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-The Victor

It's beautiful.

So thought Koslov as he first gazed upon the planet Venus. The clouds of sulfuric orange and yellow wreathed its surface in a surreal light. Roughly the size of Earth, Koslov thought with interest, yet so different; Venus' celestial clouds were very unlike the friendlier white variety found on Koslov's home planet.

"Objective in sight, sir," Koslov said into a small radio attached to his suit, though the words were much too small and insignificant to describe the perfect, stunning, radiant orb before him.

A man's sharp voice returned to him, though he very nearly ignored it in his awe. "10-4, Koslov. Prepare the *Aphrodite*."

Aphrodite 12, Koslov mentally corrected Mission Control. He winced as he thought of the other eleven *Aphrodite* missions sent to Venus. Each one was destroyed: crushed by Venus' thick atmosphere's pressure, melted or disintegrated upon touching Venus' molten hot surface, and *Aphrodite 11* had almost, almost made it—only to be burned up in a sudden volcanic eruption, the possibility of which had been completely overlooked by Russia's finest astronomers.

Each *Aphrodite* mission had been manned, just as this one was.

Venus grew larger in the window. Koslov thought of Earth, of running blue rivers and green forests and the small family he had been born into. His family—dead, all of them, so why look back? Koslov had always thought as

such. But here, gazing down upon the thing that could be his own demise, Koslov couldn't help but reflect on his life.

Calm yourself, boy. You've still got a couple of hours to live. Koslov's face screwed up in a determined grimace as he imagined *Aphrodite 12* destroyed, decimated as its predecessors had been.

Still, this was his dream, one that came closer and closer just as the swirling surface of Venus did. "Yes, sir," Koslov barked into the radio, and his thick Russian accent was more pronounced than usual as sweat trickled down his face, cold and wet against his skin, feverish and hot as it was with excitement. When he was a boy growing up in 2100—at the tender age of five—he had observed the stars and planets through the advanced telescopes and dreamed of seeing them up close.

His dreams had never included being melted, crushed, or burned to death, somehow. Koslov used to cherish the thought of being the first live person to reach Venus and claim it more officially for Russia—as was proper, he thought smugly—but now fear had taken the place of that hope. Koslov, with surprise, found himself wanting to go home, but it was too late to turn back now. After all, he had been sent by his country to gather information about Venus, as well as an eyewitness account—probes, Russia's scientists had decided, were not enough. Besides, it was as important for Russia's honor as for its scientists that *Aphrodite* was a success. America had claimed the moon, Mars, even Mercury if Koslov had heard correctly—but Venus was Russia's, and right now Russia was the laughingstock of the world.

Well, thought Koslov, no more.

Koslov thought he saw a small eruption on Venus' surface and thought that perhaps he had seen one of Venus' many volcanoes, which were said to

be huge. At least Mission Control had programmed the *Aphrodite* to sidestep all such dangers when it landed, difficult as it had proven to be.

The thought of Mission Control made Koslov burst into action as he had so been commanded. "Preparing *Aphrodite*," he yelled back into the radio. Maneuvering himself around—no easy task in a command module of this size—he carefully switched off part of the power in the command module and transferred it to the *Victor*, the part of the shuttle that would detach from the main body and land on Venus' surface. The *Victor* was small and cramped, a fact that almost obnoxiously showed itself as Koslov strapped himself in. He could see Venus through a tiny, circular window in the side, over a meter thick so as to withstand Venus' atmospheric pressure. *It'll be all right, Koslov*, he told himself firmly.

He reviewed all of the facts that dictated that he would live. Koslov would not actually be required to step onto the surface of Venus as the American astronauts had on the moon; it would kill him, as no suit had been made yet to protect an astronaut against the burning effects of Venus' fiery surface, nor that could protect against the extreme pressure. It would be like walking under 3,000 feet of Earth's ocean water unprotected. The *Victor* had been equipped with a special firm metal webbing to withstand the enormous weight, just as the insulation around the edges—which had been tested time and time again—should rightly prevent the heat from killing Koslov. Still, he worried, and still, he wondered: *Is it really worth it? Am I the right person for the job when I half don't want to do it?*

He could imagine more enthusiastic people for the job, certainly, a few of them just as bright and capable as he was. That lad Vlad, for example, at least ten years younger than Koslov was. He was barely past manhood, but a

genius in the making all the same. Koslov remembered how his dark hair was constantly ruffled, the heavy fur coats he wore to protect against the biting Russian cold only half-on when he rushed madly to the Training Center each morning. Yes, perhaps Vlad should have gone, or another young man like him. But Vlad hadn't gone. Koslov had, and he was beginning to regret it with all his heart.

Is this enormous chance of dying worth the sights and fame?

Sure, Koslov thought to himself as he gazed at Venus' ever-nearer clouds in the window, when he was a kid he was like all other kids—he imagined himself famous, maybe even in the spot Koslov occupied now. And then, again with that question: Is it worth it, Koslov? Are you happy now?

A mechanical voice sounded in Koslov's earpiece. "Nearing Venus: 10 minutes until the atmosphere," it told him, and Koslov found himself smiling grimly. It used to be that multiple men had to go on such missions, and so it had been with *Aphrodite* in its first six stages. Since then, though, Earth's scientists—a great number of them Japanese, Koslov reflected—had created a system that would do the work of a partner astronaut with supposedly no danger of any screw-ups that humans might make. The system had no emotions—and the thought comforted Koslov—the system could not panic or hit an incorrect button and send Koslov hurtling to his death. The system, as it was, was foolproof.

There was a slight tug on *Aphrodite 12* as it entered the web of Venus' gravity. Koslov grinned with relief; just as it had been on the simulator he had practiced so many times, so it was now. Everything was going according to plan. The *Aphrodite* series had always been among the most spectacular of shuttles, Koslov reflected to himself, the fastest of their kind. Hitting

that thick layer of condensed gases a mere ten minutes after reaching Venus' gravitational range? The scientists of the Old Age would have called it ludicrous.

The scientists of the New Age called it average.

It seemed like those ten minutes were gone before Koslov could blink. After five minutes, he thought, *Five minutes already? Can't we procrastinate a little?* After seven: *I want to go home!* At nine, Koslov pondered all of the various fates he could meet upon Venus' hot surface and when the *Victor* detached itself from *Aphrodite 12* with a rough jolt at ten, Koslov said a simple, three-word prayer:

"Lord, help me."

He was going to need it. The *Victor*—looking, Koslov was sure, like a great steel orb—was lowered carefully into the dense orange-yellow clouds, automatically fixing its course with small propellant rockets on the sides. They were computer controlled, of course; Mission Control trusted no human to take care of their special *Victor* module. Koslov shivered as first a dim haze, then a full-blown yellow cloud obscured his view of Venus in the window. He could hear small cracks in the *Victor's* metal webbing as the pressure increased; it disturbed him, though he had been told that it would happen and experienced it on various simulations before. The pressure, Koslov knew, would be 90 times greater than Earth's once he reached Venus' surface. He imagined being a scientist back at Mission Control: watching, through the *Victor's* internal camera, as the module touched down on Venus; feeling a flash of anxiety as the *Victor* started to crackle and pop under the huge weight bearing down on it; then the final yell of dismay and hopelessness as the *Victor* collapsed in on itself and poor Koslov was shown

crumbling into black dust as he hit Venus' surface! Koslov shivered at the image his own mind had produced.

Koslov forced himself to relax. If he was going to die, he couldn't prevent it, and freaking out would help no one. It wouldn't help Koslov, certainly, nor the *Victor*, nor *Aphrodite 12*, nor Mission Control. Still, Koslov's muscles—small though they were, he thought with an uncertain half-smile—seemed to be vibrating, longing to jump out of his skin and get out of this tiny little doomsday device. Only by clenching them as hard as he could did Koslov put a temporary end to his muscles' disobedience. Still his whole body quivered, and every time the *Victor* shook he trembled violently. Koslov became aware that he was gnashing his teeth only when one became loose and he tasted blood and he forced himself to stop.

The world was one of dust. The clouds of sulfuric acid surrounding him looked particularly menacing now that they were even thicker. "Halfway down," the computer in the *Victor* informed Koslov, and he repeated the information to Mission Control.

The Mission Control communications man, who Koslov knew couldn't have been more than five years older than he, said, "Hang in there, kid."

Koslov gritted his teeth but refrained from making a snappy retort. He had more important things to worry about. For instance, though he hadn't been commanded to do so, he checked the state of the *Victor's* insulation and pressure systems, as well as his supply of recycled oxygen. Koslov examined these with the worry and tenseness of a starving man reviewing his food rations. After all, he mused, they were the difference between life and death. They all appeared to be functioning normally, but was Koslov really imagining the sudden thickness of the air inside the *Victor's* controlled

environment? Was the temperature steadily rising as he felt it was? He could have sworn all the blood rushed to his head and his neck started to hurt terribly, as though a great weight pressed upon it. His shoulder muscles—were they feeling the effects of Venus' pressure? Did they always feel that strain, or was it new?

Koslov worriedly checked the medical status that was displayed on a computer screen to his left, doing his best to ignore the now-darker orange clouds that veiled the surreal terrain of Venus. He had objected at first to having all of that medical stuff taped to his chest and hips, but now he was grateful for it. This was some advanced machinery, he admitted to himself. His pulse was speeding, his heart rate out of control, but the oxygen level in his bloodstream seemed to be normal and none of his organs seemed to be suffering extra stress.

Focus, Koslov told himself, turning away from the screens and gazing out the window. *You're getting upset for no reason. Stop all of this or you'll blow it.*

"Koslov," came the voice of Mission Control man, making Koslov jump; he hit his head on the metal ceiling of the *Victor* and indulged in several Russian oaths before responding to his commander.

"Yes, Mission Control," Koslov said, willing his heart rate to go down. Maybe his racing heart was worrying all of the medics down there. Maybe they'd take him home. He wasn't sure if that would be good or bad anymore. He'd always been a man to rely on instinct, and right now his entire body was screaming to fly this thing back to Earth—but then again, he had heard many stories of the dangers of Venus, even watched the videos featuring the deaths of the men on the other eleven *Aphrodite* missions. Instinct...or

knowledge? He had always trusted instinct more, but what did his instinct say?

His instinct said, quite clearly then, *Get the heck out of this thing!*

Shut up, instinct, he told it angrily. *I've no time for this.*

"Koslov, I just wanted to let you know that in about thirty seconds the entire world is going to be watching you."

This did not help Koslov's racing heart rate. "Thanks for letting me know, then, sir. But sir, why...?"

"Everyone's excited about this, fool," snapped Mission Control man roughly, his accent—though just like Koslov's—making Koslov shiver. "You're not the only one who wants to see the surface of Venus. It will be one of the most-viewed news reports to ever come out of Russia!"

"So show them the surface of Venus," retorted Koslov, leaning forward to peer out the window. "Not me."

"You're the Russian hero, Koslov," Mission Control man replied in a pained sort of way. "You can't just go unnoticed."

Koslov paused and finally responded, "Yes, sir."

"Good," Mission Control man said, and then static crackled in the earpiece. "We will lose connection as far as communication, but the special camera will still work. Good luck, kid."

Koslov growled and grumbled to himself as the earpiece fell completely silent; he tapped it inquisitively, but it had gone dead. *Cut off from Earth. Plus, I'm not a kid.*

But he felt like one as he looked out the window. The clouds were growing thicker, and now and then he thought he saw a flash of red or orange behind all of the colored mist. His earlier fear still remained, but a small portion of

it was replaced by awe as the clouds shifted around the *Victor*. He felt as if he could just open the window and reach out and feel the gases like water mist on a chilly day down by the coast. It took a lot of self-control—and the fact that the window was impossible to open—to stop Koslov from trying out this idea. He knew that it wasn't water mist, not really. It was condensed sulfuric acid and aside from that, basically pure carbon dioxide with just a hint of nitrogen mixed in. One breath of that would probably kill him, collapse his lungs and heart and kill him.

The inside of the *Victor* suddenly flashed red, distracting Koslov from his thoughts. For a moment, Koslov thought that something had happened—the oxygen tank had sprung a leak, maybe, or perhaps a piece of metal supporting the pressure-resistant web had collapsed. Koslov was able to put his mind to rest as a small black camera blinked to life beside him. It looked like a little black beetle with shiny red eyes and a bulbous, glazed head. The small device emitted a sense of observation, and within the little black lens, Koslov thought he could feel millions of eyes trained on his face.

In a sudden urge to appear brave—if he represented Russia badly, the entire nation would be shamed—Koslov saluted the camera, cracked a joke or two—increasing his accent until the words were harsh and guttural—and went back to watching the sulfuric clouds of Venus outside. The camera followed his gaze and fixed on the murky orange and yellow curtain that coated Venus like icing on a cake. For a while Koslov was able to distract himself with thoughts of this cake—an excellent dessert, he had to admit—until the computer's voice told him, "Touchdown in one minute."

One minute. One minute, just sixty seconds of time, an impossible length to get anything done in—but, thought Koslov bemusedly, so very, very much

could happen in a minute. Lives could end in a minute, death sneaking into hearts as fast as a lethal striking snake. One minute in war could mean a victory or loss if one soldier happens to shoot the right man. And in Koslov's case, one minute could drive a man mad.

And so it did.

Koslov's fingers groped for his hair, recoiling with shock as they found only the hard, armored surface of his protective suit. Edging unconsciously away from the camera, Koslov gritted his teeth and imagined himself, unprotected, on the surface of Venus. He saw his own face as it was mashed into nothingness by Venus' heavy atmosphere, smelled the burning of flesh and hair as Venus' 900° Fahrenheit surface melted his body as if he were no more than a wax figure. Above all he saw that camera, watching it all, letting the entire world see his death.

With a deranged cry, Koslov reached for the camera and yanked on it hard enough to rip it from the wall. With an explosive retort and the splintering of wood, the camera came free of the wall, cords and wires hanging uselessly, dangling like beheaded snakes and sparking bits of electricity onto Koslov's suit.

"Finally," Koslov whispered to himself, and his voice contained all the dangerous potency of a madman's. He almost expected a harsh rebuttal from Mission Control, but they had long since lost contact. No one could control him now.

His fear was replaced by maniacal joy as the clouds parted reluctantly, as if loathe to give way to the mountainous terrain of Venus. Tall, dusty, rugged peaks rose before him as he sank below the majority of the sulfuric clouds. The air was still tinted with yellow and orange, as if some of the sulfur still

lingered down here—and it probably did—and overall, the face of Venus was quite unimpressive. It was easier to see why it was connected to Aphrodite in mythology from above; down here it just looked like a mountainous desert.

There was a small bump and the computer announced, "Touchdown!" with all the joy of a happy child programmed into its tone. Koslov smiled at it, some of the dementia leaving his expression as he started to regain control of his senses. *Focus, Koslov. You came here to make scientific observations of Venus' surface for Russia, not sit here grinning like a maniac.*

Koslov had no control over the *Victor's* actions; he had no control over anything. The *Victor* had the ability to move a plate of metal that supported the bottom in a circular pattern, thus allowing it to move. The *Victor* crawled over the surface of Venus like a lizard over a big rock. The rocky soil grated and scraped under the hard metal of the module, and a cloud of dust rose in front of it, but Koslov could still dimly see the outline of Venus' topographical features; the land rose and fell in an odd display of the planet's violent geological history.

I'm alive. Such was Koslov's marveling thought as he hungrily took in every detail he could of the foreign land. *I can't believe it—I'm alive.*

"Observation, commander," the computer voice told him as the little manned probe jolted to a stop. The cloud of dust was rising, Koslov saw, but it was still nigh on impossible to see. Everything was tinted orange or yellow, as though the sun were setting in the mountains on Earth. Koslov thought he spotted a volcanic peak spewing yet more gases into the atmosphere, but he couldn't be sure. Perhaps it was simply a very high mountain clouded by the sulfuric mist.

Koslov wordlessly reached for the camera he had been ordered to use one he stopped, but it wasn't there. With trembling hands he again saw the hopelessly mangled wires and circuits protruding from the wall. For a moment the knowledge that he had failed his mission incapacitated him, but then he sprang into action again; the camera, he reminded himself grimly, was not everything, and it would be unwise to simply linger there. He instead turned to his right, where the blank face of a computer screen stared back at him like a gaping hole. The small keyboard was uncomfortable under his fingertips and strained his wrists, but it was the least he could do for his country. He had already failed them in one regard.

As Koslov pressed on key after key, inputting factors which he had been trained to see and to describe, a sense of calm acceptance engulfed him. He was alive, and though Russia's astronomers were unlikely to be pleased about the loss of camera pictures, the certainty about his fate gladdened him, lifting his spirits. *Aphrodite 12* would survive, and it would go down in history. *He*, Koslov, would go down in history as the first man to successfully land on Venus and survive. He would have so many fans that he wouldn't know what to do with them all. Maybe he would even get into one of the proud, royal mansions in the Russian countryside, with a wife and children and all the books he could read...

Koslov realized that he had been typing some of his thoughts and erased the writing, embarrassed. It occurred to him that the scientists back at Mission Control must have been worried when the camera's view went black, but surely the computer in the *Victor* would still work...it didn't depend on people anymore; the scientists had made sure of that. Anyway, he reflected,

the information he was typing into the computer would be showing up back in Russia, so they shouldn't be too worried.

He finished the short summary and turned back to the window. Perhaps there was something else he could do to help, something that would replace his lost camera—but he could think of nothing to do. Koslov had been quite the artist when he was younger—a pastime that his mother had disallowed, of course—so he would have tried to draw the landscape, but there was no paper on the *Victor*. For the first time, Koslov thought—mockingly, angrily—that not only Russia, but also the rest of the world, relied too much on technology. If the technology failed, it was over.

"Next site: translation," the computer announced in a hollow monotone. Koslov knew that the engineers and scientists of his age had tried to put emotion into the voice, but it was still just a piece of metal and wire and microchips, not a living person. Koslov found himself distrusting the voice, but there was nothing to be done about that. A tremor ran through the metal module, but Koslov was no longer afraid and dismissed the noise and the vibration accompanying it. The probe crawled across Venus' surface, up small hills and down into dips and ravines, even up a volcano once. The *Victor* skirted dangerously close to the edge but didn't fall in, and Koslov wondered if the computer knew about the volcano; perhaps Russia's best astronomers had passed it up somehow. Koslov found himself glancing back nervously even though there was no back window and the only thing he could see were metal panels. He hoped the *Victor's* course wouldn't take it near to that particular volcano again.

Several more times the *Victor* halted; several more times the empty voice commanded Koslov to make observations; several more times Koslov

typed into the computer, where words appeared on the screen as skinny, twisted green glow worms amidst all of the shadowed black. Venus' surface never lost its marvelous uniqueness, and Koslov found that the entries he made were increasingly shorter, and the words he *did* type often described Venus' serenity rather than special geographical features, though he saw many. Twice more the *Victor* came near the rim of a volcano, but both times the *Victor* escaped unscathed. Finally the computerized voice decided that it was time to go home, and Koslov buckled himself in more securely in preparation to leave Venus' thick atmosphere. A rumbling noise filled the air, and Koslov was once more aware that he could still die on this mission—*Aphrodite 12* could be just like its brethren, with its commander brutally killed by Venus' harsh environment. Somehow Koslov didn't think it was to be at this point. He had been through too much for it to all end now. Who would tell fantastical stories of dropping through thick orange clouds to the World News if he died? Who would bring pride and honor to Russia if Koslov perished here, on the hot surface of his greatest dream?

Besides, it was more pleasant to imagine surviving. Koslov felt the *Victor* go through a series of bumps and spasms as it rose. The clouds were becoming thicker outside the window until only the feeling of acceleration in the metal beneath Koslov let him know that the *Victor* was moving at all. He sat calmly, observing the yellow fog, then pressed a red button on the side. He looked at a screen behind him and typed in the height of the *Victor* as a small arm extended into the crushing pressure of Venus' atmosphere to obtain a sample of the various gases. Victor remembered studying the makeup of the haze, first in school, and then in his own training in preparation for this very event. The remembering brought on other

memories, too: old friends from school, working with his colleagues in training. He vaguely thought that he had once imagined going up into the endless depths of space with one of his friends, ignorant of the fact that the astronaut was doomed to be a loner, the computer his only companion. He remembered clothes he'd worn and places he'd been and women he'd kissed in those fancy restaurants, or under the light of the full moon, or even at the fair, elevated as high above the ground as he was now. And he remembered holding the woman's hand as the Ferris Wheel continued its monotonous cycle. For some reason the only ride in the entire fair that he was truly afraid of was the Ferris Wheel—it was too slow, too wobbly, not boxed-in enough. He thought back to that day, how he had stared at the sickly, dusty, brown ground below him and wondering if he was going to fall—and knowing that he wasn't.

Life on Earth, he decided, was better than life here on Venus.

It was another twenty minutes before the *Victor* shot out of the dense, restraining clouds of sulfur surrounding it, and Koslov's eyes saw the now-familiar expanse of blue-black nothingness, dotted occasionally with chips of color-tinged ice. Koslov thought that when artists depicted outer space, they did a *terrible* job; none of the paintings he had seen could *ever* relate to the majesty of space before him.

A worthy goal, he decided as little booster rockets were fired off of the sides of the *Victor* in order to return Koslov to the command module.

Perhaps, once I am done getting rebuked for my behavior on the mission, I will endeavor to create such a masterpiece. I am sure I could do it. As Koslov traced patterns in the stars with his eyes, a small grin touched his lips, reddened as they were from always being in northern Russia's cold. *And I*

could do so many other things, too. I have wanted to come here my whole life, and yet...

It was amazing, he admitted to himself, but he had no wish to come up again. He had escaped death once; he would not try his luck again, not even for a second view of Venus. He found, even, that it was more amazing when he was standing down on Earth; seeing it up-close had taken some of the mystery out of the name *Venus*. *Once I've gotten away from multitudes of Aphrodite 12 fans, he decided, I'd like to do a lot of things. Painting outer space—still a good idea. And then there's Victoria—sweet girl that she is, maybe I'll propose. I never was very nice to her—I wouldn't be surprised if she refused, but I can try. If not Victoria, there are others who would love to have Koslov, hero of Russia, take their hands. I'm sure I'll have a lot of money after this—if I'm not in too much trouble with the government, I could be a rich man...*

Koslov's thoughts entertained him as the computer-controlled *Aphrodite 12* hurtled through space, on a course toward Earth. Finally he silenced his active mind, but his last thought before he did this was, *I can't wait to see the guys back at the training center. I did miss human company so.*

Koslov stared out on of the many windows in the command module at Venus as it grew smaller in the window, and then, though he knew it would still be there for an hour or two, he turned his back to it and set his sights instead in Earth's direction, where he knew he would soon see the royal hues of blue and green lightly covered by white clouds.

And he thought to himself, *This will be easy!*

