

# Waiting for the Zephyr

## by Tobias S. Buckell

The *Zephyr* was almost five days overdue.

Wind lifted the dust off in little devils of twisting columns that randomly touched down throughout the remains of the town. Further out beyond the hulks of the Super Wal-Mart and Krogers Mara stood and swept the binoculars. The platform she stood on reached up a good hundred feet ending in the bulbous water tank that watered the town, affording her a look just over the edge of the horizon. She strained her eyes for the familiar shape of the *Zephyr*'s four blade-like masts, but saw nothing but dirt-twisters.

The old asphalt highway, laid down back in the time of plenty, had finally succumbed to the advancing dirt despite the town's best attempts to keep it out. The barriers lay on their side.

Mara still knew the twists and turns of the highway she'd memorized since twelve, when she'd first realized it led to other towns and people.

"Mara, it's getting dark."

"Yes Ken."

Ken carefully put the binoculars into their pouch and climbed down the side of the tower. Pushing off down the dust piled at its feet she trudged down to Ken, now only a large silhouette in the suddenly approaching dusk.

"Your mother still wants to talk to you."

Mara didn't respond.

"She wants to work it out," Ken continued.

"I'm leaving. I've wanted to leave since I was twelve, come on Ken... don't start this again." Mara started walking quickly towards the house.

Ken matched her pace, and even though she could see him wondering what to say next, she could also see him examining the farm out of his peripheral vision. Their farm defied the dust and wind with lush green growth, but only because it lay underneath protective glass. Ken paused slightly twice, checking cracks in the façade, areas where dust tried to leak in.

"Their wind generator is down. They need help, Mara. I said I would go over tomorrow."

Mara sighed.

"I really don't want to."

Ken opened the outer door for her, stamping his boots clean and letting it shut, then passed through as she opened the second door. Dust slipped in everywhere and covered everything despite precautions. Brooms didn't quite get it all. Although Ken thought them a useless necessity Mara thought the idea of a vacuum cleaner quite fetching.

"I need you help Mara, just for an afternoon. You wouldn't feel right leaving someone without electricity, would you?"

Ken was right, without the wind-generator her parents would be without power.

"Okay. I'll help." Ken, she noticed, ever the wonder with his hands, already had a dinner set for the two of them. Despite being slightly cold from sitting out, it was wonderful.

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The *Zephyr* was six days overdue.

Mara shimmied up the roof and joined Ken. He already had parts of the wind-generator laying out on the roof. She had just managed to brush past her father without being physically stopped. Mother stood around, looking wounded and helpless.

Ken made a face.

"The blade is all right. But the alternator is burned out."

Simple enough to fix. The wind generators consisted of no more than an old automobile alternator attached to a propeller blade and swivel mounted on the roof. What electricity the houses had depended on deep cycle batteries that used the wind generators to recharge. Solar panels worked in some areas, but here the dust crept into them, and unlike wind generators, didn't work at night. Plus, it was easy enough to wander out to a car lot and pick an alternator out of the thousands of dead cars.

Mara half suspected her father had called them for help just to get her out to his farm. Damn it.

"Mara," her father said from the edge of the dust gutter. "We need to talk." Mara looked straight out over the edge, out at the miles and miles of brown horizon. "Mara, look at me. Mara, we spoke harshly. We're sorry."

"We like Ken," her mother chimed in from below. "But you're young. You can't move out just yet."

"Come back honey. We could use your help on the farm. You wouldn't be as busy as you are with Ken."

Ken looked up at that with a half-pained grin. Mara swore and slid off the low end off the roof, hitting the dust with a grunt. Her father started back down the ladder but Mara was already in the cart, pulling up the sail and bouncing out across the dust back towards the relative safety of Ken's farm, leaving her mother's plaintive entreaties in the dusk air behind her.

Damn, how could she have fallen for that? Her parents were so obvious. And Ken, she fumed on her way back. He shouldn't have taken her over.

Even after he showed up, sheepishly cooking yet another marvelous meal, she tried to remain angry. But the anger eventually subsided, as it always did.

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On the seventh and eighth day of waiting reception cleared up enough for the both of them to catch some broadcasts from further north. Ken had enough charge in the house batteries for almost eight hours of television shows, and they both cuddled on the couch.

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Mara began to wonder if the *Zephyr* would ever show. The last visit was two years ago, when the giant, wheeled caravan sailed into town for a day. Traders and merchants festooned its various decks with

smiles and stalls.

The *Zephyr*, Mara knew from talks to its bridge crew, was one of the few links the outer towns of America still had with the large cities, and each other. Ever since the Petroleum collapse, with the Middle East nuked into oblivion and portions of Europe glowing, the country had been trying to replace an entire infrastructure based on oil.

Almost two generations later it was succeeding.

The large cities used more nuclear power, or even harnessed the sewer systems, but small towns were hit the hardest. Accustomed to power, but dropped of the line, isolated, a minor Dark Age had descended on them. Life based itself here on bare essentials; water and wind.

Mara wanted to see a city lit up in a wanton electrical blaze of light, forcing away the dusk and night with artificial man-made day.

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On the tenth day Ken found her in the bedroom frantically packing.

"They spotted the *Zephyr* coming in from the east," Mara said, hoisting a pack onto her shoulders.

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

"What?"

"Go. You don't know what's out there. Strange places, strange people. Danger."

Mara looked at him.

"Of course."

Ken looked down at the ground.

"I thought we had something. You, me."

"Of course." Mara paused. "I told you that I would be going."

"But I'd hoped..."

"Ken. I can't."

"Go." His voice hardened and he walked into the kitchen. Mara sat on the edge of the bed biting back tears, then snatched the two packs and left angrily.

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The *Zephyr* rolled through Main Street, slowing down to a relative crawl to allow people to run alongside and leap up. Kids thronged the sides of the street, and furious trade went on. The four tall masts of the *Zephyr* towered above the small two and three story town buildings. The masts looked like vertical wings, and used the same principles. Air flowing across the shorter edge of the blade-like mast caused a vacuum, drawing the massive wheeled ship forward.

Mara followed the eager crowd behind the ship. She nodded to the occasional familiar face.

Plastic beads, more precious than gold due the rarity of oils were draped across stalls that slid out of the

side of the hull. Mara aimed her quick walk for one of these, but instead found herself blocked by a familiar form.

"Uncle Dan?"

"Hi." He had her arm in a firm grip. Mara saw the bulk of the *Zephyr* slowly moving away. She tried to pull out of his grip, but couldn't. Her dad pushed through the crowd.

"Dad! What are you doing?"

"It's for your own good, Mara," uncle Dan said. "You don't know what you're doing."

"Yes I do," she yelled, kicking at her uncle's shins. The crowd around them paid no obvious attention, although Mara knew full well that by nighttime it would be the talk of the area.

She begged, pleaded, yelled, kicked, scratched and fought. But the men of the house already had their minds made. They locked her into the basement.

"You'll be out when the *Zephyr* leaves," mom promised.

There were no windows. Mara could only imagine the *Zephyr's* slow progress out of the town. She tried to put a brave face on, then crawled into a corner and cried. After that she beat on the door, but no came to let her out.

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The basement was a comfortable area. The family den, it held several couches and carpet. The door creaked open, and from looking out Mara guessed it to be dusk. Ken came down the stairs carefully.

"It's me Mara."

"I suppose you're in on this too?"

"Actually, no. You're family wants me to speak some sense into you. I won't lie to you, Mara. I want you to stay. But holding you here like this is ridiculous."

"The longer we all stay out here, away from the cities, the crazier it gets."

"Maybe. You're family's scared. They don't want to lose you."

"That doesn't give them the right to lock me up like a damn dog!" Mara yelled.

Ken came closer.

"My sail-cart is outside. That's as far as you need to get. You're a better sailor than anyone else, once in you can outrun everyone. The *Zephyr* is still reachable on a long tack. Hey, I never did get along with your uncle anyway."

Mara looked up at him and gave him a long hug.

"Thank you so much."

"If you're ever back in town, look me up."

"Will you come with me, then?"

"Ask me then."

Ken pulled away and stepped up the stairs.

"Stay close."

He launched himself into her uncle and dad, tackling them with a loud yell. Mara ran past, losing only a shoe, pushing past her mom and out into the yard.

The cart's sail puffed out with a snap, and she was bouncing her way over the sand before she looked back to see two figures at the door watching her go. No one bothered to chase her. They all knew her skill with the sail.

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It took the better part of few hours before the four masts showed up. Mara could hear distant shouting as she overhauled the giant land ship.

"Ahoy *Zephyr*," she shouted.

Some one tossed a ladder down, and Mara hauled herself up. The small sail cart veered off and tipped into the dust, snapping its tiny mast in two. It felt faintly liberating to land on the deck with a smile.

The merchant with the ladder stepped aside, letting an officer in khaki step forward.

"We've been watching you approach for the past few hours," he said. "We like the way you handle the wind."

"Can you read a map?" asked a woman in uniform. She wore strange braids on her shoulders.

"No."

"You looking for a position on board the ship?"

"Yes." Mara felt her stomach flip-flop.

"Then we'll teach you how to read charts," the woman said. She stuck out a hand. "Welcome aboard, kid, I'm Captain Shana. Ever cross me or give me a reason to, I'll toss you off the side of the ship and leave you to the vultures. Understood?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Good. Give her a hammock."

Mara stood on the deck of the *Zephyr*, enjoying the moment. Then the man in uniform touched her shoulder.

"It isn't fun and games, it's a lot of hard work, but worth it. Come on."

Mara paused and looked out at the flat horizon, full of tempting futures. Then she followed him belowdecks.

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