Clouds of Venus
A Journey to the Stars, Human Consciousness, and Back Again

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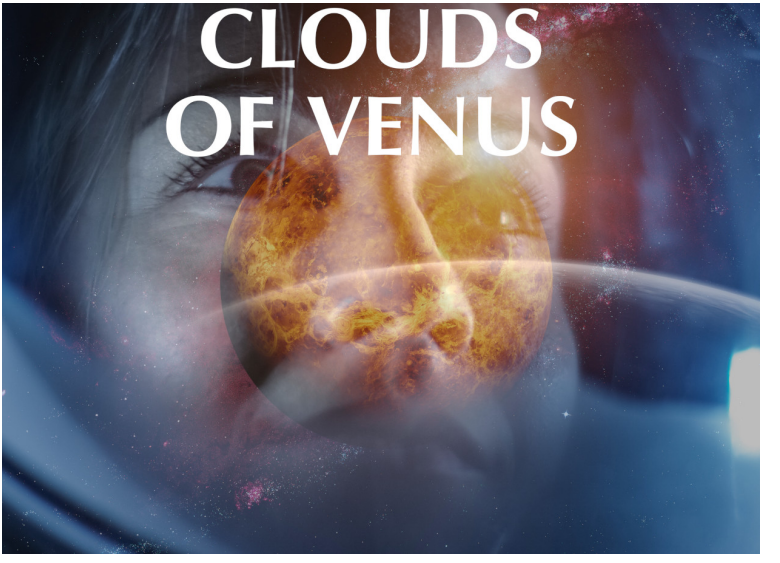

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PHILOSOPHY
SCIENCE FICTION

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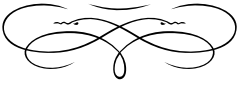
A Mission Too Far



> Great heroes need great sorrows and burdens, or half their greatness goes unnoticed. It is all part of the fairy tale.
>
> —Peter S. Beagle

“Alpha One. General Alert. Abort Mission. Mission a Failure.” Her blood-smeared hand was trembling above the button with the benign-looking label “Release Thrusters.” She was standing in the infirmary of the front of the lifeless body of Commander Jeffrey. Tears were rolling down her face dropping on the floor.

“Computer!” Her voice trembled in desperation and hopelessness.

The ongoing alert was briefly interrupted.

“Yes-Doctor-Khalim?”

“Retry connection to satellite Mars 74.”

“Unable-to-comply-Doctor-Khalim. No-signal-to-satellite-Mars-74. Retry?”

She closed her eyes, her face turned into a grimace, images of her colleagues flashed in her thoughts. Orientation day, their training, their pre-launch press conference when they were celebrated as heroes, the difficulties during launch. During the mission, they were not just her teammates, they became her friends.

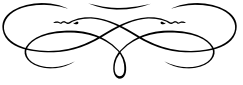
The master alarm came back online, returning her to reality. Designed to be as annoying as possible, the sound filled the spaceship with an infinite loop of “beep” “beep” “beep” …

Sobbing uncontrollably, she pressed the button.

The mission to Mars has failed.

Chapter 2

The Voyage of the Beagle Two



> The mystery of the beginning of all things is insoluble by us; and I for one must be content to remain an agnostic.
>
> —Charles Darwin

Catherine was lying in bed scrolling through the day's news—a habit she had picked up during her new assignment. One article caught her attention. There again was that gut feeling that reminded her that her life was nothing one could call "normal." Unconsciously, she brushed some hair out of her face, feeling the bump at the top of her head.

Living on Venus makes Earth and its problems *feel* far away. The very reason she signed up for the job was to get away from it all and put her old life behind her. After what had happened, she could never go back to working in the medical field. And space exploration has changed so much, astronauts in the classical sense were no longer needed. In that regard, she was part of a dying profession.

In her mind, the only reason Mars instead of Venus was ever even considered was that humans need to literally grasp things—an archaic yet understandable trait. People needed something concrete, they needed to feel their feet on the ground. "Living safely hovering above the ground with a nice atmosphere deflecting the sun's radiation at Earth's gravity? *Inconceivable!*" she added sarcastically to her thoughts.

Given the developments on Earth, she felt lucky that not many people actually know what she was doing. It seems humanity underwent a similar change to her own, moving inward, living a solitary life. Sure, there was a difference—she was on Venus, they were on Earth—but considering the size of the universe, humans live a pretty solitary life. Well, she was happy to live a solitary life. The only thing that seemed to draw her back into the moment was the implant and the habits of her "donor."

The cutbacks in funding required the mission to Venus to take a special approach. And that was not just because it was on (actually, above) another planet. Because of the massive costs of bring-

ing human life to Venus and sustaining it there—as opposed to just sending robots—all Venusians (as she calls herself jokingly) are required to get a cortex implant. On Earth, highly trained specialists (the donors, for example, the engineers who repair the ship) have their cortex scanned. Their neural patterns are then transmitted to a relay station on Venus. On Venus, the patterns are copied into a Venusian's cortex chip, making him or her ready to perform the work.

She read a lot of science fiction novels when she was younger. After the accident and her implantation, she was reminded of the stories of how computers merged with humans. But in one of her few e-mails to her mother, she explained "Dear mother, I am fine, no need to worry. It is nothing like those novels where you hear a voice telling you to do stuff. It feels as if you had a second gut feeling. Only it originates from the chip, not the gut. You still feel you are in control, but you tend more to follow that new feeling."

Her attention was now back on the article. "Government employee dies in plane crash." Next to the article, a picture showed a young, good-looking man, probably in his 30s. She did not "know" that person, but what does "knowing" mean? She did not "know" how to operate the complex machinery that kept the nitrogen converter up and running, yet her job was to repair and optimize it. She could not explain to someone how she does it. But when she is standing in front of the machine, she knows what buttons to press and in what order. Like explaining how to ride a bicycle, putting her actions into words was impossible for her—basic computer handling and programming aside. In the same way, she felt a strange familiarity with the man in the picture.

She shook her head and closed the browser. This is what the doctors have told her would happen now and then. Given the holographic structure of how the brain saves information, the process of extracting knowledge from a specialist and implanting it into someone else

is bound to also copy some personal experiences with it. Her new habit of reading the news was one of them.

Putting the pad down, her hand reached to the freshly brewed cup of tea on her nightstand. One of the luxury items up here. While the floating station did have its own hydroponic garden, it was mostly focused around essential nutrients; she managed to convince mission control to use a small section for herbs and a variety of tea plants.

She scanned the weather report. Lovely 75℃, with wind speeds of 61m/s, and relative wind speeds of 0m/s—an indicator that the Beagle-2 was circumnavigating the planet.

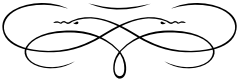
“Like a fish in the stream.”

With these words she jumped up from her bed.

“Good morning Catherine, you are looking beautiful, would you like to start the Tuesday exercise routine?”

Chapter 3

The Head Above the Clouds



> Icarus should have waited for nightfall, the moon would have never let him go. —Nina Mouawad

"Exercise program complete. Shutting down implant." Catherine jumped off the treadmill and walked toward the bathroom. Her face remained emotionless despite her obvious signs of exhaustion. The smart mirror displayed a variety of statistics from heart rate to distance run and difficulty level.

Catherine slowly came back to her senses. It felt like taking a nap, but awakening with a runner's high instead of drowsiness. While her exhaustion was written on her face, she was smiling at herself in the mirror.

Her thoughts turned back to the man she read about in the news. She was not a stalker, but when someone caught her attention, she usually became very curious and wanted to know everything she could find out about that person. She was certain that "she" did not know the person. Or did she? This is always a confusing situation for people with cortex implants: the mind tries to make sense of having additional external information integrated into it. Rather than somehow figuring out that there in fact exists an implant providing false memories, the subconsciousness constructs an internal model of self, the ego, using the most likely scenario. In this case, the scenario is that she is in fact familiar with the person but must have forgotten about him. The reason her thoughts now keep returning to him is that her mind faces the conflictmotivating her curiosity to find more about him in order to literally calm her nerves and resolve the contradictory input she is getting.

Of course, that would not be very easy. While her option could always be to turn down the activity of the implant, adjustments take a full day and her shift started soon. Likewise, it is not like she can simply search for her donor's name to investigate what caused her feeling. There is a strict policy of anonymity when it comes to host-donor relations—to prevent the very thing Catherine seems to be entangled in now. But even with the information, accessing Earth's Internet is not possible by normal means. Sure, she gets regular

updates. But those work mostly one-way, more like a newspaper than an interactive tool.

Scientists on Earth had started developing an interplanetary Internet at the beginning of this century, testing it out with the international space station and later the base on Earth's moon. But given the current distance to the Earth relative to Venus, the signal needs to be relayed around the sun through a network of satellites, effectively taking more than half an hour for a simple search. She had long given up on ever using that icon on her desktop during that time of year and instead relied on e-mail and video messages. Only during what is called "Earth time"—that is about every 583 days when the communication time with the Earth is less than five minutes—does she have "phone calls" during which each side talks for five minutes, then waits five minutes until their words were transmitted, waits another five minutes until they receive the answer, and so on. While cumbersome, it does create a more personal connection than e-mail messages.

For actual research, a better approach was developed by scientists in remote research stations. Instead of making the requests, the scientists would program an artificial intelligence and upload it to a server on Earth's network. That intelligence will then make the searches and present the results in the form of a small version of the Internet which one can browse normally. The way a scientist uses this copy of the Internet is then communicated to the AI, which downloads the most likely pages the scientist will visit next. Started as a small research project for a special case of interplanetary communication, it eventually outgrew mega-corporations that handled most searches and created virtual presences of every partaking user.

Catherine decided to open a chat with her assistant and explained she wanted everything there is about the person in the article, adding it might relate to the experiences of her donor. "No problem, Catherine, I will get right on it." With that, she switched off

her pad and got ready for work.

Work for her usually meant checking the filtering systems. While it is an automatic system with several backups, a failed nitrogen trap, CO2 trap, or solar panel ultimately means the demise of the station. She fully trusted the programmers and engineers who built the station, but having an independent human re-checking the systems was part of the protocol and she gladly followed it.

Absolute security was never possible. At university, she learned that devising a computer system that fails less than 1 in 1,000,000 times within one day is useless because the probability of that very computer system getting hit by a *meteor* is higher. The key to security really is distribution of risk. That is why three identical research stations orbit Venus and could serve as backup systems. In addition, there are a number of satellites of earlier missions which could theoretically serve as backup, but that might be "more adventurous" to put it lightly.

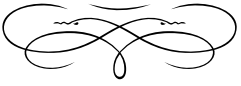
"Catherine, shift starts in five minutes. Please be seated on research station 2 and prepare for transfer of consciousness A-34 for analysis of the atmosphere."

This was her signal. A specialist from Earth would take over and work on analyzing the atmosphere for future missions of Venus and likely the extraction of resources. At least that is what Catherine had been told.

She sat down on the research chair, adjusted her head to allow for optimal wireless transfer, closed her eyes, and slowly dozed off.

Chapter 4

Maintenance

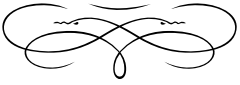


Chapter 5

Analysis

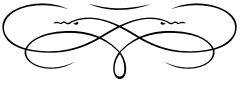
Chapter 6

Free Will



Chapter 7

Clouds of Venus



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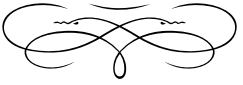
A Call from the Past



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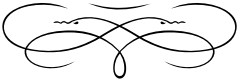
A Story Untold



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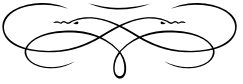
The Pen that Draws Itself



> I think, therefore I am.
>
> —René Descartes

“How convenient…” Catherine mumbles.

Pacing through her room, she started talking to herself.

“What I am wondering is… How does that happen to me? Right now? Think of the odds. If someone were watching me… They would be… entertained? Where are the boring days in my life?”

“I-am-sorry-Catherine, I do not understand this command. Please restate the question.”

“Oh, shut up.”

Briefly interrupted, she returns to her line of thought.

“What happens when characters in a book wonder why events happen… how must it feel for them to have a writer creating their universe and directing their actions?”

“What will happen if I stop to think? Will the book end?”

“Would I notice if the writer of this book took a break? How would that feel?”

“Would I notice the time between this and the next book?”

“What would happen if I suddenly started acting out of character?”

“Would people put my story away?”

Out of a sudden impulse, she kicked over the table. The wine spilled

over the floor and the glass shattered.

Watching the wine slowly running down the floor, she begins to ponder.

"Isn't the core philosophical question just about whether I should live or die?"

"Why would I want to live a life that is all about entertaining others?"

She stood up and looked through the window, watching how the stars in the sky slowly rotate with the ship's rotation.

"What if I am my own writer? All we can do is swirl and join the dance. Even the writer of my story would be part of a universe with natural laws. How is she any more free than I am?

"And what if I am just a story in a book? We do not dance to reach a certain point, we do not read to reach the last page. We are here and now."

"So, what if someone had me in mind and wanted me to change my mind? What if the reason I act is to just have a happy ending for the story? What if I am but a pawn to sell more books?"

"Well, what is human life but to create more copies of itself?"

"I am as alive as other people are in my mind. My friend is but a model in my brain, but when I think about him, he becomes alive in my mind. I interact with him more in my own mind than in real life. Silent conversations and imaginations I have, adventures we could be on together."

"In the end, what am *I* to myself but a model, an idea I have of myself? In that regard, I am as alive as a story written about me could be. Hell, I think the reader would know more about me by reading my inner thoughts than by interacting with me."

Longing to experience something real, she made a step closer to the window. Touching the cold glass of the window, for the first time, she really felt its extraordinary texture. It was designed to not leave fingerprints and be perfectly smooth. Every second cleaning the interior of the ship would cost $50, money better invested into the development of the superior materials like this one. The project for this type of plastic steel took 20 months and cost…

She shook her head, her implant was flooding her mind again with useless information. She remembered what she read about meditation. Let the thoughts come, and let the thoughts leave. Breathe. Let the thoughts come, and let the thoughts leave.

Removing her mental resistance, and accepting what she had become, she felt the data stream slowly subsiding. Removing her now ice cold hand from the window, she got goosebumps as she opened her eyes and became fully conscious of her surroundings again.

"You are part of me. Yes, you were a troublemaker the last few days. But deeply hidden between all those heaps of information and expertise, there is your personality. The conscious matrix cannot remove that, our personalities are interwoven with our experiences."

She looked out into space, searching for that pale blue dot.

She smiled.

"Time to stop running away, Catherine."

She tugged her uniform, pulled her hair into a ponytail, and stood upright again.

"Computer, change course. We are going to Earth."

She heard the noise from the initialization of the propulsion system.

"Pre-determined or not, I am certainly *determined* not to let the story end here."

An Important Final Note

Writers are not performance artists. While there are book signings and public readings, most writers (and readers) follow their passion alone in their homes.

What applause is for the musician, ***reviews*** *are for the writer.*

Books create a community among readers; you can share your thoughts among all those who will or have read the book.

Leave a thoughtful honest review and help me to create such a community on the platform on which you have acquired this book. *What did you like, what can be improved? To whom would you recommend it?*

Thank you, also in the name of all the other readers who will be able to better decide whether this book is right for them or not! A positive review will increase the reach of the book, a negative review will improve the quality of the next book. I welcome both!

“To every man is given the key to the gates of heaven; the same key opens the gates of hell.

—Buddhist proverb