

Weightless

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a novel by

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My name is Serandito Carival. I'm only writing it down because people often hear a story, whether it was real or not and wonder, "who did that"?

Some might suspect I'm using an alias, others will point out that a name doesn't really matter. They would all be wrong.

I am Serandito Carival and I'm proud of the things I've done, thankful of the memories I've kept and always fearful of the future.

That is why I'm writing this, all of this. Because you must learn the truth of it all and pass it on to those that come after you, generation after generation, like a fable, like a myth. But never forget it was all true.

Because lies are what brought us on the path to extinction.

I'm fearful it could all happen again. From the records and annals that have been restored in my time, it almost certainly happens again. That fear of mine, should become your fear as well.

Because fear, as I will explain, can be a very useful tool. And you must know how to wield it, as well as live with it.

There will be a time, in the future, when these writings - in whatever form - will be no more. It has been known, since almost ancient times, that the stars will wither and vanish, others more prominently than some. But still, the universe will die and along with it, every kind of life that populates it.

But mankind has to persevere in spite of that.

Promise me this, as I in turn shall promise you:

*At the last light of the last star, there will be
a man there to see it through to nothingness.*

Why, you might ask?

*Picture it, I urge you. Hold that picture in
your mind, make it a part of who you are.*

*Because that picture is all that stands be-
tween life and a fate far worse than death: Obliv-
ion.*

*Maybe you're confused by now; perhaps I'm
coming off as a cryptic stranger or as I've been
called many times, a madman.*

*I am simply a zealot. My aim is to turn you,
whoever you are, into a zealot as well.*

*Since you're reading this, I'm either part
of history, or something terrible has happened
again.*

*Read and learn my friend. And remember
that Serandito Carival is just a name. But me,
and you, we're more than that:*

We're humans. Never forget that.

– Serandito Carival, The death of our race

“Is this all?” said Copun under a wheezy breath, his forehead glistening with sweat. Serandito nodded with a grin.

“Thirteen stacks in all. If we must meet the quota, we need another twelve by sunrise. Think you're up to it?”

Copun was trying hard not to show he was spent for the day; he put on a big hearty smile and after a couple of deep breaths turned around and headed back to the windcomb. He shouted at Serandito playfully, mischief drawn on his thick eyebrows:

“You’ll be the death of me, Sera. Once we’re done, you’re treating me to some of your jeral, you hear?”

Serandito shook his head and let out a knowing laugh. He put his hands on his waist and took a moment to marvel at the land around them; harvest time. A golden sea swayed nimbly in front of him, lit up with the purple hues of the setting sun. He could almost see the first stars.

“Are you coming or will you just stand there? Ain’t nothing you haven’t seen, Sera.”

Serandito smiled broadly before starting off towards the hovering harvester with a quick, almost joyful pace. He jumped inside the windcomb’s gondola, causing it to bob and jerk slightly before he answered with a weird smirk on his face:

“Would it be a real shame if I missed something new, Copun?”

Copun reached out of the gondola, threw a bag of glowbees in the air and drew the anchor slowly. Hunched over one side of the gondola, he said without turning:

“There hasn’t been anything new around here since man set foot on this place, Sera.”

He heaved the last of the anchor on the deck with some strain and said without a hint of irony:

“That’s the beauty of it; nothing really changes.”

The glowbees were up and about, flying around the windcomb, following a familiar pattern of their own. Their luminescent bellies lit up the gondola with a soft, warm orange light as they swarmed around it like slow-twirling flakes of bright snow.

Serandito looked around him one last time as if failing to find something that caught his imagination, nodded to Copun and jibbed the sail with one expert, crisp motion. The wind-

comb tacked gracefully against the first duskward gusts for the night.

“Thirty-four C?” he asked while keeping an eye out for a good, strong buffet of wind out on the never-ending plain that stretched before them.

“Yeah, thirty-four C,” said Copun without so much as a thought and sat down near the controller’s seat, his back against a thin, metal rail. He sighed and slid a small toolbox nearby in front of his feet. He opened it and fussed around inside with both hands for a moment. At length, Copun’s eyes lit up with a radiant gaze at the sight of a small, tin-like, container.

“I’ll just have a whiff.”

Serandito’s disapproving stare fell on Copun. He said nothing at first, while the older man tapped on a pipe and filled it with finely-cut brown-black leaves, a genuine smile on his face.

“Thank the Protectors for the small luxuries of life, eh?” said Copun, lighting up his pipe with a sprinkle of ’golic and puffing at it wildly until a sweet, heavy aroma wafted around the gondola.

Serandito took the seat next to the controller’s, and touched some of the controls on the grimy, dusty panel. He shook his head slightly but said nothing. Copun took another draught from his pipe and said with a slight drawl:

“It won’t kill me now, boy. It’s only quazza, to ease the mind, you know?”

Serandito looked at him with a sour expression. It was one of the old man’s worst habits and he simply would not let it go.

“I know what it is, Copun. Your mind is filled with uneasiness? Again?” said Serandito and scoffed.

“The toils of life, Serandito my boy. When you are my age, they start to pile up impossibly high,” replied Copun with an almost deliberately drunken smile. The quazza had started to set in.

“That thing clouds the mind, Copun. It makes everything hazy, muddled. Just like when in a fog. Shouldn’t you at least wait until after we’re done with our quota?”

Copun made it a point to look behind his shoulder, to let his gaze wonder around the windcomb for a while. He smiled wryly and threw his head back.

“I see no fog creeping up on us. You just do the sailing, and let me worry about my own troubles.”

“I don’t like it one bit, Copun. That’s proper poison inside your soul, right there,” said Serandito, worried anger in his words. Copun couldn’t help but laugh.

“The soul? Have you been prying around Old Man Legget’s? That devil could get you in trouble and you wouldn’t even know it till you’re strapped down on that slave chair.”

Copun’s smile wavered for a bit, before he took a long, hard stare at Serandito.

“He’s a good man to talk to, Copun. You should have a couple of cups of jeral with him.”

“Ain’t that a poison too now?” replied Copun, the wrinkles on his forehead adding a sense of wonder to his smiling, curly lips.

Serandito nodded fervently, realising he had been at fault to judge. He said with a shake of his head, his eyes watching the main sail ripple with the rising wind. “It opens up the spirits to roam about freely. Weren’t you the one that asked for a treat as well?”

Copun exhaled, thin snake-like trails of smoke carried

away from his nostrils as the windcomb picked up more speed. “Well, one can’t expect to go away from this world as pure as one came, Sera.”

“No, I guess not,” replied Serandito and settled into a well-trained series of motions, adjusting the trim of the sail and making sure they were speeding along nicely in the right direction. Copun fell into silence, hands crossed behind his back, the quazza on his pipe almost gone.

Serandito cherished these moments of silence, the sound of the rippling sails and the buffeting wind in harmony with the soft light of the bees, while all around them the murky shadows of faint starlight held fast, an unyielding river of darkness flowing between them and the grain stalks only a few feet below.

“Sometimes I feel like I’m trespassing someplace sacred,” said Serandito.

“What?” asked Copun drowsily, as if being half-awake.

“I said, sometimes I feel like I’m trespassing. Like we shouldn’t be here.”

“Nonsense. This is our lot here, boy. Thirty-four-C through thirty-eight-D of the Great Landing Plains. The Flats, boy, all ripe for harvest!” cried Copun suddenly in the night, and burst into laughter while the windcomb sped away, the swarm of glowbees around her bow and stern leaving a trail of wondrous, almost magical, soft light in her wake.

The sky above became suddenly darker, starlight begging its way through a veil of gathering, dark and heavy clouds. An indication flashed on the control panel in front of Serandito, along with an audible warning message. Serandito didn’t need any of those signs to know what was happening; he felt the change of the wind in the handling of the boat, the way it became stubborn, its silky flow above the plains giving way

to an erratic, capricious balance; it started to misbehave.

“Weather’s going to turn, boy,” said Copun with an upset brow. Though intoxicated, he still had his senses about him. Serandito didn’t grace him with a reply, busy as he was plotting a new course, checking the weather feed on the panel.

Copun put out his pipe and looked at the sky warily; a broiling cluster of menace seemed to be heading their way. All across the plains, as far as they could see, a storm was approaching fast.

“This is a big one,” said Copun, his eyes twitching at the sight of the immense storm front approaching. It stretched all the way from the Low Hill on their left, to the Crescent on their right; it was as if the horizon had turned into a foaming grey and blue, twirling madness and lunged at them.

“A remarkable finding, Copun,” said Serandito mockingly before he urgently asked: “Ride it or outrun it?”

“You’re the sailor, Sera. I just harvest wheat.”

Serandito took a moment to check on the panel, then he gazed at the storm like as if looking at an old familiar face. A smirk crept over his lips.

“We’ll ride it through to its clear side then; it’s coming in too fast, it’ll catch on to us either way. This way, it’ll be over quickly,” he said, his voice picking up volume as the winds attacked the main sail, rippling it violently, the wind-comb bucking and swaying noisily.

“I hope it’s not really over, Sera,” said Copun with a twitch of fear in his words. Serandito turned to face him, his hands still at the controls. He had a wild, steely, blue-eyed gaze that seemed to bolt Copun into place.

“Scared, old man?” he asked the old man, his face motionless, his eyes wandering around the wrinkles on Copun’s leathery face.

“I’ve seen worse, Sera. Your father always came through; you’ll come through just as well,” replied Copun shouting, nodding with each and every word, reassuring himself mostly.

“Better, Copun. Better than my father,” said Serandito barely loud enough to be heard. He turned his attention to the storm in front of them and took a glimpse at his panel. “Hang tight, the other end is almost a quadrant away.”

“A whole quadrant? Boy, that’ll take us over all the way to the Tower,” shouted back Copun with wary disbelief. Serandito nodded promptly, his hair already a mess. In the distance, the first shots of lightning streaked across the horizon.

“Almost,” he said as he raced to the jib. Working deftly with his hands, he lowered the sail and raised the collector boom, a metal rod of sorts, easily three times the height of the main mast. The first thick droplets of rain shot at the deck from an angle, the nema wood soaking the water like a sponge, keeping the deck safe to tread on.

“Damn the quota, we should’ve given up for the night,” said Copun as he reached below the panel and activated a set of controls. A harsh blue glow began to emanate from below the deck, along with a sizzling sound of static. The smell of ozon mingled with the wet, earthly scent of the ground.

“You’ll have no regrets when this is past us, Copun, I assure you,” shouted Serandito with a shiny grin attached to his face. Copun opened a compartment on the deck and picked up a pair of harnesses. He wore one with one hand, the other one clutching at a handrail, the windcomb riding uneasily on blasts of sleet. Serandito reached for the other harness and put it on quickly it with practiced ease. He checked the safeties on the synthetic straps that held their harnesses locked to a metal deck ring and the handrail running around the small gondola.

“Your father wasn’t this brash, you know,” said Copun, double-checking that his harness fit snugly.

“Well I’m not him, am I?” shouted Serandito in order to be heard over the rising raucous din of the storm.

“Sail true, Sera, you still have to treat me to some jeral!” replied Copun earnestly, his long hair stuck wildly across his face.

Serandito laughed his heart out as a strong curtain of rain and sleet caught on to them, harsh as a whiplash. The storm proper hit them with the rage of a spinning giant; the windcomb buckled and heaved steeply to one side, riding aloft a monster of a wind. The ion thruster in the gondola’s belly kept the windcomb afloat, its nozzles flaring intensely white hot, shedding the darkness across a small spot on the plains.

Copun and Serandito braced wave after wave of violent gusts and razing sleets, the windcomb below their feet carried along in a maddening dance, but always moving in the same direction, in a disturbingly persistent way. As its aft thrusters shot it upwards on layers of turbulent winds, it came down with stunning force as if ready to bore a hole into the ground, yet it bounced off in the last moment and kept at this way for minutes that seemed to stretch into hours for Serandito, but mostly so for Copun: his visage had turned almost ashen, his eyes closed as if in meditation, wrinkles crisscrossing every feature of his face. His calmness ended abruptly when a large red indicator lit up.

“Ten percent capacity left, Sera! Where’s the bloody edge of it?”

“Not in sight, Copun. Have heart, it’ll hit!”

“Have you ever really done this before, boy?”

“It’ll hit, Copun. See that cluster over there? It’s full of it! Look at the crackles inside!”

“I’ll blast you to a cold dead void if you kill us tonight, Sera!”

“You can thank me in the morning!”

Serandito fiddled with the controls and set the helm and the thruster as he still had control of the windcomb. In truth, it barely changed course as the incredible winds tossed her this way and that. But the small harvest groundsail did not tumble over, and it did not yield to the demands of the ravaging storm its masters had so precariously chosen to ride. It zigzagged between ripples of wind and layers of thermal updrafts, rising uncontrollably high and swooping down with metal-straining speed, careening at angles that would have thrown Serandito and Copun off the gondola had it not been for their harnesses.

And when it finally met with the energy-filled cluster of clouds Serandito had spotted, it seemed for a moment that the storm had quietened down, that they were floating more freely, the winds settling down to a strong but safe speed, as if the storm had spent its force. Copun looked up, inside the blistering, flashing core of luminance in the sky, where two colossal masses of clouds met, lightning streaking across them like a thunderous, blinding web of light. He stood with both hands on the rail, the winds fluttering his hair almost playfully.

“Is it over?”

“We’re in the eye. I’d let go of that rail if I were you,” said Serandito and shot Copun a stern, hard look. As Copun turned his head to look at Serandito with a puzzled look, everything around them filled with a sudden, violent surge of light. Serandito had been almost blinded but he thought he had seen the huge, tall pillar of light as it tore up the air the moment it connected with the collector boom up high. And then the ear-splitting boom, the echo of a star being born, as-

saulted them. Copun put his hands on his ears and let the harness carry his weight, while Serandito looked skyward as the windcomb shot suddenly forward, like a comet, plowing through wild space.

As the windcomb steadied its course, multiple stabilizers corrected its aspect with seemingly little effort, gorging down on the immense power of the lightning. The groundsail was shooting through the storm without care, the only discomfort the rain pouring down on the open gondola.

“Blasted thunder! I think I’m deaf!” said Copun, shouting almost indelibly, trying to hear himself.

“We just rode one, old man! We rode the lightning!” shouted back Serandito with a wondrous gleam in his eyes, the rain dripping down his grinning face.

“I said, I think I’m deaf!” repeated Copun and Serandito burst into laughter right when the stars began to appear on the edge of the departing storm.

’Fuck. Be still Charlie, keep your fucking cool. Breathe.’

Charlie was on the run and out of breath; his lungs burned. In half-gee he’d managed to run out of breath and bang his head on a couple of bulkheads as well. Damn suit felt heavy for no real reason; it wasn’t bulky or anything. He thought to himself that whoever had designed the otherwise huge monstrosity he had the misfortune to be captured in must’ve been a really short fellow with a love of pencils.

’I wonder if he designed it with a pencil as well. It must be that old.’

He had to get to the airlock, it was his only chance. The airlock and then the Sardine. Naturally they knew that and that was why one of them was crawling inside the service shafts like a rat; Charlie thought he could faintly hear the man

shadowing him through the seemingly endless stretch of immaculate, plastic-white corridors. Maybe they just wanted him to think one of them was in the shafts. He couldn't really tell with those two. There was something about them that scared the shit out of him.

'Down corridor B, then all the way to the right. Look for the red arrow. Red arrow.'

His mind raced faster than his legs and while his body tried to carry him to safety, he kept repeating the directions in his mind while he tried to keep his basic instinct of fear to somewhat manageable levels.

Charlie felt the beating of his heart all the way to his ears. He found a steady pace and kept going as if he was having a jog. The corridor was only half-illuminated, alternating bands of deep shadow and harsh light fading away into a dark, uncertain place.

'It's like running in a goddamn circle. I must be. Just how long is this thing?'

He couldn't hear the sound of his feet against the floor; it might have been the microgravity but it felt really weird to Charlie. It was as if the floor absorbed it.

'Red arrow, watch for a red arrow. Fuck the floor, Charlie.'

The darkness in front of him seemed to grow closer with each large step Charlie made. He pushed harder, heedless of whatever his captors had in mind for him. It didn't seem to be relevant when he felt he was so close; all that mattered was speed.

At the far wall of the dark room he thought he saw faint pin-pricks of light. Every step made it clearer: it wasn't a wall, it was a window.

'Stars. An observation window. Where's the fucking red

arrow?’

“Looking for a red arrow, Charlie? This isn’t it. This is the wrong way.”

The voice made him freeze in place; it felt as if his spine would break if he tried to even turn his head just a little bit. The man to whom the soft voice belonged appeared out of the shadows to his right as if he had always been laying there in front of him, waiting for Charlie in perfect secrecy, without as much as a breath escaping him. Charlie saw the man still wore the same hood from before; that was because he could see blood stains. That was strangely comforting to him.

‘At least the motherfuckers bleed.’

“You’ve come a long way, Charlie. But it ends here. There’s no place to go, as you can see. Besides, we’re not done with you.”

“It’s been too fucking long. I’m not going back there. I’m going out.”

“How are you planning to do that, Charlie?” replied the hooded man with a mocking tone, his back always facing the window, his face obscured in the shadow. Charlie wasn’t sure but he was betting the bastard was grinning.

‘Fuck the red arrow. Fuck the airlock. Fuck Sardine. Fuck me.’

He looked at the hooded man with a heavy stare and then closed his eyes. His shoulders sagged, Charlie put his head down. He seemed to have given up. There was even a look of relaxation on his face. The man saw the signs and approached Charlie in what could have been otherwise seen as a friendly manner.

“There now. We still have a lot of questions for you, Charlie.”

“Well, I’ve got a question myself,” said Charlie without a hint of malice or anger. In fact, he was smiling gently.

“I’m intrigued. You so rarely do.”

“Are you wearing a suit under all that cloth?”

“There’s no reason to,” said the man smiling thinly. Their eyes met and Charlie saw a familiar, curious gaze coupled with a slight frown.

“There will be any minute now,” said Charlie with a grin and nothing happened while the planet below slowly began to hove itself into view, a dark, red and brown giant. The man folded his hands into his robes and said casually:

“Though I must admit it’s very rare, I do not understand.”

“Any minute now.. Any minute, Norio. Or is it Steve? I’m really bad with names.”

The hooded man cocked his head slightly as if searching for some kind of sudden deformity on Charlie’s face.

“I think the interview process might be taking its toll on you,” he said as the planet’s nighttime crescent below filled the view of the observation pane.

“Those were interrogations, and that.. That is a micro-meteorite, you mind-reading fuck!” said Charlie as he pressed a button on the arm of the suit, his head disappearing behind a bright, silvery visor of a helmet that seemed to have sprung up instantly from his suit’s collar. The hooded man had time enough to blink in a puzzled fashion before the observation window formed a thousand tiny cracks; as the man turned his head around reflexively the window shattered and the metal skin around them exploded with an almost visible shockwave.

Charlie felt the pressure of the explosion being absorbed by the suit; in less than a second he was already blasting away from the ship, of which he only now had a chance to get a

good look at from outside and realise just how big it actually was.

The dark observation room had vented all the air inside in a fraction of a second; the hull at that end of the ship looked as if someone had tore it open like a can of sardines.

'Speaking of which.. Can't see the damn thing from here.'

He turned his head this way and that with some difficulty. The suit had turned pretty rigid, affording him much less comfort in exchange for safety. A good distance away, Charlie saw that indeed the ship was shaped like a pencil, or more likely, a cluster of pencils with a huge parasol attached at one end. Not only that, it had a large, boisterous etching in one side that spelled TDS-1.

'What a piece of junk. Thank God the computer was easy to hack.'

The other thing Charlie couldn't help taking notice of was he was picking up speed, perhaps a bit too fast for comfort judging by the flashing indicators inside his helmet.

"One-hundred-thirty meters per second, one-hundred-forty, one-hundred-fifty. One gee, at two hundred miles up. God, I hope this planet is a big as it looks or else I'll be real sorry for every last candy bar ever."

"One point zero six standard gravity, current. One point eleven estimated at surface."

"You can talk?"

"Yes."

"Good for you. Shut up and give me an visor display."

The suit indeed complied and Charlie couldn't hear anything but his own breath, enjoying the feeling of the rich oxygen atmosphere inside the suit. He blinked furiously as the suit fed him data in his visor and seemed to be totally indifferent of the marvelous sight that filled his vision. The

planet below him was like a sea of dark brown and golden yellow, sparse clouds layered so seemingly close to him he could almost touch them. His mind though was elsewhere, calculating, estimating.

“Solve for five point seven degrees.” A small flashing orange icon indicated he was past the speed of sound. Another red one indicated his entry trajectory was too wrong for the suit to compensate for.

“Fuck this. Fuck me,” muttered Charlie almost under his breath, and a grey flashing sign indicated that was beyond the design capacity of the suit.

“Go to manual attitude control, display estimated envelope and max temperature.”

The orange flashing icon turned red and the visor turned opaque as if suddenly someone had turned the universe outside off. The suit was clamping down the helmet and Charlie was going to fly through the atmosphere by hand, or rather with his whole body. The visor turned itself back on, a composite radar and thermal image now in place that looked more like some kind of kaleidoscope instead of a planet’s surface.

‘We did this in training. Why can’t I remember a fucking thing?’

Charlie’s mind was almost empty, working on the cold data in front of his eyes while a few inches away, all that stood between a fifteen-degree hot cloud of plasma was an unbelievably thin shell of a suit.

And yet as he fell down through the atmosphere like a falling, raging star, plumes of fire in his wake as the atmosphere thickened and he bled away all the energy from orbit, his body was in the right angle, his hands and palms and arms and feet and neck all barely moving an inch.

He fell through the various layers of atmosphere and saw

the readings on the atmosphere composition; human rated. And then he saw a huge, white, whirlpool in the radar and realised he was heading straight for a storm front whose upper layers whirled at transonic speeds, which meant he'd be flung to death or worse.

'What a bitch.'

He had to avoid that and that's why he had to take some drastic measures.

"Rated max thermal?"

The answer on Charlie's visor was a number that no matter how he looked at it, he would never like it enough but that wouldn't change the fact he had little choice in the matter. He moved his wrists and feet slightly, and changed his attitude suddenly, exposing a lot more body surface to the airstream. He felt the force of the airshock and the heat buildup as the suit tried to cope with the stress. He saw the trajectory estimates and the raw data and closed his eyes.

'Charlie, don't fuck this up.'

"Fire retro!" he said with a muffled voice as his body trembled in the rigid shell of the suit and in instant felt a huge hand slam across his body, grabbing and whipping his sides. His eyes almost fell out of his sockets and he could definitely feel his brain brush up against the inside of skull because of the brutal braking maneuver.

A few moments later he managed to open his eyes, his breathing rushed and shallow. He checked the data and felt relieved to know that he was gliding down at an easy fifty feet per second, almost a mile up. The visor flashed back into the normal visual array and he could see now the storm front bristling and flashing away, as well as a colossal structure to his left that seemed to dominate the flat landscape.

"Helmet down," commanded Charlie and the suit com-

plied. Fresh, wet air assaulted his nostrils and it brought a smile of freedom and homeliness to his sweat-laden face. He looked around him and only then did he realise the visor was feeding him a data-overlay image. He couldn't tell the ground from the sky. There was faint starlight and distant pin prickles that he couldn't make out.

The tower he saw from before was mostly dark except for a faint glow at his base. Charlie tried to put the visor back up to no avail. He looked at the panel on his arm; it had been charred to cinders. He looked up and saw the deployed glider wing firmly attached to through some sort of rigid harness. There were no controls. He tried to shift his weight and saw some change in attitude. He had no real control of where he was going, strung up under the wing like a victim of some sort of bird of prey.

'Shit.'

He saw faint blueish light growing stronger as their paths seemed to intersect. A moment or two later he could almost see the ground and the faint blueish light had turned into a strong, blue aura that seemed to cover what implausibly looked like a ship with masts and all, plus some huge shiny blades like an overgrown lawnmower.

'Fuck me.'

That was Charlie's last thought as he fell hard against the deck, bounced off it, hit the main mast with his head and blacked out.