders back down.

Ultimately, Zora and Marcus didn't trust the work of the decon crew. They had to do their own investigation. Nothing else would convince them it was okay. The sensors had to be replaced, and that wasn't cheap. But they had a home. They had a place for Sekou to play.

Sekou didn't get his camera back from the municipality of Borealopolis, but Marcus traded a packet of new freeze-resistant seeds for an antique chemistry set, and that seemed to satisfy the boy.

Why had Valkiri been willing to make her victims homeless but not actually murder them? Zora never figured it out. Marcus said it was because she was afraid that if she had really breached the nuke, their home corp would have charged her with murder. Or maybe she was afraid she herself would be in danger if she sabotaged the nuke.

Or maybe she had some ethics, said Marcus. He always said things like that. Seeing both sides. Zora found it exasperating. Ultimately, though, it made him lovable.

#

The baby, a girl, was pretty and small, always quite small, for her age, but with

big eyes favoring Zora's and a sly smile favoring Marcus's. Zora treasures an digital image of the two children, boy and girl, taken soon after the birth.

But Marcus prefers the quite deft drawing Sekou did of the family, though of course, as the artist, he put himself in the picture wielding a camera that by that time rusted in a crime lab in Borealopolis.

(end)