



Illustrated by Kurt Huggins

A Place to Stand On

Marie Vibbert

Hortensia inched along a beam fifty kilometers over the surface of Venus, her safety harness clipped to two different guide ropes. The structure beneath her shook and bucked with the wind. It was cool, barely twenty degrees Celsius, as the Sun painted the western horizon with the first gilding of daybreak. The clouds of Venus were a surface under her, a choppy sea of cotton, lit now and again with flashes of lightning in the deeps.

A long way to fall. Her mother would say, “Anything over thirty meters and you’re dead, so why worry?” Her mother was a climber, leading tourists up El Potrero Chico on weekends. She’d been proud when Hortensia climbed, even when she climbed badly, because parents always want their kids to share their interests. Space she did not approve of. “There’s no reason to climb so high that you can’t come home for the weekend!”

Hortensia shouted to be heard over the wind on her suit mike. “Coming into position near

pylon three.” There wasn’t much to Nueva Tenochtitlan right now, just the beginning of a platform and the pylons mooring her to the balloon. Like its namesake, a city built where no solid land had been. Construction lights dotted the spindly structure, making it glitter in the cobwebs of mist.

Across the steel and rope lattice, she saw Julio making his way to the section opposite hers. They worked in synchronicity, balancing every step, she and Julio and Nora spaced out around Eduardo’s crane and the nest of building materials at the center. Hortensia carefully transferred first one and then another safety clip to the hold she’d welded the day before. Secure. She relaxed. It was time to start another section of the city that would some day be her home.

“Material incoming,” Eduardo’s voice broke from her earpiece, always a little too loud. Maybe she shouldn’t shout so much, either. She leaned back and raised her hands to catch and guide the piece of fabricated hull Eduardo lowered to her. She could see him far above, strapped to the spindly crane. The Mexican flag snapped smartly in the wind behind him. Eduardo raised a hand, and then his voice came over the radio. “Looking beautiful. Let me know if I need to ease up.”

“This light little thing?” Hortensia let herself feel a little airless to avoid gasping. “I got it.”

Eduardo laughed. “Well hurry up and staple her down. I want to get off this thing before it falls apart.”

Hortensia lowered the welding shield over her visor. “It hasn’t fallen apart yet, you big chicken.”

The radio crackled. The mission commander, Juana Santiago, spoke. She rarely used the main channel. It had to be bad news. “All work crews back to aerostat. Now.”

Hortensia kept welding. “I just started; this thing will rip off if I—”

“We’re losing altitude. All work crews back. Move it.”

Hortensia’s heart froze. She looked down at the unchanged clouds. “Are you sure?”

“There’s a leak in the primary balloon. Re-inflation control isn’t responding. We’re going to disconnect the gantry so the platform doesn’t drag the aerostat down with it.”

“Whoa, wait,” Eduardo said. “What about the chopper? Get someone up there with a can of spray sealant.”

“Chopper’s out of gas. Supply ship isn’t due for two weeks. Look, guys—I don’t want this any more than you do, but your lives are worth more than the mission. We can start over again.”

Their first platform had failed when the rigging came loose. A month of work. It had hurt. But this—eight months of work stretched out around her. How would they start again if they lost the balloon? It was the backup balloon, their only backup balloon, which replaced the one lost when it pulled free. “We can’t start over,” Hortensia said.

There was silence. No one disagreed, but no one wanted to agree.

“I’ll pull the section back,” Eduardo said. “Get out of there.”

“No,” Hortensia said. “Control—we can climb.”

There was a pause. “How much time do we have?” Juana asked someone. The answer was off-mike.

Hortensia did a temporary weld—a few dots to hold the piece there for as long as it could—and secured her equipment.

Juana said, “It’ll take you an hour to get up there and we barely have that.”

Hortensia took the “barely have that” as a go-ahead and unclipped her safety line. “Eduardo, you can get the sealant to me from the crane. I’m climbing this tether.”

“Every meter we sink, the weather’s going to get worse,” Juana said.

Hortensia fastened her safety clips to the nearest balloon tether. She climbed up what would some day be a wall, and then there was nothing above her but the cable stretching about twelve meters to the balloon. She wrapped her legs around it and started climbing hand-over-hand. Her welding gloves slipped, but she couldn’t go barehanded without shredding her palms, so they’d have to do.

A gasping voice came over the radio. “I’ve got the sealant. I’m taking it to Eduardo.”

Eduardo said, “Thanks, Julio. I’m retracting the arm.”

Juana said, "I take it she's already climbing?"

"Yup," said Eduardo.

Juana groaned. "We don't know exactly where the leak is, just what section."

"I've got eyes," Hortensia said. She kept climbing, trusting the rest of the crew to come around because it would be easier than stopping her. That was how she'd gotten her family to accept her going into space.

After a brief pause, Juana said, "You have half an hour. If you take longer than that, we pull everyone else in and leave you out there."

Hortensia was sweating heavily. She kept her eyes on her hands and her mind on getting the next grip and hauling herself up. One two three. One two three. Resettle her hold with her feet, reach, and pull. The balloon was fifteen meters up. She'd done longer climbs back home in Hildago. She could imagine the limestone cliffs, the blue sky.

The sudden gutless feeling when an anchor popped free. The scatter of stones that heralded a fall.

She'd done twenty meters, many times. Not a rope the whole way, but still. There was a section of her regular trail with an eleven-meter rope climb. This would not even be twice that. Then—how much further? The leak wouldn't be right where she arrived on the balloon, unless fate was feeling uncharacteristically kind. She'd never climbed on a balloon, but she was sure it wasn't hard. It would be like the top of the mountain. Her mother's favorite place, walking on top of the world.

"Tensia, this isn't going to be like climbing a mountain," Juana said, as if reading her thoughts. "It's flexible and moving. Are you sure you can do this? You can still make it back if you slide down now."

The cable gave a particularly hard buck. Hortensia tried not to think about her first fall—from a faulty anchor made by her own mother. Not that she blamed her, but oh how it hung between them when she said she was leaving, maybe for good. It was an unspoken question, weighting the air.

Their last climb together had been slow, the silence broken only by the relentless tapping of hammers as they both sank more anchors than necessary.

Hortensia's left hand slipped, and the welding glove rotated nearly halfway around. She locked her knees against the rope and gave herself a second to shake it back. Her hand rejoiced at the rest, but felt worse starting again. That was always the way.

"Get the net," Eduardo said. "Nora, Julio. Come on, we need something under her."

This reminded Hortensia that there was, in fact, nothing under her, and as she ascended, she was also going outward from the platform below. She looked up at the balloon. It was a taut, sandstone-yellow torus. It looked no closer than it had on the platform. At least it didn't look less inflated. She turned her eyes back to her hands. She could trust her hands, and her arms, though they were sweating and trembling. She trusted them.

Her coworkers and Venus—not so much.

"Tensia—the crane arm is approaching to your left. Let me know when you see it."

Hortensia didn't want to look away from the rope. She had to stop and steel herself. She turned her head. Then she had to do it again because she'd been too quick. The black spider-arm of the crane was weaving in the wind, like a snake climbing the clouds up to her. Eduardo had put the square equipment basket in its big claw, like a dainty purse. The sealant can rattled inside, buffeted by the wind. "I see it." Behind it she could see the aerostat—their home for the past year—so small and clumsy under its cluster of balloons, like a wad of gum dangling off the gantry that joined it to the larger construction platform, cables draped loosely between. The helicopter was strapped down at the end of one soup-can module, its rotors swung back like insect wings.

"Keep climbing. I'm aiming above you."

Hortensia watched the rope above. Slowly, jerkily, the crane-arm came into view. A dangerous thing—she could hit it; it could hit her. She imagined the steps involved in getting one hand free, opening the cage, getting the bottle out.

The crane swung wildly past the rope and then swung back.

"We're getting some weather," Control said. "High clouds due west. They're coming our way."

The crane-head swung again, just over Hortensia's head. She flinched as it passed.

Juana said, "If it rains, this is off. You get back in here. We can't take the rain."

Eduardo cursed. "Stupid-ass crane, stupid-ass wind. It was probably the rain that caused the leak."

Julio said, "Sit out in sulfuric acid and see how *you* feel."

The Aztecs called Venus Quetzalcoatl. Not a love goddess, but a serpent ready to swallow the unfit. It wasn't the first time they were more accurate than the Europeans.

Hortensia inched higher. The crane hit the cable and it shook. She slipped downward, her heart leaping into her throat. Shakily, she wrapped one arm around the cable so she could let go and reach for the basket. It bucked and swayed—or, she supposed, she was bucking and swaying. One pass she got the catch open, the next the lid open. The can skittered away from her fingers and for a moment it teetered, but it fetched up against the basket and she got her hand around. She clipped it to her vest. "Got it," she said. Her voice came out too labored for her liking, but there was no helping that.

"Retracting arm. Tensia, Nora and Julio are spreading the safety net. We've got you."

"No you don't," Hortensia said. She kept her eyes on the torus. The cable she was climbing bent outward around it. She remembered her first climbs, her mother saying, "I've got you." She never said that after the accident. Instead she'd say, "Never trust someone else to catch you. It's your job not to fall."

What would her mother say if she came all this way to fall?

Juana said, "The leak is two sections to your right, and the simulations think it's near the top of the torus."

Hortensia tried to figure out how many more meters that would be. Another ten? How many hand-over-hands per meter? Four? Eight seconds per hoist? Hortensia's head felt heavy. She decided to stop counting.

The balloon cast a deep shadow over her, now, but it didn't cool her. It was getting hotter as the morning progressed. The planet below was barely started on its long day, but they rode the clouds. The wind would carry them to sunset again in about forty-eight hours, and then whip them along the dark side of the planet for a two-day journey back to the light. The temperature could get up to fifty degrees Celsius, hotter than a summer climb back home, but freezing compared to the surface below. "Midday" would come in about four hours and last eight. Over the long noontime, in their sealed suits, they tended to cook in their own juices.

She reached the first cross-wire and had to unclip and re-clip above it. Dangling a moment between one side and the other, she looked down at the city platform. She could see almost the whole of it. The square in the center was a conscious nod to Aztec architecture. When the dome was finished, it would be a small park, verdant: the first green on Venus. The corridor that would hold Hortensia's apartment hadn't been built yet, but she knew where it would be. She would have her own bed that wasn't pre-warmed by the second shift and a little window looking out on clouds.

The thought of clean, cool sheets gave her the strength to pull her body up and onto the second wire.

"Even if you fix the leak in the next twenty minutes," Control said, "We'll be living in chop until we can get the balloon reinflated. We're already ten meters down from our usual altitude."

"Doom and gloom," Eduardo said. "How are you holding up, Hortensia?"

Hortensia gritted her teeth and held her breath before speaking, so it would come out calm. "Fine. Reaching the second cross wire."

"I'll keep the crane nearby. Maybe you can use it."

"DON'T." That was the last thing she wanted.

Unclip. Re-clip. Unclip. Re-clip. She had the hard fabric surface of the balloon under her now and had to press into it to get her clips to catch. It felt more like rock climbing with something under her. The fabric was slick, but the movement wasn't as bad as she feared. It was more like

she and the balloon were still and everything else was swaying. A little of the tension left her chest. "When I get to the third line, I'll go along it. I can get a toe-hold on the second line."

The first raindrops hit her back, fat and solid. Through her coveralls, they felt like normal rain, not acid. The coveralls were coated in Teflon, lightweight and acid-protecting. They didn't have to be pressurized, and the design favored movement for work. Mostly, the light suit wasn't a problem. They didn't stay outside too long. You were supposed to rush in as soon as raindrops fell. She'd gotten burns on her ankles when she stayed through the first moments of drizzle to finish a weld.

Under the seams of her suit, at her wrists and ankles and neck, she had spandex sleeves. It was supposed to help. Better than nothing.

More fat drops hit her shoulders. She could see the top of the balloon now. She moved her clips to the horizontal wire and nudged her toes into the tiny purchase of the parallel wire below. "Control, I'm moving to the second section to the right."

"You have to abort, Hortensia. Rain's coming. Jump to the net."

"Negative. I'm almost there."

"Mother of God," Eduardo said. "Control, we can't just sit here."

"That's affirmative. Get your asses inside the aerostat. Hortensia, if you survive, you are getting written up for disobeying orders."

Hortensia said, "Not if I save us all."

"Asshole. You're on the right section now. Tell me when you have a visual confirmation of the leak. You'd better hope it's only one."

Hortensia looked at the smooth hill of canvas above her. She inched along. Unchanged canvas above. Then she saw it: a tiny distortion of light where air blew outward. A few dark specs against the canvas—a spattering of small holes, a weakened area. Another two meters, maybe. But there was no vertical wire leading to the weak patch, and only one more horizontal wire between her and it. She would have to unclip her safety lines entirely to reach it.

"Hortensia? Say something. You're scaring me."

"I see it. Almost there."

She felt naked and vulnerable the moment she unhooked the second line. She had to lie still a moment, hugging the balloon, waiting to die, before she got up the nerve to move her hand overhead, pressing her body into the firmness she stretched, lost contact below, an eternity of balance. Her fingers brushed the higher line.

Once she had it in her hand, she felt better, connected. She pulled herself up. The raindrops were hitting her back heavily now and splashing against the balloon below her. Droplets splashed up to her visor. She crawled, willing herself to be heavy and stable on the balloon, to stick to its rough surface.

She found the first little hole—hardly the size of a stylus-tip. She put her finger over it. There was too much noise—the creaking cables, the howling wind—to hear if a small hiss had stopped. "I'm at the leak."

Slowly, sweating fiercely, her fear lending a coldness to the oppressive heat, she worked her feet onto the last horizontal rope and laid herself down flat, her left arm wide to help hold her there. It took several cursing moments to get the sealant bottle off its hook.

She looked down at it.

She needed both hands to open it.

"Hortensia? How's it going?"

"FINE." She didn't bother controlling her voice this time. The air in her respirator tasted like batteries now, even though, hypothetically, the rain couldn't get in. The face-shield was fogging faster. She was breathing too hard. She forced herself to close her eyes. She slipped back down the torus, back to the line she could clip to. She clipped on, once. As she turned to get her left and right hands together, she slipped. The safety-line caught her, jerking her harness tight into her chest and groin. She dangled. Angry with herself, knowing she should have clipped both hooks, she opened the sealant bottle and re-hooked it, open, to her vest.

"Hortensia?"

There was no breath to make a reply as she twisted, trying to get back up on the wire. She was so tired. Her legs didn't want to do what she told them to do. She kicked and kicked and finally got her heel on the wire. She crawled sideways, digging her foot between cord and canvas lest it slip off.

Her neck was itching, and her wrists and ankles. The neck was worst, though. The rain was streaking the outside of her facemask. Back at the cross wire, she was able to climb up and get her other foot on the wire. Then she made it back to the hole. Would the wetness make the balloon slippery? She didn't have time to worry.

She sprayed the sealant over the wet surface, over the hole and a line of its friends. There were about a half-dozen that she could see, and probably a few she couldn't, pinholes alongside fingertip-holes. The spray was dark blue, sharp against the yellow balloon.

Then she saw the big hole. A line of smaller holes had caused a tear. She had no idea how much more sealant was in the can. She held the flapping canvas down and sprayed over her glove. Focused on checking that the flap stayed down when she moved her finger, she forgot she was standing on a thin wire and stepped into air. She flung herself flat again. Hortensia's curse rang loud over the comm system. No one responded.

Idiot! A thousand times done right, and only once wrong was enough to kill you. Her mother's words, again, and even her mother's tone in her head.

The flap stayed stuck. Hortensia sprayed more on top of where her finger had been. She sprayed the sealant back and fourth as far as she could reach until the bottle was empty. Then she dropped it. She heard it hit something, and then another thing, and then it was gone.

"Hortensia?"

"Fine," she said, breathing out. The itch was becoming a burn. "Sealant in place. I'm coming down."

Her arms and legs were shaking as she lowered herself back to the wire. Her feet slipped off the one below, twice.

"No, Hortensia, there's no time to climb down. The rain is going to burn you. You're going to have to jump. You have to jump for the net."

Eduardo said, "I've got you, Tensia. I've got you. Just let go."

She only trusted her own anchors. Her own welds. Her own hands.

"Don't trust someone to catch you," her mother said.

"No." Hortensia felt tears in her eyes. She couldn't make it, and she couldn't make herself let go. Didn't they understand? She'd spent her whole life trying not to fall.

"Time's up," Juana said. "Jump. Your suit will be compromised before you're halfway down."

"Please, Tensia. Let me catch you. You gotta take a chance. Isn't that what we're doing here? We're building our own ground piece by piece. It's lunacy, but we're doing it. Right?"

Hortensia reached the down-rope. She unclipped one safety-line, and then reached for the other. She hesitated, squeezing it. She was so tired. The carabineer slipped as she tried to fasten it. She wrapped her leg around the line and started lowering herself.

"Let go!" Five voices in her headset, all urging, all pleading. She started inching down. She had to move the safety lines over the bottom cross line. She unclipped one, and then the other.

What if she missed the net? She would implode, pop like a grape before she reached the surface of Venus. If she were lucky, the heat would kill her before that. Devour her as unworthy.

"It's because I never let you fall," her mother had said, when she didn't think Hortensia was listening. She had been angry to hear it at the time—how her mother made everything about herself. "That's why you can't get over it. I should have let you fall when you were younger."

Hortensia's fingers slipped trying to clip the safety back on. She scrambled, grabbing with exhausted fingers. She lost her hold.

For a split second, she was free.

I understand now, Mama.

She felt flat on her air tank, the rope net singing the strain around her. She screamed as she rolled onto her side, and her suit gaped at the neck, exposing skin to acid.

Hands were fumbling over her, rolling her to the edge of the net like a fresh-caught tuna. She

ANALOG

slipped on smooth metal and almost plummeted off of it, a hard hand digging into her arm saved her. "I got you," Nora said. Strong, steady Nora, who never said much. "Easy, girl. I've got you."

The platform was bucking wildly; the storm had overtaken them. They had to inch their way back to the aerostat, one handhold and safety-hook at a time, Nora in front, Julio behind. Hortensia sucked her acid-scented breaths in shallowly and kept her jaw clenched against the pain. She could see smoke rising from Nora's back.

They tumbled together into the equipment storage module. Someone pulled her facemask up and off, and then Eduardo had her face in his hands and kissed her full on the lips. Hortensia weakly pushed him away. "Asshole," she said.

"No, you are the asshole. You kept us all out in the rain. But you're a beautiful asshole."

White powder drifted over them. Nora flung handfuls out of the antacid barrels like celebration confetti.

Hortensia let her friend's arms support her, her feet weightless on the floor that held them fifty kilometers over the surface of a boiling planet. It wasn't unlike the impossibly fraught task of raising a child, keeping her safe. Together, they made a place to stand on.

Besides selling thirty-five short stories, a dozen poems, and a few comics, Marie Vibbert has been a medieval (SCA) squire, ridden 17% of the roller coasters in the United States and has played O-line and D-line for the Cleveland Fusion women's tackle football team.