

The Sula Cloud [tentative title]

A Novel by Wade Tarzia © 2006

Chapter 1

After they had argued, they stared at each other for exactly 5 seconds -- the chronometer hung on line of sight with her face -- then she'd sent him aloft, where the air smelled of cut hay. 'By the blind and earless gods,' he thought, 'I want strawberries.'

"You'll get sharks," she spat over the VHF. "Slow down, you started a wave. Mind the job, sailor!" She was right -- distracted enough to think aloud, he could be mindless enough to...

The linerunner ran out of fuel, and he coasted to a hang as the little turbine spooled down to an audible whine. That figured -- it had been burning alcohol all week. He leaned forehead on harness and sighed -- and she was right again -- the sine wave caught him and sent his stomach for a loop. The runner's readout said 1700 feet. So he reported the problem and advised he'd ascend the remaining 100 feet on cam-cleats. She didn't speak, just clicked the send button twice. He sighed again and thought of other things he could do up here, as many things as possible, for as long as possible.

They were cutting hay somewhere in Bali. Cutting something, but not forest, which had been exhausted 20 years ago, but he could wish it were hay, and strawberries, he hadn't any for so long, and somehow the smell of hay had reminded him. Up at 1700 feet, you could smell a lot of things when you were only a few 20s of kilometers out from land. He twisted around to look for the sea birds that would suggest how far away land was but saw none in the hazy Pacific line that was today only softly divided from the horizon.

"Brendan, all right?" She had the glass on him.

“On my way, Cap.” In a rattle of carabineers he pushed the cleats on one of the twin tenslar cables that was his connection to the proa Sula Cloud far below and the wing-like canopy above, spreading out in its long, shallow, inverted U against the tradewinds. He left the linerunner hanging and slowly started the rhythm of crouch-slide-stand-crouch as he inched his cleats up the cable to the nexus.

The little Honda should have started. It always started. They’d been starting for a hundred years or more. Nearly there, he paused to catch breath, shading his eyes against the sun appearing as a distended shine through the fabric. There it was in its baked-on red enamel and its precious few gallons of Jet A. He’d hung it there last week after the electric compressor quit, had programmed its schedule and sensor parameters, and let it be. Yet this morning the day’s heat had not distended the kitesail to the usual pressure, and no archaic finger-tapping on the cockpit readout had changed it. The ‘turbulent flow’ alarm sounded a half hour-later.

All this, of course, after Tsumaru 17 had offered a contract over the single-sideband to the next kiteship that could hook on outside the Sunda Strait. They had their own kite up but wanted another because they carried perishables and were running on one freezer, and all in all, Murphy was timeless for all concerned. Tsumaru was a medium freighter but a good contract. Transfer your cable, go in tow (outriggers like Sula Cloud were a good hullspeed match and floated light), and sleep aboard if they had a cabin free, or in a tent on deck if they didn’t --that fine wide deck where you could stretch, walk, play games! And eat at the captain’s table. Hidetora was still the cook, last he’d heard. But Kangaroo and Ronny’s Luck had acknowledged intentions to “eat at the table.” Both were faster rigs, but Sula Cloud was closer to the Strait, and its tow more powerful.

Now he was at the first node, and the hay smell was stronger, and he was feeling the directional change of wind under the aerodynamic shadow of the huge kite. The air had a shudder to it he didn't like, but the Honda was now dangling within reach on its titanium ring, and he set to work. The hoses seemed intact, and the starter had power. He hit the restart and listened to the gas turbine spool up and the authoritative snap of the sparks thudding away in the burner. Nothing. He inched up until the camcleats bumped the node, grabbed a primary shroud and chinned up a foot and glanced at the other side of the compressor. He looked a while, and then let himself back down until he felt the harness snug around his hips. He looked at the horizon, careful to look slowly, did a few needless things, and then radioed down.

"OK, this is easily fixed. Just a little high-speed contamination. For now, send up another compressor. Shit!"

"What? What shit?" her voice crackled over.

"The linerunner -- it's still hanging down there, grooved into both cables, in the way. I have to come down 100 feet and drop it."

"No, no, let's think it through."

Both their voices took on that professional caution, each word screened for anyone else listening to their radios, because that was a 20mm 'high-speed contaminant' that had drilled a hole in the compressor's fuel tank. The haze was still too thick and bright to get a good view below. The outlaws around here used wave-piercing hulls -- almost submarines -- and moved very fast and with little wake or spray. Sula was being towed at 20 knots or so, not enough. Wind was good, wind was free, but it wasn't always enough to outrun pirates while dragging a hull.

He relaxed the cleat to slide below and get the Honda out of his face. The silence was telling. What was there to think through? Now they had to fly, fly for more than a contract and wide deck underfoot. And to fly, Brendan had to end deflation, unstick brailing lines, and loose another few hundred square meters of sail.

He thought of Sula down there uncovering their little automatic 20mm. It was slightly illegal, only slightly, because most of the area authorities allowed semiautomatic defenses. The conversion kit in the end didn't mean much. They had ammo enough for a few bursts. More than that was too much weight. And of course, you had to hit something in the right place. The Cloud's strength was in running.

Brendan looked out again over the sea. He shook his head. Sometimes when they were close they matched speed to a swell and hid at the back of it. Which wave, which whitecap?

He hated thinking that way. The world was falling apart slowly but definitely, and honest working folk had to pull the housing off a deck and jack up a 20mm. "Things fall apart, the center cannot hold."

"What?" Her voice was breathless in the mic; she must have just jacked the gun up.

"It's a poem, Cap. I forget who wrote it. Well, any way, get ready to drop the bird."

A pause. "It's fixed? No, we aren't up to pressure. Haven't broken the spare compressor out yet."

"Cap, I'm just an honest working man, but I can clear the lines." He grunted, got himself over the Honda, then the node, and straddled the node for a moment, shifting his safety clip around. "Get the bird ready, Cap. I've figured this out. The leading edge loses some inflation, turbulent flow sets up a flutter on the suction side, the flutter has a period that the stupid pressure

sensor can't figure out so it defaults to failsafe and won't release the brailing lines. We need smarter sensors, Cap. Cui Corporation sells the good ones."

What he didn't say out loud was that he thought his chatter might make a pirate nervous of losing its prey. He would accelerate out of the wave trough and Brendan would see. He raised his lowpower glass, risking all, risking detection, and scanned as Sula started trying to convince him that now wasn't the time....

He smiled. He was literally and figuratively at the top of the world, and yet unaccountably sad. "Things fall part," he whispered, then louder. "Drop the bird, Cap. This is how it has to be. Remember you told me about the decision-making stuff? Yeah, it's important, I know. You were right. The family is right. Your family. I decide...."

"Brendan...." slow, painfully professional. "The wing can't hold your weight at the trailing edge, not for long. You mean to disconnect the sensor, right. What if that's not it? You have maybe a few minutes before the kite goes too far into stall."

"I know what I'm doing. I'm committed." He launched himself out on one of the chord stays and started the rhythmic motions of cam-cleating his way up and aft.

"Damn! Damn!" The VHF went silent. He kept up his climb, breathing in the old timed way he knew so well from his first days. Old Chen! Brendan smiled in spite of the effort. Chen had thought a linerunner a luxury. "Sailor boy paid to climb! Up you go! Machine take skill away." Well, he couldn't complain. Chen had given him a chance. Brendan had paid it all back and added the philosophy of climbing besides.

He wasn't quite finished with the climb before he knew the wing was shifting. Even something that big couldn't just sneeze at a little weight in the wrong place, especially under deflation. Closer still, and he could see the thin spots in the trailing edge. They were good

sailors, and they had kept flutter to a minimum with constant tuning, but, as Mau always said, “No cure for life!” And worn fabric was part of life. They had pushed that kite well into its design limits. They’d push it a little more. Fabric was getting harder to find. The USA was the first to start conserving its production. The USA was in bad shape. Uzbekistan was still good, at a price. China was the best, but everyone wanted the good Chinese stuff. Hell. All a fellow wanted was something to spread to the wind. Was it asking so much? Things fall apart.

He is at the trailing edge, aiming for a flat plastic sensor pod, he is unaware of his streaming sweat, stinging eyes, the heat in his brain, whistling lungs. He is at the sensor, and he pries it off and pockets it without thinking. Must save everything. The kite is tilting, he hears through the stays the whine of control lines reeling in, but they will meet their stops any time now, right now. The cam-cleats are rated for falls. When they’re new they can take xyz amount of kilonewtons of force. He remembers to reverse it, and clings to the stay with fingers alone.

“The bird is down, Brendan. Get down now, get down, get down.”

“You know its too late.” Perhaps she does not. She has not had the time. He feels it.

“Sailor!”

“I have a plan.” Barely enough breath to tell her. “We don’t need all those stays.”

Silence. He frees the line-cutter and commits himself to air. He remembers to spreadeagle, to pretend to fly.

There’s that bird. A bird. Funny how there’s always time. The bird looks at him and flaps. He flies. The sudden air flings the sweat off his brow.

He blacked out for a short time and woke up hearing the familiar sound of a kite unfolding from its brails -- a long drawn out ‘boom’ and a kind of hum transmitted through the stay from which he now dangled a few tens of feet over and ahead of the Cloud. So slowly, the kite rose.

It must have been very close to unrecoverable stall. The worried pirate whose chisel-bow he had seen riding over the crest of the swell must wonder if he were getting lucky, that he'd just idle up to a kiteship going into wet stall. He'd like that. His fuel costs were very high. They preferred to go slowly when they could. Proper fuel was getting hard to find, and a pirate burning home-brewed alcohol in his turbine was a sad, hungry pirate. No -- bad luck today. The kite, now more than double its previous size, was pulling and rising. Brendan felt the telltale bounce and acceleration as the Sula Cloud rose free from the water. A brief mist of droplets blew from her hull. The mizzen mast tilted back in fin-mode and stabilized the airborne canoe at an angle to the kite -- wind direction and speed changed as you rose from sea-level. The bird was in the water, holding them back just enough to give control to keep that balance between drag and stall. Ten meters under the troughs of the swell the titanium hydro-wing shot. That was the last such bird they were likely to see if they ever lost it -- titanium was getting hard to get, too. Their spare was aluminum.

Brendan hung bruised and exhausted in his harness, while Sula stood by the gun and waited. The raider would fire or he would not. An airborne kiteship was hard to bring down unless you hit the pilot or the computer that controlled the bird. Some kiteships had one or both behind a plate of ballistic ceramic. The Cloud had one little plate. When you were out of ammo, the crew laid down behind the computer, which was behind the plate. The kite itself would fly for a long time without much care, even flying dumb. The spray from the cable to the bird told a tale of 40 knots. Shoot, or don't shoot. Use more precious fuel by throttling up; waste all the time spent tracking the Sula Cloud. Perhaps suffer return fire from the kiteship. Decisions! What kind of person was this raider? Wise, perhaps, and gutsy, making the hard decision to bear away. That was harder. A boss was back home waiting; a rough crew could be disappointed.

Brendan had enough left to smile at himself feeling sorry for the guy; he was dangling, a good target. Decisions....shoot the gaijen hanging from the rope, settle accounts with the trouble maker at least? In any event they never saw the raider.

After a while, Sula rode the wire up and winched Brendan in, brought him down, checked for broken bones, brought him water. The scanner found nothing.

“Good,” she said, snapping its cover shut and replacing it in the med bag. “Just harness bruises. In a day or two you can go aloft and replace the stay.” She watched the wing for a good while.

They were running downwind at about wind speed, and in the light relative air the ends of her loose hair fluttered around her neck. He fell in love with her again.

“Smooth even with deflation. And I’ll get the spare pump up there. We’re good. Rest in the cockpit and keep an eye on things. Stay on the com.” She hauled him up, handed over the med bag, settled the second linerunner on the tow, clipped in, and glanced over. “Let me know if things fall apart.”

Chapter Two: Intermezzo

You are a fourteen year old boy, small for your age, sitting on a rocky knoll with a few trees left on it. Everyday makes it harder for you to recall your parents. Because of this you like to sail the little ulua across the Harulki Gulf. Your older cousin and his husband Harol care for you and keep your parents’ pictures on the bureau. Every day the pictures seem to change. Harol once said in a hiss over the dishes, ‘...for god’s sake they must be like tombstones in the house,’ and today you finally understand.

Your hand has been playing with a white plastic bottle cap you sat on earlier. Now you look at it. It is like the bottle caps from the champagne that Shepperd and Harol drink sometimes. Someone has sat in this very spot and celebrated....something. Your photo album (presented to you long ago as if it were the gold mask of King Tut) has a picture of a woman, a man, and a baby on a red-checked blanket under a tree; a tall white-capped bottle stands up from a picnic basket. The shadow of the photographer extends toward the family across a beach of stones.

A noise out over the gulf -- a giant bird flapping with wings a thousand feet wide. In the channel a freighter forges out on a beam reach. Its kites might even pass over this little isle. It's a stack! They are very hard to manage, every child knows that. A few captains manage them; one has even boasted he doesn't use a computer. You know this Gulf pretty well (and if Shepperd ever finds that out, the ulua will be disassembled and hung from the roof of the boathouse for a month), so you know that bringing a freighter through this point is itself a boast. Here they come. You think you feel the air change around you, and it is not all your imagination. The stack passes almost a thousand feet overhead, its long tow bowing away to the freighter deck. Harol gave you a fine set of compact binoculars (he might even know that you are exploring the Gulf). You trace the control lines to the nodes, and the man straddling the node, one hand on a guy, the other near his face holding binoculars, startles you so much that you drop the glasses as if to hide from something. Look again; he sees you. He sees you see him. He waves. Something has been inside you a long while and now it comes out. You stand and wave both arms, and the sailor waves again, now with both his arms too, and you can't help crying for the next quarter hour.

Back at the beach a stranger is standing near the ulua. He seems unconcerned, even amused. Chinese or Japanese. His neat little power skiff is drawn up 50 meters down the beach. Sliding stones under your feet alert him, and he looks over and nods once. He too watches the freighter reach away. "You OK? Get home OK? Long beat out of here anyplace, sailor boy." He nods at the ulua. "Very wet, I think." He's right. The long windward course back home is going to be wet and cold against the afternoon chop, especially on that tack with the ama to windward, when the canoe hull sends spray right at you. You don't answer. "You no talk? Think I sell you to pirates, ey? No, you too skinny. They cook fat boys for breakfast, no worries!" Harol would call this an 'inappropriate' conversation. But the wrinkle-faced man inspires no fear. "What's the name of the freighter?" you venture. "Chavin De Huanter," he says at once. "Very excellent, Captain Matos, her kites no drip on her any time." Even at 14 years you know that's an ancient phrase, because rarely do ships drop their kites any more. Only in the old days. Or only when things are going very badly. He turns at you, quickly, you jump. "What, I bet you want be sailor boy, out there, up there? Hah!" Has he seen you waving your arms? You feel shame but wouldn't be able to explain why. "Very stupid! Famous man say once, one thousand years, maybe, hmmm...." his cheeks scrunch up, he looks aside, "He say like this, being sailor like in prison except you can drown too." He looks away, to the freighter, to the little outrigger with its brailed sail shaking in the breeze. "Not too different now. You sure you get home? I give you tow....where home? "Coromandel," you say. "No problem, I tow." "No thank you. I can make it. I do all the time." You start turning the canoe around. He holds the bow into the waves as you unbrail. "Nice talking, sailor boy. What your name?" "Brendan." Harol says never give your last name. "Keep eye to windward, Brendan." "OK. Who are you? I mean...." "Captain Chen. Watch....!" and the untended boom gives you a little slap on the side

of the head. It luffs, and the bow falls off the waves. You wish this didn't happen in front of a man named Captain Chen. You ignore the sting and flail the steering oar to slant the canoe through the surf. "Never enough eyes for sailors," he calls, "not enough hands too." He shakes his head. You harden the sail and let the bow smash through some steep ones. You don't mind being wet. Not yet. It does become a long shivering beat home, and by the time you tie up, it is long after dark and they think you are dead.

Chapter Three: The World

News Item, Last Satellite News Agency, 2047 -- Huge Explosion Alleged at White Sands Desert -- As far away as the California Seismic Center, the shock of a November 11th blast registered strongly from the Government's testing grounds in Nevada. The second in nearly two years from this area, the US Government has again failed to comment to public enquiries. Freelance correspondents could not approach the area, where desert roads are guarded by Internal Defense Forces with airspace interdicted by armed drones. One reporter in an off-track hover did not proceed more than a few miles before ground drones disabled her vehicle and arrested her. Columnist Harri Gouveia has followed this story since 2045 and commented, "We can't expect an explanation but it is not hard to narrow down the guesses. This is just the latest failure in fusion. Decry the secrecy but weep for the failure. We need nothing more right now than workable fusion." Dr. Sara Wright, former White Sands researcher and known from the cloud of scandal she continues to blame on Government sources seeking to discredit her, stated more bluntly, "They're killing my colleagues. That fuel is too unstable for inertial confinementthose lasers are too big and the field switching system not able to keep up with the pulse. It's

a dead end in all ways.” (ed. note: She refers to the magnetic field meant to contain the fusion fire and feed it a controlled stream of fuel pellets). The mystery is only compounded by the two-week-old accident at Dextitron Corporation’s floating lab parked 1,000 miles off shore, reputedly working under a National Science Foundation Anti-Matter Initiative contract. The accident has left no traces of the 2,000-foot former tanker except for the plume of steam caught by Last Satellite’s Earth Long Focal camera. ENDTRANS 47-23845937

Abstract: Dr. Indra Panani, Guest Professor, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. “On the Possibility of a Cognitive Technology.” *Journal of Virtual Technology* Vol. 11 No. 3, 2047. Contextualized in a material and causal world, the field of cognitive technology could not have begun without the initiation of the IBX Thought Grid and the slow -- one might say slowed by terror -- realization that certain cognitive events within the Grid were tied to certain external events unexplained since unlinked by known causality channels yet whose connections are too significant to deny (Tomashevsky 2036; Sato 2036). The author’s previous publications (2038a, 2038b, 2041, 2042, 2046a, 2046b, 2046c) have outlined what was once labeled jokingly as “philosophical physics” but now more agreeably called “cognitive technology.” Unpublished oral presentations (sadly mangled in unauthorized reporting from news organizations) to the MITERS club, notwithstanding the undeniably celebratory nature of the gatherings, nonetheless recently outlined a second crucial factor now linking cognitive technology to the holy grail of physics. The author proposes that the Observer is the ultimate field and the only switch. The Observer’s role is no crude freezing or selection of quantum probability. The Observer instead affects the flux of nodes of the multiverse. The unthinkable energies likely held in tension in multiverse boundaries, allowing our universe its enabling (and comforting) physical parameters,

might then be “switched” as it were via the ICUI (irreducible cognitive universal icons, see 2042). To think may well be to do, to do in the arena where all forces are united in the multiverse node and translatable to each other. It is not currently testable whether aforesaid energy is continually evoked then dissipated in the multiverse boundary or whether it can be brought to our side of the boundary via ICUI (and controlled if so), and of what magnitude and expression in time and space it might be. Nor have recorded astronomical events yet suggested that hypothetical extraterrestrials may have tapped into nodes by means of ICUI or otherwise. In any event, on Earth tests must be delayed, since experiments in cognitive technology might not be turned off as easily as physical apparatus should the results be discomfiting. *[Purchase the complete article through your GLS account.]*

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