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The Coldest Summer

The stars are hiding tonight, but Aisha hears them tinkle behind the clouds. They laugh, like silver dust that turns the whole world into some unnaturally glowing landscape. Their laughter blend with the crickets' chirps, the almost inaudible sound of melting ice cream.

The stars are hiding tonight, and starships are buzzing, and the Venusians are setting their eyes on Earth.

Suddenly, it's not summer anymore.

Raleigh Farwell wants to be an astronaut, after his dad. He's only eleven, only a year older than Aisha Martins, but his dad is the senior rocket director and his words are law in his private rocket company.

"I'm gonna be the third youngest man in outer space," he smiles, his brain already floating into outer space.

"Only third youngest," says Louis Fang. "I'm ten, I still have time to beat you."

Raleigh shrugs. He hugs Aisha and Louis. Hours later, he's in space with his dad in a rocket.

"Why is Raleigh allowed?" Louis demands the junior rocket director, a thin man in glasses who looks about nervously. "There's been a younger kid in space. I've heard about someone who went to space when she was eight. Why couldn't we?"

The junior director twitches nervously. Aisha tugs on Louis's jacket, and he falls silent.

"What are they doing out there?" She asks the director.

"You heard about the Venusians, right?"

Of course she did, it was all over the news. The people from Venus had moved Earth 10,000 miles away from the sun, out of orbit. This is why she's not allowed to have ice cream, why she has to wear a sweater and two jackets in the middle of August. The Venusians, in their defense, claim that a comet is on course to hit Earth, but none of the Earth scientists have found evidence. Louis had stared at the TV screen for two hours, but he didn't once catch a glimpse of a Venusian. The human interviewer says that they don't show up through TV signals.

"Yeah, we have."

"Good. Mr. Farwell and his team are going to space to gather evidence of an incoming comet. They're just circling Earth, so there's no risk and he can carry his son along."

"Why can't we go then?" Louis interjects, clenching his hands into fists.

"Sorry, company policies," says the junior rocket director. His mouth twitches in a semblance of a smile.

The Venusians speak on live TV that night.

"We're sorry for this inconvenience," says a yellow-eyed, pale skinned Venusian, "we've drawn Earth 4000 miles away from its original orbit, away from the sun. Comet Etbr is on collision course with Earth, and we're just moving Earth out of harm's way."

“I don’t buy into this bullshit,” says Louis, when they’re in his house with his parents gone and the heaters on. “Why would they help us? I mean, how does helping us benefit them?”

“Maybe,” says Aisha, “maybe they’re just trying to be nice?”

Louis crumples the dragon he had been wheedling from skin-thin origami paper. He huffs and turns away.

Raleigh is back from the sky. He’s changed, stiller, and so much stardust has gotten into his brain that he doesn’t like to talk anymore. Makes him dizzy, he says.

There is a new pallor to his skin, and space has granted him a growth spurt of 3 inches. Mars and Venus glow in his eyes that are deepening and taking on the colors of the Earth.

“Did you see any of these Venus bastards?” Louis pokes him, oblivious to his changes.

Raleigh shakes his head, and the whole Earth moves to his motion.

One shot, two shot, three shot.

One, two, three dead Venusian skins, stuffed and on display in the Smithsonian Museum.

The Earthlings don’t know that they’re Anzfimt, Rixhrpmerg, and Eupnqv, that they’re sulfur analysts, expert cloudskaters, among the last speakers of a dying language. But the Earthlings dissected them and are now able to conclude that Venusians aren’t people at all, that they have no brains and are heartless.

The Earthlings then broadcast their conclusions over national television.

The Venusian bastards had it coming, the news reporter says.

Aisha, Louis, and Raleigh sit in the uncomfortably cramped backseat of Mr. Farwell’s old red truck. They’re headed for Los Angeles, for August 27, 2029, the coldest summer yet as snow dusts metal that had never seen snow before and ice cracks where ice should not exist. The Lake Arrowhead Conference Room’s windows are covered in frost flowers that wave their jagged wings.

Aisha and Louis have to listen at the door because they’re not allowed in. Raleigh, the youngest astronaut, is somehow granted the privilege to be in the same room as a Venusian.

“I’ll tell you anything you miss,” he whispers to Aisha before his father drags him inside the room.

Through the windows, Aisha sees the leader of the Venusian starship. His skin is pale, almost translucent, from having never seen the sun. His hands are spiders with threading legs. His eyes are the color of Earth.

He has grotesque proportions, but he could almost pass for an Earthling human.

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen,” the microphone he holds buzzes, even as his lips barely move. “I am Jolmzv, and I’ve been chosen to represent Venus in this interplanetary affair. I know that we Venusians have caused this unseasonable winter -- not so unseasonable in the southern hemisphere. We have caused snow to dust desert towns and crops to wilt to dust. However, you *must* understand, our intentions are good!”

There is a collective snort of derision from the 46 Earthlings present.

“Three days from now, the comet Etbr is due to pass this way. Had we not drawn Earth out of its natural orbit, Etbr would crash straight into --”

A loud cough sounds.

“Excuse me, sir,” said a balding man with a pale face that’s just a few shades less natural than the Venusians. “I don’t trust *your* kind. How come our scientists haven’t detected anything? Are you *really* sure you Venusians aren’t trying to take over the world, huh?”

“We have explained this on national TV,” says Jolmzv smoothly, patiently. “The Venusian technology is proficient at identifying a special kind of epsilon-sulfide waves, which Earth’s technology cannot detect yet. Comet Etbr emits this and no other kind of detectable --”

“Are you saying,” a woman in the front narrows her wide, wrinkled eyes, “that Earth’s technology is inferior?”

“No, no, a thousand times no!”

The Venusian’s voice fades as almost every conference member closes his or her mind. It’s a smooth jazz, then the delicate and quiet whistling of a flute, then it’s barely louder than insect wings. The conference members stand up, and some hurl their pencils and cans at Jolmzv.

Louis grips so tightly to Aisha’s hand that she pulls away. Raleigh Farwell stares, transfixed in horror, as the Venusian fades.

Mr. Farwell, senior rocket director and astronaut, puts his hand on Raleigh’s shoulder.

“This is pure injustice,” Louis kicks every rock in his way. “Why won’t they believe Jolmzv? Why? Mr. Farwell, didn’t you find evidence of a comet collision in three days?”

Mr. Farwell sighs. “They won’t believe us, Louis. They want to keep on believing that the Venusians are out to get them.”

Aisha hears what he doesn’t say, that most of the Earthlings can’t believe anyone would do something out of pure kindness.

It’s the 30th of August, and Comet Etbr is due to land tonight. TV buzzes theories nonstop, and the usual guitarists at the farmer’s market have been replaced with two red-faced men who yell into microphones, condemning the Venusians and their planet. The stall with the pale yellow tulips and the scarlet chrysanthemums is empty.

At noon, the sun glares, but nobody feels its warmth through the snow and the wind.

The sunset that night lights the sky on fire.

7:06, 7:07, 7:08, then comes the warmest summer yet.

The sky is bright orange, bent like melting iron. Then it’s neon red, far, far overhead, as some invisible comet tilts by and narrowly misses Earth.

Aisha blinks. When her eyes open again, all the snow is gone, and she’s drenched in sweat.

Red is fading from the sky. Her white lace curtains flutter, and the air that reaches her face is warm, like being near an open fire on Christmas day.

The sky looks golden now, like the surface of Mars...

Aisha draws in a sharp breath. She slowly slides open the curtains. A Venusian peers at her.

“Jolmzv?”

“Earth is back in its normal orbit,” he tells her without moving his lips.

Aisha nods. “That was the comet, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” says Jolmzv. “We’re going back to Venus. Our spaceship is called the *Selenite*. You know, we didn’t mean to cause a winter in summer.”

“I know. I think Louis and Raleigh know it too.”

Jolmzv smiles, revealing his jagged teeth. “Farewell, Aisha.”

He’s gone in a heartbeat, and the sky has already cooled down to a dark indigo.

Aisha crosses her arms and leans over the window sill. Tomorrow brings the leaving of the Venusians.

Tomorrow brings real summer and melting ice cream and Cassiopeia jingling in the sky.

“Tomorrow night,” says the old radio from beside her bed, “Venus will be especially bright.”