

July 11 @ 9:00 p.m. EST

Spider Robinson holds *Callahan's Key* (The new Callahan novel from Bantam).

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Death on Venus

Ben Bova

Illustration by Vincent Di Fate

My name is Van Humphries. I will be the first human being to reach the hell-hot surface of the planet Venus, or I will die in the attempt.

My father gave me no other choice.

All my life my father had looked down on me; despised me and my illness, sneeringly called me "Runt." Sick from birth, I'd been born with a form of pernicious anemia because of my mother's drug addiction. She had died giving birth to me, and my father blamed me for her death. He claimed she was the only woman he had ever truly loved, and I had killed her.

Father--Martin Humphries--lived in Selene City on the Moon where he played his chosen roles of interplanetary tycoon; megabillionaire; hell-raising, womanizing, ruthless corrupt giant of industry; founder and head of Humphries Space Systems, Inc.

My older brother, Alex, was the apple of Father's eye. But three years ago Alex was killed on the first human mission to Venus. His ship entered the clouds that totally cover our sister planet, but never came out again.

"It should've been you, Runt!" Father howled when we got the news. "It should've been you who died, not Alex."

Father stewed in helpless fury for months, then suddenly announced that he would give a ten-billion-dollar prize to whoever returned Alex's remains to him.

Ten billion dollars! I would have thought that half the world would leap at the chance to claim the prize. But then I realized that no one in his right mind would dare to try.

As beautiful as Venus appears in our skies, the planet itself is the most hellish place in the solar system. The ground is hot enough to melt aluminum. The air pressure is so high it has crushed spacecraft landers as if they were flimsy cardboard cartons. The sky is perpetually covered from pole to pole with clouds of sulfuric acid. The atmosphere is a choking mixture of carbon dioxide and sulfurous gases.

But Martin Humphries wanted his son's remains returned to him. So he offered his ten-billion-dollar prize.

And he did one other thing. He cut off my stipend, as of my twenty-fifth birthday. On that date I became penniless.

I had loved Alex, the big brother who'd protected me as best as he could from Father's cruel disdain. I decided that I would go to Venus and find his remains.

If I was successful, I would be financially secure and independent of Father for the rest of my life.

If I failed, I would join Alex on the red-hot surface of Venus.

I was not the only desperate one aiming for the prize money, I discovered. Lars Fuchs, a "rock rat" from the Asteroid Belt, was also on his way to Venus. From what Father told me, Fuchs was a monster. I had never seen my father look so disturbed about anyone. My father hated Lars Fuchs, that was apparent. He was also quite clearly afraid of him.

* * *

We travelled from Earth orbit to Venus orbit in a converted freighter named *Truax*. Tethered to the shabby old bucket was *Hesperos*, the craft that we would ride into the clouds of Venus and down to the planet's surface. *Hesperos* was small but efficient, a cross between a dirigible and submarine that would glide through Venus' thick clouds and carry us all the way down to the ground, where the atmospheric pressure was about the same as the pressure of ocean water more than a kilometer below the surface.

I had wanted Tomas Rodriguez to captain *Hesperos*, but Father had insisted on putting one of his former mistresses in charge, Desiree Duchamp. Tomas reluctantly accepted being bumped to second-in-command. Captain Duchamp, in turn, brought her daughter along. Marguerite was a biologist, of all things. Who needed a biologist on a planet as dead and devastated as Venus?

I soon found out two things: Captain Duchamp wanted her daughter with her because my lecherous father had his eye on her. And Marguerite Duchamp was a clone of her mother.

As Marguerite explained to me, "Mother's always said she's never met a man she'd trust to father a child with her. So she cloned herself and had the embryo implanted in herself. Eight and a half months later I was born."

It was a tense two months, going from Earth to Venus. At last the day arrived when we were to transfer from *Truax* to *Hesperos*, leaving the old freighter in orbit with a skeleton crew aboard her.

* * *

I took one last look at my stateroom. When we had boarded *Truax* the single room had seemed rather cramped and decidedly shabby to me. Over the nine weeks of our flight to Venus, though, I'd grown accustomed to having my office and living quarters all contained within the same four walls--or bulkheads, as they're called aboard ship. At least the smart wall screens had made the compartment seem larger than it actually was.

Now we were ready to transfer to the much smaller *Hesperos*. At least, the crew was. I dreaded the move. If *Truax* was like a tatty old freighter, *Hesperos* would be more like a cramped, claustrophobic submarine.

To make matters worse, in order to get to the dirigible-like *Hesperos* we were going to have to perform a spacewalk. I was actually going to have to seal myself into a spacesuit and go outside into that yawning vacuum and trolley down the cable that linked the two vessels, with nothing between me and instant death but the monomolecular layers of my suit. I could already feel my insides fluttering with near panic.

For about the twelve-thousandth time I told myself I should have insisted on a tugboat. Rodriguez had talked me out of it when we'd first started planning the mission. "A pressurized tug, just so we can make the transfer without getting into our suits?" he had jeered at me. "That's an expense we can do without. It's a waste of money."

"It would be much safer, wouldn't it?" I had persisted.

Tomas Rodriguez had been an astronaut; he'd gone to Mars four times before retiring upward to become a consultant to aerospace companies and universities doing planetary explorations. Yet what he really wanted was to fly again.

He was a solidly built man with an olive complexion and thickly curled hair that he kept clipped very short, almost a military crew cut. He looked morose most of the time, pensive, almost unapproachable. But that

was just a mask. He smiled easily, and when he did it lit up his whole face to show the truly gentle man beneath the surface.

But he was not smiling; he looked disgusted. "You want safety? Use the mass and volume we'd need for the tug to carry extra water. That'll give us an edge in case the recycler breaks down."

"We have a backup recycler."

"Water's more important than a tug that we'll only use for five minutes during the whole mission. That's one piece of equipment that we definitely don't need to carry along."

So I had let Rodriguez talk me out of the tug. Now I was going to have perform an EVA, a space walk, something that definitely gave me the shakes.

My jitters got even worse whenever I thought about Lars Fuchs.

Once my father told me that Fuchs actually was racing for the prize money, I spent long hours digging every byte of information I could glean about him. What I found was hardly encouraging. Fuchs had a reputation for ruthlessness and achievement. According to the media biographies, he was a merciless taskmaster, a driven and hard-driving tyrant who ran roughshod over anyone who stood in his way. Except my father.

The media had barely covered Fuchs' launch into a high-velocity transit to Venus. He had built his ship in secrecy out in the Belt--adapted an existing vessel, apparently, to his needs. Unlike all the hoopla surrounding my own launch from Tarawa, there was only one brief interview with Fuchs on the nets, grainy and stiff because of the hour-long delay between the team of questioners on Earth and Fuchs, out there among the asteroids.

I pored over that single interview, studying the face of my adversary on my stateroom wall screen, in part to get my mind off the impending space walk. Fuchs was a thickset man, probably not much taller than me, but with a barrel chest and powerful-looking shoulders beneath his deep blue jacket. His face was broad, jowly, his mouth a downcast slash that seemed always to be sneering. His eyes were small and set so deep in his sockets that I couldn't make out what color they might be.

He made a grisly imitation of a smile to the interviewers' opening question and replied, "Yes, I am going to Venus. It seems only fair that I should take this very generous prize money from Martin Humphries--the man who destroyed my business and took my wife from me more than thirty years ago."

That brought a barrage of questions from the reporters. I froze the image and delved into the hypertext records.

Fuchs had an impressive background. He had been born poor, but built a sizable fortune for himself out in the Asteroid Belt, as a prospector. Then he started his own asteroidal mining company and became one of the major operators in the Belt, until Humphries Space Systems undercut his prices so severely that Fuchs was forced into bankruptcy. HSS then bought out the company for a fraction of its true worth. My father had personally taken control and fired Fuchs from the firm that the man had founded and developed over two decades.

While Fuchs stayed out in the Asteroid Belt, penniless and furious with helpless rage, his wife left him and married Martin Humphries. She became my father's fourth and last wife.

I gasped with sudden understanding. She was my mother! The mother I had never known. The mother who had died giving birth to me six years afterward. The mother whose drug addiction had saddled me with chronic anemia from birth. I stared at her image on the screen: young, with the flaxen hair and pale blue eyes of the icy northlands. She was very beautiful, yet she looked fragile, delicate, like a flower that blooms on a glacier for only a day and then withers.

It took an effort to erase her image and go back to the news file. Fuchs had taken off for Venus in a specially modified ship he had named *Lucifer*. The Latin name for Venus as the morning star was Lucifer. It was also the name used by the Hebrew prophet Isaiah as a synonym for Satan.

Lucifer. And Fuchs. After a high-g flight, he was already in orbit around Venus, more than a week ahead of

me. Sitting there in my stateroom, staring at Fuchs' sardonic, sneering face on the wall screen, I remembered that the time had come to transfer to *Hesperos*. There was no way to get out of it. I still wished I was home and safe, but now I knew that I had to go through with this mission no matter what the dangers.

But my thoughts went back to my mother. I had never known that she was once Fuchs' wife. My father hardly ever spoke of her, except to blame me for her death. Alex had told me that it wasn't my fault, that women didn't die in childbirth unless there was something terribly wrong. It was Alex who told me about her drug dependency; as far as my father was concerned she was faultless.

"She was the only woman I ever really loved," he said, many a time. I almost believed him. Then he would add, cold as liquid helium, "And you killed her, Runt."

A single rap on my door startled me. Before I could respond, Desiree Duchamp slid the door open and gave me a hard stare.

She wore the same dun-colored flight coveralls as everyone else aboard ship, but on her they looked crisper, sharper, almost like a military uniform. Her eyes were large and luminous. She might have been beautiful if she would smile, but the expression on her face was severe, bitter, almost angry.

"Are you coming or not?" she demanded.

I drew myself up to my full height--not quite eye to eye with my captain--and forced my voice to be steady and calm as I answered, "Yes. I'm ready."

When she turned and headed down the passageway I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to conjure up a picture of my brother. I'm doing this for you, Alex, I said to myself. I'm going to find out why you died--and who's responsible for your death.

But as I headed down the passageway after Duchamp, the image in my mind was of my mother, so young and lovely and vulnerable.

We had done simulations of the EVA procedure a dozen times, and I had suited up each time. I thought it was silly, like children playing dress-up, but Duchamp had insisted that we pull on the cumbersome suits and boots and helmets and backpacks even though we were only going to play-act in *Truax's* virtual reality chamber.

Now the crew was gathered at the main airlock, busily getting into their spacesuits. It looked to me like the changing room in some athletic team's locker, or a beachside cabana. I paid intense attention to every detail of the procedure, though. This time it would be for real. A mistake here could be fatal. Leggings first, then the thickly lined boots. Slide into the torso and wiggle your arms through the sleeves. Pull the bubble helmet over your head, seal it to the neck ring. Then work the gloves over your fingers. The gloves had a bony exoskeleton on their backs, powered by tiny servomotors that amplified one's muscle power tenfold. There were also servos built into the suit's joints: shoulders, elbows, knees.

Duchamp herself hung the life-support rig on my back and connected the air hose and power lines. The backpack felt like a ton weighing on my shoulders.

I heard the suit's air fans whine into life, like distant gnats, and felt cool air flowing softly across my face. The suit was actually roomy inside, although the leggings chafed a little against my thighs.

Marguerite, Rodriguez and the four other crew members were all fully suited. Even Dr. Waller, our rotund, dark-skinned Jamaican physician with the sunny disposition, was frowning slightly with impatience as they waited for me to finish up.

"Sorry I'm so slow," I muttered.

They nodded from inside their fishbowl helmets. Marguerite even managed a little smile.

"All right," Duchamp said at last, once she was convinced my suit was properly sealed. "Radio check." Her voice was muffled slightly by the helmet.

One by one the crew members called to the EVA controller up on the bridge. I heard each of them in my helmet earphones.

"Mr. Humphries?" the controller called.

"I hear you," I said.

"Radio check complete. Captain Duchamp, you and your crew are go for transfer."

With Duchamp directing us, we went through the airlock hatch, starting with Rodriguez. Then the doctor and, one by one, the three technicians. I followed Marguerite. Captain Duchamp grasped my arm as I stepped carefully over the sill of the hatch into the blank metal womb of the airlock.

Once she swung the inner hatch shut I felt as if I were in a bare metal coffin. I started to breathe faster, felt my heart pumping harder. Stop it! I commanded myself. Calm down before you hyperventilate.

But when the outer hatch started to slide open I almost panicked.

There was nothing out there! They expected me to step out into total emptiness. I tried to find some stars in that black infinity, something, anything to reassure me, but through the deep tinting of my helmet I could not see any.

"Hold on." Rodriguez's familiar voice calmed me a little. But only a little. Then I saw the former astronaut--now an astronaut once again--slide into view, framed by the outline of the open hatch.

"Gimme your tether," Rodriguez said, extending a gloved hand toward me. It looked like a robot reaching for me. I couldn't see his face at all. Even though the bubble helmets gave us fine visibility from inside them, their protective sunshield tinting made them look like mirrors from the outside. All I could see in Rodriguez's helmet was the blank fishbowl reflection of my own helmet.

"C'mon, Mr. Humphries. Gimme your tether. I'll attach it to the trolley. Otherwise you'll swing away."

I remembered the drill from the simulations we had gone through. I unclipped one end of my safety tether from its hook at the waist of my suit and handed it mutely to Rodriguez. He disappeared from my view. There was nothing beyond the airlock hatch that I could see, nothing but a gaping, all-encompassing emptiness.

"Step out now, come on," Rodriguez's voice coaxed in my earphones. "You're okay now. Your tether's connected to the trolley and I'm right here."

His spacesuited form floated into view again, like a pale white ghost hovering before me. Then I saw the others, a scattering of bodies floating in the void, each connected to the trolley by thin tethers that seemed to be stretched to their limit.

"It's really fun," Marguerite's voice called.

We were not in zero gravity. The two spacecraft were still swinging around their common center of gravity, still connected by the Buckyball cable. But there was nothing out there! Nothing but an emptiness that stretched to the ends of the universe.

Shaking inside, my heart thundering so loudly that I knew they could all hear it over my suit radio, I grasped the edge of the outer hatchway in my gloved hands and, closing my eyes, stepped off into infinity.

My stomach dropped away. I felt bile burning up into my throat. My mind raced. He missed me! Rodriguez missed me and I'm falling away from the ship. I'll fall into the Sun or go drifting out and away forever and ever.

Then something tugged at me. Hard. My eyes popped open and I saw that my tether was as taut as a steel rod, holding me securely. But the trolley seemed to be miles away. And I couldn't see any of the others even when I twisted my head to look for them.

"He's secured," Rodriguez's voice said in my earphones.

"Very well," Duchamp replied. "I'm coming out."

I was twisting around, literally at the end of my tether, trying to find the rest of us.

Then the massive bulk of Venus slid into my view. The planet was huge! Its tremendous mass curved gracefully, so bright that it was hard to look at it even through the heavy tinting of my helmet. For a dizzying moment I felt as if its enormous expanse was above me, over my head, and it was going to come down and crush me like a ponderous boulder squashing some insignificant bug.

But only for a moment. The fear passed quickly and I gasped as I stared at the overpowering awesome immensity of the planet. Tears sprang to my eyes, not from its brightness, from its beauty.

I felt someone tugging at my shoulder. "Hey, you okay, boss?" Rodriguez asked.

"Wha . . . yes. Yes, I'm all right."

"Don't freeze up on us now," the astronaut said. "We'll be ready to move soon's Duchamp gets herself connected to the trolley."

I couldn't take my eyes off Venus. She was a brilliant saffron-yellow expanse, glowing like a thing alive. Goddess of beauty, sure enough. At first I thought the cloud deck was as firm and unvarying as a sphere of solid gold. Then I saw that I could make out streamers among the clouds, slightly darker stretches, patches where the amber yellowish clouds billowed up slightly.

I was falling in love with a world.

"I'm secured. Let's get moving." Duchamp's terse order broke my hypnotic staring.

Turning my entire body slightly I saw the seven other figures bobbing slightly around the trolley, which was nothing more than a motorized framework of metal struts that could crawl along the Buckyball cable.

I looked down the length of the cable toward *Hesperos*, which seemed to be kilometers away. Which it was: three kilometers, to be exact. At that distance the fat dirigible that was our spacecraft looked like a toy model or a holographic image of the real thing. At its nose the broad cone of the heat shield stood in place like a giant parasol, looking faintly ludicrous and totally inadequate to protect the vessel from the burning heat of entry into those thick yellow clouds.

"All right, by the numbers, check in," Duchamp commanded.

As the crew members called in I thought again of what a farce Marguerite's "official" title of mission scientist was. But I was glad she was with us. I could talk to her. She didn't lord it over me as her mother did; even Rodriguez made it clear, without realizing he was doing it, that he regarded me as little more than a rich kid playing at being a scientist.

"All right, then," Duchamp said. "Captain to *Truax*. We are ready for transfer."

"Copy you ready for transfer, Captain. *Hesperos* main airlock is cycled, outer hatch open and waiting for your arrival."

"Activate trolley," she commanded.

"Activating."

I felt a very slight tug on my tether, and then all of us were moving toward the distant *Hesperos*, accelerating now, sliding down the long Buckyball cable like a small school of minnows flashing across a pond. *Hesperos* seemed to be coming up at us awfully fast; I thought we'd crash into her, but I kept silent. Sometimes you'd rather die than make an ass of yourself.

Sure enough, the trolley smoothly decelerated, slowly coming to a stop as the seven of us swung on our tethers like a trained team of acrobats in a silent ballet until we were facing down toward *Hesperos*. I marvelled that we went through the maneuver without bumping one another, but Rodriguez later told me it was simple Newtonian mechanics at work. My respects to Sir Isaac.

The trolley stopped about ten meters from the open airlock hatch, with us hanging by our tethers with our

boots a mere meter or so from *Hesperos*' hull. As we had done in the virtual reality simulations, Duchamp unhooked her tether and dropped to the hatch, her knees bending as her boots hit the hull soundlessly.

She stepped into the airlock, disappearing into its shadowed depth for a moment. Then her bubble helmet and shoulders emerged from the hatch and she beckoned to me.

"Welcome aboard, Mr. Humphries," she said. "As owner, you should be the first to board *Hesperos*. After me, of course."

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