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Book Cover by Gilberto Amado.

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# **The Wind of Venus**

**The Aeoliad  
Part I**

**Jayán F. R.**



*For Leo.*





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## PROLOGUE

THE SUN was about to set in the east.

A lone airship emerged from the acidic clouds as it rode the westbound wind. Its size and shape were akin to the great zeppelins of centuries past; its dark-silver envelope a glossy photovoltaic skin. Large round windows at asymmetrical locations allowed sunlight into the vehicle's interior.

A single, thin cable tethered it to the floating forest four hundred meters below.

The windtrees' upper and lower crowns shook and bent under the wind's relentless power. The sound the wind made as it passed through the forest was like the howl of a mighty beast.

A man dressed in an acid-resistant overall, a raincoat, a sealed oxygen mask, and a backpack did his best to

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walk under the conditions. The wind was prodigiously fast, but its relative speed to the forest was not, which made it an annoyance and a trickster. The man made his way along the forest's floor — an interlocking web of flexible roots that made it safe yet nerve-wracking to walk. The gaps between the roots, sometimes wide enough for a grown man to fit through, were a grim reminder of the gruesome death that awaited down there, below the clouds.

What he would give to go back to the safety of the airship.

He found what he was looking for: a large, rectangular machine embedded into the roots, like a half-buried coffin, and connected to five spherical water tanks via tubes. He crouched in front of it, opened the control panel, and ran a diagnostic. The result on the display made him frown and sigh.

The man inspected a tree next to the machine. Instead of leaves, all of the windtrees' upper crowns had hundreds of air balloons growing out of their branches. They were made out of a thin, transparent membrane that separated its precious contents from the toxic atmosphere. Under the root system, each of the trees' lower crowns was a mirror of the upper one, but instead of balloons, their branches were covered in dark-green leaves that took nourishment from the sunlight reflected by the clouds.

Once he found a bubble close to the ground, the man produced a thin tube from under his raincoat and inserted its tip into the bubble. The tube was connected to his mask. He took a couple of deep breaths. Satisfied, he left the tube attached and returned to the machine to get

to work.

Flipping through the options on the display showed contradictory and unreliable information. Frustrated, he stood up and removed a panel at the top of the machine, revealing its many innards. He searched among them until he found what he was looking for: a small cylinder, one of several, that exhibited damage by corrosion. The revelation made him frown again.

Footsteps nearby. A woman, dressed in an atomosuit like his, approached him from a spot among the trees. She took notice of the tube he had attached to the windtree's air balloon.

"Planning to stay long?" she asked. Her voice sounded muffled under her oxygen mask. The howling of the wind did little to help.

The man handed her the corroded cylinder. "Why waste oxygen if I can help it?"

She inspected the cylinder in her hands. "How many?"

The man sighed. "Most of them," he said. "Maybe all of them?"

"How?"

"Not sure. Condensers don't usually corrode if the piping is well maintained. I don't see damage to the other components so the outer seals are tight. My guess is someone did a shoddy job of maintaining the pipelines."

"Our people?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. Someone back in the cluster is overdue for a dressing down. This isn't the first busted distiller I see."

"What's going to happen to the trees?"

The man studied the forest around them. "Well, the

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water tanks are still half full. If we ration the water coming out of the pumps they shouldn't dehydrate too much until we can get this box of junk in working order. Trees aren't my specialty, though."

"At least the rest of the distillers are fine. Ziv says the wind turbines are looking good, too. This forest's given us enough headaches as it is."

"What's the plan, co-captain?" he asked.

"We're running against the clock here. Let's leave this for later. We need to attach the towing lines before nightfall. I don't even want to think of how much farther north this forest is going to drift if we don't rein it in. And don't 'co-captain' me."

The woman stepped closer and pressed her head against his chest.

"Hana..." he started to say.

"You always do that when you want to push me away. Always."

"We're busy."

She wrapped her arms around him. Hesitant at first, he did the same. "Why are we even fighting, Ey?" she asked.

"I... I honestly don't remember," the man called Eyrik said.

"Doesn't that make it worse? What are we doing?"

"Wish I knew."

"Do you want to give up?"

"No. Of course not. You?"

"Silly question."

Something in the distance, far beyond the forest, caught Eyrik's attention. He let go of Hana and searched his toolkit for a pair of binoculars.

"Ey?" she asked.

He adjusted the lenses the best he could and looked. All he could make out was a distant glimmer reflecting the dying sun's rays back at him.

"I thought we were the only Fleet vessel out here," he said as he handed her the binoculars.

"We are..." Hana said after looking. She handed the binoculars back and reached for the radio in her belt. She looked at the airship flying high above them. "Amelia, Hana here. Do you copy? Amin, you there?"

"I'm here, Hana," a man's bored voice on the radio said. "Ready for the towing lines?"

"We see an object at, uh... your four o'clock. Telescope confirmation, please."

"Confirming..." The radio fell silent for a moment.

"Amin?"

"It's... it's an airship. By the wind... It looks damaged!"

"Damaged how?"

"Hard to say. Something's not right with the envelope."

"Any distress calls on the web?"

"No. Nothing on the transponder or radio, either. Okay, it's showing up on radar now. Why wasn't it showing before... There's something else, Hana. I think it's losing altitude."

"They're in trouble," Eyrik said. "We should help them."

"Help them how?" Hana asked.

Eyrik pondered their options. He removed the tube from the air balloon. "You're not going to like this."

"What?"

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"Come on!" he said as he dropped everything and dragged her along.

EYRIK AND Hana reached the western edge of the forest, a point where the last of the trees gave way to open sky. Some of their roots extended into the void, wrapping around small pouches holding precious cargo: tiny young trees, their first brave leaves and air balloons already battling the fury of the wind.

A small crowd of eight people clad in atmosuits had already gathered around the line connecting the forest to the Amelia above — an almost invisible wire dotted with stirrups and a large spherical counterweight attached to its end. The sphere, made of reinforced plastic and filled with water, rested on the forest floor.

"Here they come," the man called Ziv said.

"I take it you heard?" Hana asked.

"Heard what?" a woman called Indira asked. "Amin has been babbling on the radio about an airship or something."

"Is it true we're going back?" Ziv asked. "What about the towing lines?"

"Listen," Hana said, "this is the gist of it. There's an airship in distress out there. We don't know who they are and they're not responding to our hails. We're getting back on the line. Amin will take us to them to see if there's any way we can help."

The crowd fell silent. Their masks hid the emotions their voices betrayed.

"What!?"

"What about the forest?"

"Makes sense."

"And here I thought this was going to be a nice, quiet foray outside."

"Is this Eyrik's idea? I bet it was Eyrik's idea."

"What about Gerard?"

"What about him?" Hana asked.

"Hana, are you there?" a man's voice asked on the radio. It was deep and strong, the voice of a man used to the burdens of coordination and compromise.

"I'm here, Gerard," Hana said, a hint of annoyance in her voice. "Are you up to date on the situation?"

"Amin just briefed me. Can't say I'm okay with this. It's too risky."

"We have to do something. We're already wearing atmosuits. You can take us there so we can better assess the situation."

"What's Eyrik dragging you into now, Hana?"

Eyrik could almost see Hana's eye twitch under her mask.

"This is something I believe we must do. Me." Hana managed to keep her ire well contained. "According to Article 37 of the Cytherean Charter, any and all airships in the vicinity of another airship in distress must come to their aid, and provide adequate assistance in solidarity."

"There's no need to quote the Chart—"

"As your fellow co-captain, I'd appreciate a little more respect. This is a proposal born out of love and concern for my fellow people of the Fleet, and I believe it's worth pursuing. It shouldn't entail any more risk than the work we're already carrying out out here. Gerard, let's not waste what precious oxygen and time we have left. Take

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us above that airship so we can do our part.”

Gerard’s sigh could be heard loud and clear on the radio. “I take it the rest of the team down there is in agreement.”

Eyrik intervened. “Actually, it’s best if only two or three of us come. We shouldn’t risk any more people than necessary.”

“Nonsense,” Ziv said.

“Huh?” Eyrik said.

“If that airship really is in distress and in need of repairs,” Ziv continued, “we’re going to need as many hands as possible. We should all go.”

“Yeah. How typical of Ey to want all the glory to himself,” someone else said.

“That’s not—”

“You all talk too much!” Indira said as she attached a carabiner from her gear onto the line and grabbed onto the stirrups. “Sun’s going down. We can come back to this forest later; the night be damned. Move it, people!”

The group went into a frenzy. They all rushed to attach themselves to the line and grab onto it. Hana and Eyrik took the last available spots near the counterweight.

“Hey,” Eyrik said to her. “That was... quite something.”

“I meant what I said.”

“I know, just... wow.”

Hana’s eyes hinted at a playful smile.

“Well, there’s more where that came from,” she said.

“You two back there!” Ziv said. “I thought we were in a hurry. Everyone’s ready.”

“Forest team,” Gerard said on the radio, “we’re



ready on our end.”

Hana cleared her throat. “Confirmed. Forest team ready. Bring us up. May the wind be gentle.”

A few moments later, the line tensed up and lifted them up from the forest floor.

FROM WHERE they were, the forest now looked like a small island of green floating in a sea of white.

The crew of the *Amelia* had raised the line up to a point where it could safely clear the forest. Since the mysterious airship was behind them to the east, and the wind always blew westward, the *Amelia* had to throttle down its propellers to let it catch up with them. The forest was the first one to overtake them. Slowing down meant the wind’s relative speed was higher than before. The counterweight now swung forward, dragging the line and its passengers with it. The line itself was so thin that, from a distance, all ten of them looked like they were floating in the wind.

“This was a bad idea. Oh, wind. I’m going to puke,” someone said.

“Take your mask off if you need to,” Hana said, “but watch out for the haze. Kinda dense here.”

It was. The acidic haze wrapped all around them as it rode the wind, decreasing visibility to the point where the *Amelia* was but a blur above. The sky itself was now a moribund orange, with the first stars of the evening making a triumphant entrance.

“Got eyes on it?” Hana asked Eyrik.

“No. Nothing at all,” he said.

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"Amelia, we can't see anything out here. Do you have eyes on the airship?"

The Amelia turned on its exterior lights, becoming an airship-shaped constellation above.

"We have it on radar," Gerard said. "Please be patient. Amin is doing his best, but the wind isn't making our lives easy."

Eyrik pointed with a finger. "There!"

The haze cleared just enough to see it. A silver phantom a couple hundred meters below them. The unidentified airship in distress.

The Amelia throttled up to match speeds with it. The counterweight now swung backward. Someone screeched.

"Hang on, people!" Hana said. "Gerard, you can lower the cable now. We're right above them."

"Lowering. Hana, we just confirmed with the Fleet. There are no reports of any homeships out here but us."

The line started to descend, taking them closer to the airship. The density of the haze decreased little by little, eventually clearing up to reveal the wreck in all its dismal state.

The forest team uttered a collective gasp.

"Unbelievable," Ziv said.

"No way there's anyone alive."

"What do you think happened?"

"This was a waste of time."

"Gerard," Hana said. "You can stop the cable now."

The line continued lowering for a couple of seconds before it ground to a halt. The whiplash was so strong they all had to cling to the stirrups in order to not lose

their footing. The counterweight was now hanging only three meters above the airship.

"Hana?" Gerard asked. "Report, please."

"Tell us what you see, Ey," Hana said.

Eyrik cleared his throat. "It's... it's not good. Much of the internal frame is exposed. There are beams broken and twisted. Imagine some kind of beast sinking its claws into it and ripping the envelope off and you get the picture."

"What else?" Gerard asked.

"Only two propellers seem to be spinning. The whole thing is tilted forward, I'm guessing because its bow ballonets are busted. It must have lost a lot of its internal atmosphere with so much of the upper envelope gone. I can't believe it's buoyant at all."

They all contemplated the derelict airship in a solemn silence. They were looking at what was most likely a residential area. The lack of an envelope revealed several apartment units and the hallways connecting them. There were holes on some of the walls, debris on the floor, scorch marks, and some large spots that looked like dried blood.

"What do you think happened?" Hana asked. "An accidental explosion?"

"Doubt it," Eyrik said. "Flammable materials in a residential area? This was no accident."

"This is bad," Indira said.

"We shouldn't be here," someone else said.

"This area is exposed to Venus," Eyrik said. "There can't be another explosion."

"You don't know that," Ziv said. "There could be an oxygen leak somewhere. One spark and we're all

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toast.”

“Let’s go home,” someone said.

“I don’t like what I’m hearing,” Gerard said on the radio. “Hana, we’re losing the sun. If the counterweight gets tangled up with that airship when it’s dark, we’ll be in serious trouble. Give the word.”

Eyrik looked at Hana. He saw in her eyes the words about to come out. “The airship is still buoyant,” he said, “meaning there’s got to be plenty of sealed compartments still filled with air.”

“Ey, we tried...”

“This airship doesn’t have much time left. There might be survivors.”

“We have to prioritize our own safety and the Amelia’s. You know this.”

“Hana, no...”

“Bring us up, Gerard.”

The wire tensed up and they all felt a mild whip-lash as they climbed back to the Amelia. The damaged airship was now four meters below the counterweight and getting further away.

Eyrik saw in those scorched remains a rapidly closing door, a dying world. The same impulse that had derailed much of his life took over. He detached his safety line and jumped.

“Ey!”

EYRIK LANDED feet-first onto a piece of intact envelope that broke his fall enough to avoid a broken leg but not a mild bump to his head. It took him a few moments to re-

orient himself. He was in a residential unit, that much was clear. There were some appliances, furniture, as well as personal mementos. None of it looked like the stuff they had back at the Fleet. There were significant differences in design and intent. Things had a rougher, more utilitarian look. Everything was so gray.

He stood up and looked up. The forest team was now far enough that he almost couldn't see Hana's frantic, desperate gestures. He checked his radio only to find out he had landed on top of it. The only path open to him was forward, so he made his way around the debris and opened the door to the hallway.

The place had been ravaged. Some doors in the hallway rattled in the wind, disturbed by occasional bouts of toxic breeze. Evidence of corrosion spread all over the walls and floor, proof that the ship had been exposed to the atmosphere for days. The streaks and puddles of dried blood on the floor and walls alarmed Eyrik, who risked a look over the railing. The hallways downstairs were silent too. It was a ghost ship.

Eyrik turned around a corner. The remains of an improvised barricade blocked the stairs to the levels below. Once past the barricade he saw the bodies. So many of them. They were bloodied and dirty and looked like they had been dead for many days. Someone had piled them up in a corner out of the way. All of them wore oxygen masks, and on inspection, some tanks still showed varying levels of oxygen left. As he checked the bodies, Eyrik discovered piercing wounds in them. There had been a battle there, and those were the defenders.

As he moved downstairs, the battlefield revealed the grim scene of more dead defenders locked in a deadly

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embrace with soldiers dressed in armor. There were spears, maces, shields, pistols and rifles scattered about the floor. Eyrik inspected one of the soldiers. Bolts had pierced his hardened armor. He was one of the attackers.

He then took a closer look at one of the rifles. He took note of the compressed-air tank and the ammo cartridge still attached. The cartridge had some bolts left inside. The bloody bolts embedded into the dead soldier's armor made it clear how powerful that rifle was.

There was something else. The armored soldiers wore a distinct patch with an emblem: the pentagram of Venus — a white, five-petal flower on a black background. He recognized the symbol and it made him frown.

Darkness crept outside. The airship's lights were out, and he didn't have a flashlight with him. Whatever had transpired, the airship's occupants had done very little cleanup after the battle. Perhaps they were all gone and the autopilot was in charge, a faithful thrall bound to instructions dictated by now dead masters. Maybe it was time to let the mystery rest. Getting back to the Amelia would be hard enough. He took the rifle with him for future study and tore the flower patch off one suit of armor.

Something caught his attention — a faint light flickering through the gaps of a door downstairs. Survivors, maybe?

Eyrik trod with care until he made it down to the door. The howling of the wind creeping into the airship's ruinous interior was the only sound.

He tapped on the door. It was blocked from the inside. He pushed on it, but it only budged a little. After a few more tries, the gap became wide enough to look in-

side.

A single light flickered in the room. It was a residential unit, similar to the one he had landed in. The occupants had haphazardly barricaded the door using whatever pieces of furniture and construction materials were available. There were two bodies on the floor on the other side of the room: a woman sitting against the wall and a child curled up next to her. Both of them wore oxygen masks.

Eyrik stepped inside. There were a handful of empty oxygen tanks scattered about the floor. The child's mask was attached to the woman's tank, a likely last-ditch attempt to keep her alive. They both had black, wavy hair and a dark complexion.

He checked the woman's pulse. Nothing. As he checked on the girl, he had the scare of his life when she twitched and groaned.

Once the initial shock passed, he carried out a more thorough check on her. She was barely conscious, her oxygen tank almost depleted. "Can you hear me?" he asked. "Can you talk?"

The girl didn't respond. She was drowsy and short of breath. Her dark eyes unfocused. Signs of carbon dioxide poisoning. Eyrik picked her in his arms. As he headed outside, he dedicated one last glance to whom he assumed was the mother. "I'm sorry, friend," he said. "She'll be okay. I promise."

IT WAS almost pitch-black outside. What little sunlight was left was in its death throes. The gaps in the haze re-

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vealed a sky full of stars. Getting back to the Amelia would be tricky and dangerous.

Eyrik climbed upstairs with the little girl in his arms. He realized the rising temperature was making him sweat. They couldn't stay much longer or they'd cook alive. "Hang in there," he said to the barely conscious girl.

As he made his way to the airship's median level, he came across a badly damaged corridor that led to starboard. Where he would have expected to see an airlock, he found only a charred hole.

He gently set the girl down on the floor and inspected the hole. It had been blasted open from the outside with some kind of explosive. Scorch marks blackened the surroundings. He grabbed onto a deformed piece of the frame and stuck his head out into the void. Strands of the envelope skin fluttered in the wind. The lights of the Amelia were hard to see through the haze above them, but they were there.

Eyrik turned back to the girl. "I have an escape plan, but you're not going to like it." He checked his radio again. "Amelia, this is Eyrik. Do you copy?"

Silence. He'd have to entrust both their lives to the wind. He first took his backpack off, then his acid-resistant raincoat, and wrapped it around the girl. The fit was too loose and there were too many gaps the haze could seep through.

"Hmmm. Not good," he said. He then rushed to take his whole overall off and put it on the girl. Its size was too big, but the straps allowed some customization, and with a few tricks he was able to safely cover her entire body with it.

Satisfied, he put the raincoat and backpack back on



and secured his safety line around the girl. He then settled the rifle between his body and hers and picked her up in his arms again. "Hang on to me tight. Whatever happens, don't let go. Can you do that?"

He felt the girl's grip tighten around his back. It was weak, but it was there. Pure force of will.

"Here goes nothing," he said. "Amelia, if you can hear me, we're jumping on three. One. Two. Three!"

EYRIK RAN and leaped into the dark. He and the girl plummeted like a rock. The mighty roar of the wind wrapped around his body, the voice of Venus. It was hot and dense. He could almost appreciate the warmth. It was soothing, like embracing the one you love.

Once they were at a safe distance from the airship, Eyrik pulled the cord.

The backpack opened and deployed a large balloon that instantly filled with hydrogen from its attached tank. It broke their fall slowly but hard enough that Eyrik had to hold the girl tight as the drop almost yanked her away. They were now adrift in the atmosphere like grains of sand in the ocean.

The balloon hauled them up without delay. It wasn't long before they left the crippled airship behind, abandoned to its fate. The westbound wind pushed them forward as they rose. Catching up with the Amelia would be a delicate game of synchronizing speed, vector, and buoyancy.

There it was — the Amelia-shaped constellation. Searchlights illuminated the surrounding sky, possibly

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looking for them.

"Amelia, we're coming straight for you. Do you copy?"

Still nothing. Eyrik had a moment of lucidity and wondered if he had made the worst, and last, mistake of his life. The Amelia was close, but still too far ahead of them. He clung to the ball-chute's handles, but it was almost impossible to control their direction in the hurricane winds. They were going to miss the ship.

"Amelia, we're too far behind you. I can't control this thing. Do you copy? Amelia?"

Without warning, the Amelia's propellers stopped spinning and turned in reverse. The entire airship trembled and groaned as it battled the wind hitting it from behind. Eyrik spared a thought for the fallen objects and people that little maneuver had caused. He figured he wouldn't have many friends aboard after his little adventure.

They now came up on the Amelia's starboard side. If nothing was done, they would continue drifting forward and miss it. Eyrik scrambled to operate the handles. He noticed with dismay the many faces gawking at them from inside the windows and observatories. At least someone knew they were out there.

Right when he thought they would miss the Amelia for certain, a searchlight blinded him with what felt like the fury of the sun, followed by a net shot from the dark that wrapped around them. The rope pulled them toward an airlock.

They were almost there. Eyrik checked on the girl in his arms. She was unresponsive. "Hey, are you still with me? Amelia, we need a doctor waiting for us."

Once they were within reach, two people in atmosuits dragged them onto the balcony outside the airlock. While they helped them get untangled from the net and balloon, Eyrik checked on the girl again. She was still out. He detached his oxygen tube from his mask and discovered with relief that it fit hers.

"Let's get inside. Quick!" one of them said.

They made it inside the airlock and sealed the door. The room hissed as the toxic atmosphere gave way to breathable air. What little oxygen was left in Eyrik's mask was gone in a moment, replaced by carbon dioxide. He gasped for air right before he fell to his knees and passed out.

HE CAME to his senses a few seconds later. The two rescuers, a man and a woman, helped him and the girl sit up. They weren't wearing their masks anymore and helped them remove theirs.

Eyrik was only forty-eight orbits old, or thirty years, but his eyes looked like an older man's. His dark, short beard, grown to make up for his balding head, made him look older still.

"Stay with us, Ey. You made it," the woman said.

Eyrik looked at the girl next to him. She seemed asleep. He clumsily reached for her neck and felt a pulse. "A doctor... she needs a doctor..." he said.

The woman opened the door to a hallway packed with curious bystanders.

"Clear the way, Cythereans! Doctor coming through. Clear the way!" It was Pierr's voice outside, one

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of the doctors aboard.

The woman helped clear a path for him. "Come on, people. What's the matter with you? Step aside, please!"

Pierr entered the airlock and set to work. He was a thin, no-nonsense man with a big nose, round glasses, and stubble. He first checked Eyrik's vitals. "I'm fine, doc..." Eyrik said. His hands were trembling. "She needs your help."

"Come by the clinic to have those acid burns checked, please," Pierr said.

Eyrik noticed for the first time much of the skin on his arms was red and stinging. Some tiny pieces were flaking off and bleeding. He tried to take his mind off it.

Pierr then checked the girl. She was breathing, but he didn't like the way it sounded. "Let's take her to the clinic. We need to put her on oxygen. Not you, Eyrik. You rest here for now. Moniqa, help me out here, will you?"

The woman named Moniqa helped Pierr pick the girl up and they carried her out of the airlock. Some of the crowd outside followed them, mainly curious children, while others stayed by the door and contemplated Eyrik, the unlikely hero of the hour.

"Look at you," one of them said. "Just a moment ago, Gerard was screeching about throwing a disciplinary assembly at you for insubordination or something."

"You madman!"

"Way to go, friend!"

"Next time you pull a stunt like that, give us a heads up, will you? The dining halls are a mess right now."

All that and more they said. Eyrik paid them no mind. He was still a little light-headed. The hard floor felt

like such a comfortable place to rest. The skin on his arms was starting to really sting.

A woman still wearing her atmosuit barged in and breathed an enormous sigh of relief, then hugged Eyrik so tight he thought he would pass out again. She was about Eyrik's age. She had a pale, thin constitution, with long, straight black hair, sharp facial features and dark eyes.

She let go of him. "We heard you on the radio. I guess you couldn't hear us? Ey, I... I can't believe it. I just saw the girl. Did you... you saved her..."

"Is she okay?"

"Pierr's taking care of her. What happened to the airship? Is it salvageable? Any other survivors?"

"None that I saw. It was getting scorching hot down there. I'm not sure we could salvage it even if we could find it. Hana, what I saw in there... it was bad."

"Does this thing have anything to do with that?" Hana asked, pointing at the compressed-air rifle next to him.

"Yeah. Thought it could be useful."

"You'll tell me later. I want to hear all about it." Her expression of relief changed to genuine anger as she gently pummeled his chest with her fists. "How dare you do this to me!?"

"I'm sorry."

Hana hugged him again and kissed him, then helped him up and into the hallway. Onlookers packed the way. "Hurray!" "Hurray!" "Hurray!" they cheered in his honor.

He was too exhausted to comprehend what was happening. His recent adventure would likely be the topic of the hour for the next few weeks. It's not often that big

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things happen in small towns.

TWENTY-FOUR hours had passed and the world moved along. It would still be twenty-four more hours before sunrise, so activity aboard was at its lowest point. The workshops were empty, the maintenance crews did the bare minimum. Even the farmers limited themselves to keeping their crops and stocks alive. The absence of solar power and the dependence on wind turbines and stored electricity made this inactivity inevitable, and the lack of energy seeped into human bodies and minds.

The only major work that took place, dangerous as it was, was the long-delayed attachment of the towing lines to the rogue windtree forest, which thankfully went about without a hitch.

Eyrik's recent exploits made him something of a local celebrity, not a big deal in a place where everyone knew each other by name. It was not the first time his recklessness had gotten him into people's bad side, but the miraculous rescue of the girl did much to sway the community's opinion in his favor. After a briefing, even Gerard couldn't help but commend him for a job well done.

The clinic was small, with only a handful of beds available. There were monitoring machines, cabinets full of supplies, instruments, and everything needed to perform minor medical procedures.

Pierr replaced the bandage on one of Eyrik's arms. The skin underneath was red but seemed to be healing well. "Are you applying the ointment as instructed?"

"Of course, doc."

"There will be scarring, I'm afraid. Keep using the ointment and it shouldn't be too noticeable once you heal. Thankfully, the acid wasn't dense enough to penetrate the epidermis."

"How is she?" Eyrik asked.

The girl slept on one of the beds. She had an IV line hooked to her arm. Her slumber seemed pleasant, but fragile. Hana watched over her from a chair by her bedside.

"She's okay from a physical standpoint," Pierr said. "Oxygen levels are fine, blood pressure and pulse are stable, all labs okay. We're keeping her on fluids to prevent dehydration. She's been sleeping non-stop since you brought her aboard. I don't think she suffered any neurological damage from oxygen deprivation, but we won't know for sure until we run more tests or she wakes up."

Eyrik moved closer. The girl had a dark, freckled, round face. Her hair was black, wavy, and short. She couldn't have been older than eight Venusian orbits, or five Earth years.

"She's so pretty. So little," Hana said.

"First sky-orphan in a generation," Pierr said. "What do you think her story is?"

"Beats me," Eyrik replied. "I didn't have enough time to search the ship. It wasn't one of ours, that I know. And something else."

Eyrik produced the flower insignia from one of his pockets and placed it on a table. Pierr inspected it with a mixture of curiosity and horror.

"Is that..." Pierr asked.

Eyrik nodded.

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"We don't know for certain," Hana said.

"Gerard consulted with Sugako Lyceum for confirmation," Eyrik said to Pierr. "This is the white flower of the Venusian Mandate. All the dead soldiers in armor were wearing this."

"The Mandate has been gone for ages," Hana said. "It's... no, it makes no sense."

"Maybe some kind of successor state?" Pierr speculated.

"I don't know if that's better or worse," Eyrik mumbled. "Whoever they are, they must be in the north, beyond the equator. That's where she came from."

The girl shuffled in her sleep. She seemed suddenly in distress. A nightmare?

Pierr checked the monitors. Her heart rate was increasing. The girl shook with violence and whimpered in her sleep. Eyrik and Hana looked at her with concern. "Pierr? What's wrong with her?"

THE GIRL opened her eyes. They were dark and big. She looked and tried to take it all in. The room was unfamiliar. Who were those people? Her mom. Where did her mom go?

"Can you speak? Do you understand me?" the man in front of her asked.

Was he one of the bad men? Could she trust him? She found she couldn't speak. Ideas took shape in her mind, but her mouth refused to express them. Who was the woman next to the man?

She tried to sit up, but the man stopped her. An-



other man, dressed in white, spoke. "Wait, you're too weak. You need to rest."

She struggled. All she wanted to do was to find her mom. The first man looked at her with gentle eyes. "Pierr, maybe we can take her for a walk?"

"Are you kidding? She could get even more disoriented. It'll be a shock for her once she sees the Amelia."

"We can use a wheelchair. She won't have to walk."

"Ey, stop," the woman said.

"For once in your life, listen. She needs to rest, and I still need to run some tests. You can take her for a walk in, uh... when the sun comes up. Sound good?"

The man budged. He smiled at her. "Hear that? You'll be out of here soon. It's okay. You're safe now. Rest."

She liked the sound of his voice. It was comforting. She closed her eyes and drifted back into nothingness.

THE LONG night ended. She woke up feeling better, but her voice still wouldn't cooperate. The same two men from before helped her sit in the wheelchair. The first man offered her a cup of water. It was tasty, the way water is when you've been thirsty for a long time.

The hallway outside was strange and green. So green. Vines and flowers covered the walls, columns, and handrails. The first rays of the rising sun illuminated the gap that divided the hallway in half, revealing the many floors above and below where they were. There was art and beauty and color in every direction she looked. The

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murals depicted adults and children, machines, plants, animals, worlds, lands, stories. She couldn't understand them, but she liked them nonetheless.

That place was so different from where she had come from. Where was her mom?

They came across the woman from before, who checked on her. "Hey, sweetie. How are you feeling?"

She averted her gaze. She wanted to talk. Why couldn't she talk?

"She's still recovering," the man said. "Pierr says her vocal cords should be fine, but she's not talking. Maybe she doesn't speak our language?"

"Maybe," the man in white said. "Or maybe she's just shy."

"What news from the Fleet?" the man asked.

"We're approaching the cluster as we speak," the woman replied.

The man turned to face her. "Alright! Wanna come to the observatory? There's something I want to show you."

She studied him apprehensively. She still couldn't piece together what was going on. All she could remember were flashes of terror and darkness. Were those people good? Maybe they were taking her to her mom?

The girl nodded and the adults pushed her wheelchair along the hallway toward an elevator. They came across other people. Some of the children looked her age. They stared at her with intense curiosity. "Look, it's the girl! It's the girl!" they said.

One girl stood in front of her wheelchair and studied the newcomer with a very serious expression. She was skinny and carefree, had hazel eyes and her hair was

light-brown, curly and long. "Hey, Saga," the lady said. "Wanna say hello to your new friend?"

"Hello!" Saga said as she waved with both hands and her serious disposition melted into enthusiasm. The girl could only respond with a faint smile.

The elevator took them a couple of levels above. They pushed her wheelchair into a narrow passage that led into the observatory. The sun rose in the west in front of the ship, and the atmosphere outside had that magical aura only the early morning has.

She stood up from the chair and moved closer to the big, round window. She had to squint to make out what she was seeing outside. One. Two. Ten. Dozens of airships flying in tandem at different altitudes, all glistening in the early morning sun like silver jewels suspended in the air. Some of them dragged great floating forests with towing lines. They were spread across the entire sky, some so far away she could barely see them against the haze and clouds.

"Welcome to the Cytherean Fleet," the man said with a proud smile. "Thousands of airships and urbs just like ours. The greatest fleet the Solar System has ever seen, and your new home."

She looked back at him in awe. That word. That last word he said. She could say it. She knew she could. "H-home?"

The man and the woman shared a sorrowful look. "Listen," he said, "there's no easy way to say this, but you deserve to know the truth. Your airship was in very bad shape when I found you, and there was nothing I could do to save it. It was lost to the wind. Your people are gone. I'm sorry."

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“M-mama?”

Eyrik hesitated for a second. “She’s gone. I’m so sorry, little one.”

The girl felt a hole growing in her chest. It was a void unlike any she had felt before. Her eyes filled with tears. Her mom was gone and she was already forgetting her face. She cried and cried until she was out of breath. The man and the woman hugged her through it all and cried too.

The woman looked her in the eye. “You can stay with us if you want, sweetie. My name is Hana.”

“Mine is Eyrik,” the man said. “You don’t have to be alone. We’ll be there for you. Always.”

She hugged them tighter and cried some more. Eyrik and Hana looked at each other. The girl would join that awkward, beloved family they called the Amelia. They contemplated the fragile creature that had made such an unexpected entrance into their lives and wondered what the future had in store for them.

She was a sky-orphan, a gift from the wind.

She said her name was Aeolia.