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Vega – The Wind in My Hands

Vega # 1

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I still remember sneaking on to the roof, every night before going to bed and sometimes long after. I would sit there and watch the weather. My eyes would follow the clouds as they drifted across the sky, observe the rain as it fell hard and heavy on the horizon. I stood in the storm, without fear, full of trust – because I was familiar with it. I knew the storm just like I knew the snow and the fog and the columns of clouds that rose high into the sky and came down as thunderstorms. I knew them all like they were my own brothers and sisters.

I always knew what the weather would be like. Long before I learnt to interpret the signs – the shapes and colours of the clouds, the warmth and intensity of the wind – I could feel whether it would rain or whether the sun would shine. I could feel it in my bones, deep in my gut, in the tips of my fingers. The only thing I didn't see coming was the storm that would change the world.

A bead of sweat runs down my temple and I wipe it off with the short sleeve of my blouse. Not even the air conditioning in the bus can do anything about the sweltering heat outside. I fan myself off and Esper shoots me a fleeting smile that says: we're almost there, we'll be out of here soon. He reaches over and tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. I can't deal with his look, the worry in it right now, so I look past him out the window and let the apartment blocks and withered lawns pass me by without taking much note of them.

Almost imperceptibly, the scenery becomes greener. Tall trees with large crowns drop long shadows, and there is the odd lavender bush and scrawny oleander shrubs. Hedges run along the street and a hint of rosemary wafts in through the bus's vents. As I sit up straighter, Esper's smile turns into one of enjoyment, but I don't engage. I'm too busy absorbing the greenery in the gardens and saving it for those days when our missions keep us locked inside the city. Plants have a hard time growing in the city. Just like people.

[...]

'Esper Lund?' the woman asks. She is about fifty, quite a bit shorter than me and rather plump, but the most striking feature about her is her raven hair, pleated into a glistening braid.

Esper turns on his best customer-service smile. He approaches the woman with his hand outstretched. 'The very same. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. Frau Wintorf, I presume?'

The woman nods. 'Alma.' She shakes Esper's hand, and then motions to the two men, one of them about her age, the other a good twenty years her senior. 'This is Yegor and Albert.'

Esper waves me over. 'My assistant Vega.'

We nod and smile at each other pleasantly, then Alma asks us to step into the gardens. She tells Esper all sorts of things about the gardens' history, about the size and the number of plots and other useless stuff, but that's his problem now. I fall back a bit and feel. It's a happy place, you don't need to be a clairvoyant to know that, you just need to breathe in and listen. A few plots ahead of us, children are playing, cheerful squeals and laughter keep interrupting the silence that envelops the complex. A delicate smell fills the air, sweet and a little citrusy at the same time, and at first, I can't place it, but then I realize that it's coming from a climbing rose

that is growing up the wall of a blue shed and sporting dozens of radiant yellow flowers. An entire swarm of bees is buzzing around it.

Roses. It must have been six years since I last saw one, maybe seven. You can't eat roses and they don't provide shade, so they no longer exist in the city. But now, as I catch myself stopping and breathing deep, as though I could hold on to the scent within me, store it like warmth in a wall, I wonder whether surviving is enough. If we're still leaving any space for life.

A woman is kneeling in a vegetable patch next to the blue shed. She has noticed me. With one hand, she shields her eyes against the glaring sun, then her face lights up and she waves at me. Soil crumbles off her gloves.

I smile. Normally, I would carry on walking, but something makes me point at the vines surrounding the white window frames. 'The roses are beautiful.'

Embarrassed, I turn away, but she has already gotten up and is brushing dust off her knees.

'Wait,' she says in a voice that betrays the fact that she likes to laugh, and I realize that she is younger than I had thought. She pulls a small pair of secateurs from a holster on her belt, steps under the rose bush, chooses a flower and snips it off. She smiles as she walks towards me and passes me the rose over the fence. The lines around her eyes are entirely unlike those furrowing the faces of the people who live in the city. I wonder what it's like to live out here. The garden complexes that Esper and I have visited so far have been small fields, there were no playing children, no sun loungers underneath knotted fruit trees like the ones next to the small blue shed, and there certainly weren't any roses.

'Thank you,' I say, as I take the yellow flower. I can't help myself, I smell it, and the scent is so intense that I close my eyes for a second.

When I open them again, the woman is scrutinizing me. 'We all pooled our money, you know,' she says quietly and points to the small group surrounding Esper and Alma with her chin. 'It has only rained twice since February and the little that we were able to catch is almost all gone. You'll be successful, won't you?'

Her gaze pans across to Esper. I can see the hope in her eyes as she looks at him. Esper is good at that. He makes people feel that they can trust him. We'd have a whole lot less work if they knew their hopes were placed on me. But no one can know that, ever.

'We will,' I reply as we watch Esper open the suitcase on a wobbly wooden table and sort the chemical cartridges. They are just for show, but they are part of the equipment. It wouldn't make a difference if they were filled with soapy water – just like the drones, they are

only meant to direct attention away from me. ‘We will be successful,’ I promise, and give the woman one last smile as I wave goodbye.

With a few quick steps I catch up to Esper, Alma, and the two men. Esper gives me an exasperated look because I was dawdling and he had to make more small talk, but I keep a straight face. I set my bag down at the foot of the table, as cool as you like, while Esper rambles on about air pressure and humidity, as if he knew what he was talking about. I take a small black box from my bag, put the tray under my arm, and slip away on a narrow path that leads away from the main path. While Alma and the two men can see me, I hold the black box to the air like I’m taking measurements, then I do away with the show and look for a quiet spot.

Which isn’t so easy, because as soon as I walk a few metres, I can hear voices.

‘... over there, you see? The whole elm population, from here to the property line, has been suffering.’

‘Unfortunately, that happens all too often when there are undesired side effects in the use of atmoactive substances.’

The woman on the other side of the hedge – the owner of the tree nursery, I assume – snorts. ‘You can say that again. Do you have any idea what could have gone wrong here?’

‘The most common accidents happen when somebody gets the dosage wrong or the chemicals are contaminated.’

I do try not to eavesdrop, but Willem makes it difficult. What is he talking about? That doesn’t really sound like an endorsement of the weather makers.

‘And you say that you have filed a complaint with the IAAO?’ he asks. The tone of his voice, between bootlicking and arrogance, sends shivers down my spine.

‘As soon as the extent of it became apparent,’ the woman confirms. ‘But all they said was that they could not prove a connection between the weather modification and the damage that occurred.’

‘Typical. The IAAO has no control over the market and doesn’t want to admit it. There are too many unregistered agencies around. You don’t remember who it was that you hired, by any chance?’

I can almost see his chummy grin through the hedge, but the woman is just as irritated as I am.

‘Why do you want to know that?’ she asks suspiciously.

I’d like to know that too.

‘You can make a complaint with the weather makers’ union. If you tell me the name of the colleague, ...’

‘You have a union? That’s the first I’m hearing of that.’

My sentiments exactly. What is Willem on about? Why is he so bent on getting a name? He has probably started an argument with someone yet again and wants to get back at them now. I wouldn’t put anything past Willem.

‘It’s more of an association that has funds reserved for cases such as yours,’ he continues to run his mouth. ‘Maybe you still have the documents.’

‘Hm, yes, maybe ...’ After a short pause, she continues: ‘What if I take a look at my files and once you’re done here you come see me in the office and we’ll have a cup of coffee?’

‘Five minutes, that’s all I’ll need.’ Willem sounds extremely pleased with himself.

‘Wonderful,’ chirps the woman and starts to walk away.

I make a quiet gagging sound and smile to myself as Willem looks around in confusion. When he discovers me between the branches of the hedge and the expression on his face suddenly turns grim, I say: ‘There’s really nothing you won’t stoop to, is there?’

He bends the branches to the side a little so that I get to enjoy his face in full view. He doesn’t seem embarrassed in the slightest but arrogant as always. ‘Funny you should say that. The thing with your alleged contact the other day ...’

‘Why alleged?’ I feign ignorance, but of course I know that there is no trader named Rita who sells silver iodide on the black market like I claimed.

‘You think you’re really clever, don’t you?’ Willem steps closer to the hedge and is so outraged that droplets of his spit fly through the leaves. ‘Your Rita is called Riva, and she’s an undercover agent for the IAAO. She interrogated me for five hours!’

I suppress a grin. The name was made up, I had no idea that the Inspection Authority for Atmospheric Optimization was now taking on the black market. Normally, it’s us weather makers who have to grapple with the IAAO. But this story explains why Willem is especially annoying today.

‘Oh, that’s really terrible,’ I say with so much fake compassion in my voice that Willem’s face turns bright red with anger, ‘but I have to be on my way.’ I turn away with a small wave of my hand.

‘Vega, one of these days ...,’ he growls behind me, but I barely hear it.

As I look for a quiet spot, I find a small gap in a hedge that takes me to a field full of fruit trees. I feel as though I’m stepping into an oasis from the desert. Short, knotted trees with tiny apples and pears on their branches provide shade for bluebells, sage and mint. Sunlight filters through the branches and casts specks of gold on the ground. The meadow seems like

it's from another time. From a fairy tale. I never would have believed that something like this still existed.

Suddenly, my knees buckle. For a heartbeat, I am not here, on the fringes of the city, beneath an unrelenting sun, I am not seventeen but five, and I'm racing against the butterflies in our garden. I cheat a little bit and they sway in the slight breeze I call so that they can't fly away. Instead, they perform a dance, all around me, and I raise my arms to the sky and dance with them.

The ground beneath my knees is hard. It is so dry that no moss grows, and only little patches of grass. No shiny, colourful butterflies but small brown moths and fat bumblebees are fluttering around the thyme and lavender flowers, but even they have become so rare that seeing them intensifies this surreal feeling. I shake my head and stagger to my feet. There is no time for memories, they make me sentimental, and I don't need that right now. I have to focus my attention on the things that are here, that are real. Everything else is irrelevant now.

I close my eyes and listen, breathe, and feel. A buzzing sound floods my ears, behind that, the laughter of the children, and much, much quieter, so much so that I need a while to place it, the rustling of tiny legs in the dry grass. Dust and the sharp essential oils of the herbs are in the air, but there is also more humidity than I have felt in weeks. A breath of wind, created by tiny wings, brushes against my skin.

Then I call. Warmth floods my body as my consciousness feels its way forward, to the forests where it is cool and shady and where there is much more water stored than there is in this garden. It takes a while for the water to answer. I block out everything that could distract me, voices, sounds, the buzzing of Esper's and Willem's drones. My willpower stretches out, I can feel the energy flow, but then I pause. It's as though my senses are colliding with the air. I try again, a little more insistently, and the sensation disappears.

With my eyes closed, I stand and wait. Time passes with each beat of my heart. The tips of my fingers are tingling, as is my scalp. Finally, I feel it. Like a down feather, the air caresses my bare arms, just a hint at first, then more forcefully. Wind. It raises the hair on the back of my neck, blows a few strands into my face, but still I keep my eyes closed. I wait until I can hear the whisper. It gets louder, becomes a rustle, and now the wind is ripping at my clothes. Every other sound fades away. It is as though the insects and the birds were astonished by the moving air, even the playing children can no longer be heard.

I take a deep breath and open my eyes. Squinting, I return to the here and now. My work is done, I can sense it. Just a little more patience and there will be rain falling onto the gardens, more than it has in months.

[...]

The wind billows Alma's baggy trousers. She turns around to face us and smiles as she pulls an envelope from the inside pocket of her cardigan. That very moment, a drop bursts on her shoulder. She looks at the dark stain spreading on the light green fabric in fascination.

'Here you are,' she says and holds the envelope out to Esper, but she seems absent minded. The gaze of her blue eyes moves me. The thing that has been a part of me ever since I can remember is like a miracle to her. And it has to stay that way, because people can never know what I can do. I have learnt my lesson.

The cumulus clouds have become denser, a seething grey blanket of cloud stretches out above us and drop after drop bursts on the ground and in our hair, more and more, until the spitting becomes a tapping and the tapping turns into a pounding. Esper, Alma, and the two men automatically begin to talk in louder voices, but I lose my patience and shut the lid of the suitcase. My head is pounding. I want to go home. I need rest.

The garden owners say goodbye, waving to us from the gate, and they seem happy about the fact that the rain is now running down their noses. The children have been silent for a minute or two, but now a few of them appear on a pathway and turn onto the main path. They cheer and skip through the pattering rain, and I laugh out loud as one of them, a boy of maybe six, throws himself on the ground and catches the droplets with his tongue. His arms and legs move back and forth, just like before, when there were still proper winters and you could make snow angels in the freshly fallen snow.

Esper reaches for my arm, wanting to pull me along, but something bitter pierces my nose and makes my laughter shrivel up. The pressure in my head that I had just written off as exhaustion becomes a stinging. Even though tears are springing to my eyes, my gaze is glued to the boy, and I feel a coldness creeping across my back that has nothing to do with the fact that my thin blouse is now sticking to my body. I take off my wet glasses, wrest myself free of Esper's grip, and run back through the gate and into the gardens.

'Vega!'

I ignore him.

Now a girl is lying next to the boy and her screams no longer sound joyful. Just like the boy, she is screeching as though her skin was being torn off her body.

Behind me I can feel the heat of Esper's body. He has realized what is happening too. The three adults and the third child stand with their mouths hanging open, seemingly unable to believe what they are seeing.

‘Go!’ I roar. ‘We have to get them out of the rain! Look for shelter! Get out of the rain!’

I don’t know how many people hear my instructions, but I hope that the rest arrive at the same idea by themselves. At least once the pain sets in.

I reach the young girl, a second before Esper kneels down next to the boy, grabs him in his arms and scoops him up.

‘Where do we go?’ he asks, and I point to the blue shed.

The young woman has come to the fence, opens the gate, and reaches for the other boy, who lets himself be dragged along without resistance.

‘Shhhh,’ I say when the girl squirms in my arms and swipes at me, so that I have to struggle to carry her through the pounding rain.

‘Make it stop! Make it stop!’ she screams over and over again.

Alma and the two men finally spring to life. Yegor and Albert rush toward me to take the girl from me. I leave her to them and even though my skin is starting to burn, the others have long since disappeared into the blue shed, and Esper is calling my name, I stay in the rain and do what the girl has asked me to do: I make it stop.

As soon as I start, I begin to tremble – I still haven’t recovered from earlier, and every drop of rain is like the sting of a wasp, venomous and agonizing. But I have to end it before it turns into a disaster.

Out of the corner of my eye, I think I see something moving in one of the sheds, a shadow that glides towards me at first, but then disappears back to the shelter of the roof, twitching. I pay it no mind, I can barely keep myself on my feet as the wind rages all around me and flings the rain against my legs and my back, against the hedges and fences. The pressure in my head makes my ears ring. I grit my teeth as the acid cuts along my spine, I have to block out the pain.

It throbs as I unleash the storm. My arms cramp under the force with which the air pummels me, the howling in my ears drowns out every other sound, even Esper’s panicked screams, but I stand up straighter in the wind and send the poison rain out into the countryside, away from these gardens, away from the city, to a place where it can’t hurt any more people.

At least by now the storm has sent the people running into their houses, so I am the only one who notices two IAAO vehicles stop outside the front gate of the gardens a few minutes later. Me and the shadow in the shed.

They can barely open the doors in the storm, but eventually some officers in protective suits brace the wind and get out of their vehicles.

And I fall to the ground.

[...]

I am dreaming of a drumming noise that seems to be coming from all directions. It fills my head, or no, something else is already there, pressure, a grinding pressure, and the drumming pricks like needles, turning the dull thudding into explosive pain.

‘Vega,’ I hear, but I don’t know what it means.

I thrash my head around, but the pain follows me.

‘VEGA!’

I start with a scream, feel hands on my arms, a bright light illuminates my face for a moment. It takes a second, then the realization penetrates my pain, and with a groan I drop my forehead onto Leo’s shoulder. He puts a hand on my neck.

‘Stay awake, Vega,’ he says, quieter this time. ‘The world is ending out there.’

The drumming, the pounding, the pain ... I block everything out, for a few breaths, and then I can think again. I lift my head gingerly.

‘What?’ I ask, but even as Leo is taking a breath to explain, I understand what he means.

Hail is pounding against the glass of the dome, the wind is pushing the rain sideways and howling through the gaps. Every few seconds, the guest bedroom lights up with piercing flashes of lightning.

Leo’s thumb caresses the furrows between my eyebrows. ‘Did you ...?’

‘I’m fine.’ I push his arm aside and get my butt out of bed. It’s a lie, but I banish the pain from my head. It’s the same pressure I felt two days ago, when the IAAO cornered us, the same kind of storm. I step through the door and into the gallery, Leo follows me. The roaring and raging of the wind accompanies us as we run along the edge of the butterfly house to the glass door that leads to the small rooftop terrace. I push aside the memories of what almost happened there.

I throw myself against the door. It shakes but doesn’t give in. Leo slams into my back, wanting to push me to the side to help, but then there’s a big bang right next to us. We retreat when a crack tears through the windowpane, radiating out from a white, shattered ring.

Another bang, this time above us. We duck our heads because another pane of glass breaks. The hail has smashed through it.

It is now pounding all over the dome of the butterfly house. Down below, Boyd has woken up. He keeps shouting: ‘What’s going on?’ but we don’t have time to explain it to him. If the butterfly house is in danger, the rest of the neighbourhood sure as hell is.

Despite the humid heat, my arms are covered in goosebumps as I turn to face Leo. ‘I have to go out there. The wind is so strong, you have to hold onto me. Otherwise ...’

I don’t expand on what could happen to me, because the next pane of glass bursts beside us.

‘Vega ...’ Leo looks at me, shaking his head, the tone of his voice is almost pleading, but he knows that I can’t just run away. That he has to help me calm the storm, at least redirect it. Every few seconds now, lightning flashes across the sky, thunder rolls through the butterfly house like an earthquake. Nobody will be safe so long as this storm is raging outside.

His gaze becomes determined, I watch him prepare himself. He puts his arm around my shoulders, then he leans against the glass door. With our combined strength, we push it open, but only just. The power of the storm seems to intensify in this corner of the roof, the rain is like a brick wall, it’s hard to breathe.

Leo turns his face away, but I hold mine into the howling, pelting chaos. When I raise my arms, Leo grips my hip and remains standing like that, the weight that keeps me on the ground, my anchor, as I search, feel, close my eyes and let my mind be carried away.

Once again, the thunderstorm’s impulses run across my skin like goosebumps. I hear a muffled groaning coming from Leo whenever the waves are particularly powerful. Can he feel them? Or is it just that I might slip from his grip? I can’t find out now, I have to get to the eye, to the place where the storm is coming from.

Just like last time, I feel the storm resisting. It’s hard to read it, to understand its patterns. And once again, it seems to have a kind of purpose, a will. Something no storm should have.

Flashes of lightning blind me, thunder vibrates through all the fibres of my body. In between the discharges, the night is pitch-black, only here and there are the undersides of the clouds illuminated by the lights of the city like the bellies of enormous whales. Rainwater runs from my hair and down my nose, but I continue to reach out my arms like sensors. Like antennas.

And there it is. The heart of the storm. Leo tightens his grip around my waist, only now do I realize that I have taken a step forward. I feel the fury raging in the chaos, I hold it back with everything I have. Then something clicks, my energy and the energy of the thunderstorm fuse. For a moment, I lean against Leo, gathering strength, before I scatter the masses of air in every direction.

The pressure eases immediately. Leo stumbles backwards and pulls me with him, but then we find our balance again. I lower my arms, he presses me against his body, rubs my cold skin. I stare out into the darkness until the pattering on the dome fades away, until the water

has stopped gushing through the gutters and starts to run in fine rivulets along the windows, until the wind falls silent. And then, the night retreats as well, to our right, the horizon begins to glow red and orange.

I feel Leo's heart beating against my back, calmer now, and at the same time I hear the screams. It takes a second or two for us to move, then we rush towards the balcony railing. The rooftop terrace looks down on the tiny house estate and the workshops behind it, something I didn't notice this morning. At first, I can't see what is happening below us, but with dawn approaching fast, it becomes clear that the houses no longer exist. Where there had been three dozen of them before, masses of brown water are now flowing. The canal has burst its banks, the torrents the thunderstorm has dumped on us have swept everything away. Whatever isn't being carried off by the mud is piling up into mountains of debris and rubble at the foot of the butterfly house and along the edge of the canal.

A woman is standing on top of one of those mountains. She's bending down, clearing away pieces of rubble and shouting a name.

'Enna! Enna! Enna!' rings in my ears.

I can't look away, but a hand grips my upper arm. Leo's hand.

'We have to get out of here. Let's go!'

I slowly turn my head to face him. His face is white as a sheet. He pulls my arm, but I can't move. It was too late. It was too late again, and someone has paid the price.

I've failed again.

[...]

I don't know how Leo managed to pull me from the rooftop terrace and back into the guest bedroom in the end to grab our things. I only wake up from my numbness when he leads me by the hand back to the spiral staircase, which we run down at breakneck speed.

'What happened?' Boyd calls out to us.

'Go outside!' Leo shouts. 'Go outside and help those people. There are casualties!'

Boyd's gaze falls on me, full of mistrust and fear, but Leo shoves him as we run past.

'It wasn't her! It's thanks to her that more people weren't hurt.'

Now that the shock wears off, the exhaustion really kicks in. My knees buckle, Leo is struggling to keep me on my feet. Still, we arrive at the gate within seconds. Leo pushes it open.

'Stay with me,' he murmurs, and it's only then that I notice that my head has fallen onto my chest. I lift it with a jerk and focus on my feet.

Leo looks left and right. People are out and about on the street in the faint dawn light, but no one pays any attention to us. Boyd seems to be springing to life as well now, because he pushes past us and runs towards a little boy who is sitting crying next to a stream of mud. Leo breathes in sharply, then pulls me to the left. We hug the side of the butterfly house, keep running along the wall of the estate for what feels like hours, then we head north.

That's when my perception begins to blur. I'm shivering from cold and exhaustion – even the piece of chocolate Leo shoves into my mouth doesn't change that – I can no longer feel my legs and my fingers are dug into Leo's shirt. I don't know if I could remove them.

Leo continues to drag me along like that, it's slowly getting brighter, that much I notice. He's swearing at shorter and shorter intervals now, the rest of the time he talks to me insistently. Encouraging or calming? I can't tell.

Then I suddenly feel a seat under my backside. It's covered in a scratchy fabric. Leo leans over me and fastens a seatbelt, then I get pushed against the backrest. We are moving. Behind us, someone starts to scream.

[...]