

The Solar System: nine planets trapped in orbit around Sol, a Main-Sequence G Type star. The planets, as called by humanity, are; Mercury, Mars, Venus, Earth, Jupiter, Saturn, Neptune, Uranus, and Pluto. Five of these nine are terrestrial and visitable with current technology, though the only successful mission ended in complete disaster. The Phoenix 10 mission departed with five crew members but returned only with one. No one knows what happened on that planet, some say the survivor killed the other members, others say they were attacked. The only person to know the full truth is the lone survivor, Carmichael Orion.

“Alright, can I have a name for that?” the barista asked, tapping his order into the system.

“Yeah, Carmen, C-A-R-M-E-N,” he said, the barista smiled and glanced at him.

“Right, your order will be right there at the end,” she pointed to the far side of the counter, “And here is your receipt, have a nice day!”

“Thanks, you too,” Carmen said before leaving the line to find a table.

The Pluto Cafe was a small spot on the outskirts of Seattle. It was mostly overlooked by tourists for more famous spots but Carmen always preferred the location to the busy downtown. He wasn’t the only one, the other regular who happened to frequent Pluto at the same time as Carmen, was a journalist. From what he’s gathered on the man, Icarus Cao was a journalist for the *Seattle Times* just down the road. His usual was tea, mostly oolong but on occasions, he had masala chai. Icarus spent most of his time writing, though there was one day he spent watching the news. Carmen knew it seemed a bit stalkerish but he knew Icarus had watched the news that day because everyone watched the news that day. The day everything changed, but everything stayed the same.

The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists announced that Earth was 30 seconds to midnight on July 23rd, 2097, a good five years after Carmen thought they would. The whole academic world held its breath, watching the three solemn scientists unveil the clock, which had slowly inched forward over the past 145 years. Icarus had been taking notes, outlining an article that would be published two weeks after the day would fade from public memory and the world would move on. The next thing Carmen learned about Icarus was that he was a poet. This knowledge came with watching the journalist argue with an older man outside the shop. The man, who was dressed similarly to Icarus, was yelling and waving his arms, following the journalist who looked like he was trying his best to ignore him. The words being said were inaudible but Carmen watched Icarus stop in front of the cafe and deliver a few short and scathing remarks before storming inside. The man had stood shocked for a few minutes before walking away and Icarus had sat fuming at his table across the cafe.

“One oolong and one yaupon please, hot for both,” Carmen asked the new barista, she nodded and tapped the order into the system.

“Is that all?” she asked,

“Yeah, that’s all.”

“Alright, can I have a name for that?”

“Yeah, Carmen, C-A-R-M-E-N,” he said, and the barista smiled.

“Right, your order will be right there at the end,” she pointed to the far side of the counter, “And here is your receipt, have a nice day!”

“Thanks, you too,” Carmen said, walking to wait by the counter. From there he glanced at Icarus, who was buried in a notebook, a different one than what he usually wrote in. He continued to watch the other man until the barista placed the mugs next to him. Carmen thanked her again and picked up both mugs, turning towards the table that Icarus Cao was sitting at.

Cao: And recording has started. [papers shuffle], okay, for the record, state your name, the date, and your age.

Orion: My name is Carmichael Orion, it is June 5th, 2098 and I am 77 years old.

Cao: Good, for those listening, I am Icarus Cao, freelance journalist, I am 32 years old. We will be referred to by last name for the sake of simplicity. [pause] So Mr. Orion, would you like to give people a little background on your story?

Orion: Yes, in 2055, NASA launched the first mission to Venus. I was part of that mission, one of the four crew members, we were tasked with exploring the surface and gathering samples. Something went wrong, my crewmates, Jackie Hartwell, Mako Hayazaki, Zayna Ahmen, and Vikesh Sharma all perished soon after we landed. The thing that killed them left me alive, and I was able to return to Earth after four months.

[Silence]

Icarus did not stop writing until Carmen set the mug down on his table. He glanced over his dark-rimmed glasses, first at Carmen, then at the mug.

"I hope I got your order right," Carmen said, as Icarus looked back up at him. His eyes were still simmering with anger. "Sorry if I didn't." Suddenly feeling very awkward, he turned to leave.

"Thank you," Icarus said, standing, "Would you mind joining me?" he gestured to the seat across the table from him. Carmen nodded, taking the seat. Icarus sat across from him, the anger in his eyes had dulled to exhaustion, he seemed to be examining Carmen, trying to dissect him with his eyes.

"I'm Carmen,"

"Icarus," he said, "You're one of the regulars," He took a sip of the tea, thinking for a minute. "And you know my order." They lapse into an awkward silence, both unsure how to proceed in a way that wouldn't seem odd to the other.

"So you're a journalist," Carmen said, breaking the silence that had fallen over them as both men sipped their tea.

"Poet, technically." Icarus corrected, his eyes flicking to the small notebook. Carmen nodded,

"And that old guy, who was he?"

"Just a coworker, technically my boss." Icarus' curt answers would have discouraged Carmen if he wasn't entranced by the mystery. "What about you?" The question caught him off guard,

"What do you mean?"

"What do you do? For work, I mean."

"Oh, I'm an engineer, for future space travel and stuff," Carmen answered. It was close enough to the truth, but Icarus lit up for a second and for the first time that day, he smiled.

"Do you work on rockets or do you work more on stuff like Biosphere 2 and moon colony?" Carmen blinked, slightly taken aback. He hadn't expected such an enthusiastic response from the poet, especially not him citing a century-old experiment.

"Yeah, actually I spent a few years down in Oracle studying the project, mostly the 2030 launch," Carmen said, "Crazy stuff but they had worked on stuff similar to what I'm doing." Icarus nodded along, he had a frown of concentration on his face, as he tried to pick apart what Carmen was saying.

"What sort of work, if you don't mind me asking." Carmen paused, debating how to answer. If he told the truth he could change this man's life forever, if he didn't, that'd leave him in the same boring life that Icarus had managed to make a little bit more interesting. Carmen could pretend he didn't find the other man interesting, and he is one of the few Environmental reporters that isn't bought. Icarus could change the world, Carmen just had to change his first.

"I'm working to rehabilitate Venus."

Cao: So what did you find out about Venus?

Orion: Everything about Venus has evolved to kill humans, its atmospheres are crushing, its clouds are made of acid, its surface is covered with volcanoes, and its temperature runs hotter than any planet in the solar system. That has been our understanding of Venus for the better part of the century. And while Venus is all those things, it is also beautiful. Under the planet's surface are remnants of what it was before it was driven into this state by its inhabitants.

Cao: Remnants?

Orion: A city, to the likes of Tokyo or Dubai. High tech, only abandoned for centuries. From what I found, it was inhabited by lifeforms very similar to us, possibly even related to us.

“Rehabilitate Venus?” Icarus repeated, he had been silent for a few minutes, leaving Carmen nervous on whether or not it was too soon. Well, it was definitely too soon, they had technically just met, though Carmen had been watching him for a few months now, but that wasn’t the point. Carmen needed someone to tell the world the truth, someone reliable.

“Yes.”

“Why not Earth?” he asked the same question Carmen had asked when they had made their discovery. Before he was the last person to hold that knowledge.

“There’s a lot about the planets we don’t know about.”

“That’s not an answer.” Carmen grimaced, the pushback was both what he expected and unhelpful for what he was trying to accomplish.

“It’s an answer enough for being in public,” Carmen responded, lowering his voice. Icarus glanced around the cafe, there were only three other people besides the baristas, all college-aged and crowded around a table, whispering. He watched them for a second, waiting for one of them to look over, to meet his eyes, to let him know they’d been listening to everything he’d said. But they didn’t, they just continued talking. Across the table from Carmen, Icarus’ chair scrapes across the floor as he stands, and he extends his hand.

“Care to join me at my place?”

Cao: You mean aliens?

Orion: Yes, in fact, I’m confident that there is alien life on Venus, I encountered many creatures during my time there, though most were akin to wildlife here on Earth.

Cao: Interesting, these cities, you said they were underground?

Orion: Yes, they were underground, though they didn’t seem to have been there originally, a few of the buildings had a sort of solar paneling, which wouldn’t do much underground. I think that between centuries and the active range of volcanos, the planet buried the city, almost as if it wanted to hide it.

Icarus lives in a small house in the old quarter, surrounded by the husks of lives that had once been lived.

“I own this house by the way, legally if that concerned you,” he said, unlocking the door.

“Cool, I lived in a place like this for a while, illegally.” The journalist laughed as he pulled open the door. Despite the dingy outer appearance, the inside of Icarus’ house was cozy and cluttered, but organized. Slipping off his shoes, Icarus flicked on the lights,

“Sorry for the mess, it’s been a while since I had anyone over.” The poet said, pushing a box out of sight with his foot.

“No worries, it looks lived in,” Carmen said, taking off his shoes and placing them out of the way. They stand in the opening, staring at each other. Carmen watches as Icarus analyzes him again, his eyes picking him apart. He doesn’t back down, watching Icarus’ dark eyes coupled with slightly furrowed eyebrows. Carmen stared back, following the planes of dark hair that fell to the other man’s neck, blending into the hood of his sweatshirt. He is a few inches shorter than Carmen, his head raised slightly as Icarus’ eyes finally raised to meet his.

Cao: What was the purpose of NASA sending people to Venus if it was so dangerous?

Orion: We were meant to investigate the environment, specifically the clouds. Venus’s atmosphere is very similar to how Earth’s atmosphere is projected to evolve due to global warming. NASA theorized that understanding Venus could help us find a way to stop, or even reverse the damage we have done to our own atmosphere.

Cao: This was in 2055? How long has the government projected we need to sort out this problem?

Orion: We pushed Earth past its brink a long time ago, are you familiar with the Doomsday Clock?

Cao: Yes, the Atomic Board's attempt to make climate change tangible.

Orion: Well we're at what? 30 seconds to midnight now, right?

Cao: Yes, it moved just last year, in 2097.

Orion: Well, for the government, we were at 30 seconds 20 years ago.

Cao: [whispered] Oh my god... Where are we now?

Orion: The Doomsday clock ran out in 2086, for listener's context, that was twelve years before this interview.

[Tape Cuts]

Icarus sat across the room, still unraveling Carmen with his eyes. The living room was constructed around a low table, two chairs bookended it at either head and a couch ran the length, opposite an empty fireplace.

"So," the journalist started, his words drawn tight like a trap, each chosen carefully to draw out the most information possible. "NASA is working to rehabilitate Venus instead of keeping Earth from falling further into the climate crisis, yes?"

"In a broad sense, yes, but there's some..." Carmen paused, waving his hand in a wild gesture, trying to catch the right word. "...nuance to the issue."

"Such as?" Icarus countered, his fingers tapping the arm of his chair.

"State secrets, lost history, and mysteries from before human memory, all of that knowledge would put you in danger." Icarus' attention snapped from Carmen's body to his eyes, his own had an onyx shine in his dark irises, a glint of addiction, an attraction of thrill. The intensity of the gaze sent shivers down Carmen's back.

"The government knows?" he asked, his voice low and quiet, almost a whisper. Icarus held his gaze, only flicking his eyes down to watch Carmen's lips for a second. Carmen doesn't notice,

"Of course the government knows," Carmen rants, spitting the word like poison. "Did you think they'd do something about it? It's not something that benefits them, it's not something that keeps them in control. They don't care-" Blood burns through Carmen's body, and blazes of memories follow. He remembers the General, the needles, the blood, the cold, the starving nights, the colder mornings, the"

"Carmen?" there is a murky form calling his name, there are hands on him, one on his shoulder, warm. grounding. The other lay light on his face, butterfly taps, *Icarus*, a thought floats in and out of his brain. The man's face fluxed in and out of focus, the only constant being the feeling of hands on his face and shoulder. "Carmen, Carmen hey, hey, are you okay?" Concern laced Icarus' voice, edging on panic. "Do you need a doctor? Hello?"

"Oh Venus," Carmen muttered, the man in front of him fading slightly from sight, blinking between his own form, and the form of a creature Carmen only saw in his memories. "Oh love, I'm so sorry."

"Carmen?" the man's voice, confused now, echoed in his head, intertwining with his memories.

"*Carmen!*" the creature called, fear and worry etched into her voice. She lay her hand opposite the warm flutter against his face. "*You must keep going!*" Her rusty eyes stared into his, burning bright like stars, filled with sadness worth a hundred lifetimes. "*You must save them!*"

"**Alves!**" Carmen gasped awake, the language of stars on his tongue. The stunned form of Icarus leaned over him, both hands now cradling his face.

"Carmen?" Icarus' voice was now a whisper, horse with worry. The soft noises of rain against the windows filled the silence as Carmen tried to catch his breath. The light of the room had dimmed, the wind batted the house, but Icarus didn't move.

"I'm so sorry," Carmen rasped, his throat was dry and rattled. "I don't have an easy way of explaining that, I-"

"No no no, it's okay," Icarus interrupted, moving his hands from Carmen's face. "I don't know your life and whatever, you don't need to justify your life or anything to me."

"That was a possessed memory," Carmen said, straining his voice while staring hard at Icarus who was standing awkwardly in his own house.

"What?"

"A memory embedded in my mind, pushed towards the forefront by intense anger, a reminder of why I'm still here," Carmen said, inhaling, trying to drive the tears out of his eyes. "That was a reminder of the mission I am here to accomplish."

Cao: [papers shuffling] So you said Venus is designed to kill us? How could a place that dangerous be used to save humanity?

Orion: Venus was made that way by its previous inhabitants, a humanoid species long dead, longer than human history here on Earth. We theorize it was part due to their own Climate Crisis, part because they had become a plague upon their planet.

Orion: We had only been on-planet for 12 hours before my crew started feeling the side effects. 24 hours later, I was the only one alive.

Cao: What killed them?

Orion: That's the thing, We never figured out what it was. Even NASA's tests came back completely negative.

Cao: [muttering] shit. [clears throat] And do you have any theories?

Orion: I think Venus kills everything she touches, it's part of her power.

Cao: Except you?

Orion: You'd have to ask her that.

Carmen swirls the glass of water with a flick of his wrist, watching the liquid slosh against the rim. He could hear Icarus sitting at the other side of the kitchen table somewhere to his left as he kept his gaze fixed on the glass. They both let the silence stew with questions brewing in Icarus' mind. Carmen tries to anticipate what he'll ask as he listens to the other man's pen scratch across paper, no doubt jotting down information that stuck out to him. He thought about standing up, apologizing again, and leaving, but he had tried that a few moments after he caught his breath, only for Icarus to push him down into this chair and place a glass of water in his hand. They had sat in relative silence, only the occasional tick of the clock broke the consistent sounds of Icarus' writing. Grappling with how to break the silence, Carmen opts to cough, a pathetically fake cough, but it gets Icarus to look up from his notebook.

"Who is Alves?" the journalist asks, he leaned back in his chair, setting the pen on the page. The question caught Carmen off guard. Icarus seemed to have a habit of that, asking the right questions at the right time.

"Alves," Carmen said, once again weighing his answers, "Is the ancient name from Venus." Icarus nodded, picking up his pen and scribbling something down.

"It's not from any language I know, definitely not Tamil, something older?" Carmen shakes his head.

"It's the blueprint language."

"Blueprint language? Sanskrit?"

"No, older." Icarus makes two strikes through a word.

"Older than Sanskrit... is it known to the general public?"

"I'm the only one who knows of its existence."

"You? How?"

"The Phoenix 10 mission." Icarus was quiet for a second, tapping his pen against the table. Then he jumped from the chair,

"Phoenix 10," he muttered, bounding over to a bookstack that stood in the corner. He crouched down, skimming the spines from bottom to top. "Excuse me for a second." Icarus said, glancing at Carmen before disappearing into the hallway. Carmen sits stunned, the hours he has gotten to know Icarus have been a whirlwind, but the more they talk, the more the journalist adapts to Carmen. The more he adapts, the easier it is for Icarus to read him. It's enthralling, the way he undresses an issue. Carmen had read his articles before they talked, his writing peeling back every flaw within the topic with a surgical precision that has been lost in the past few decades as every news publication is slowly turned into a

soapbox for agendas instead of a megaphone for information. Once the guillotine for corruption, now corrupted by the expensive pay provided by those with the means and the motive. Real journalists are hard to come by, most replaced by machine-learning bots that cost a pretty penny to train. Most places use them to churn out the work of 20 writers in mere minutes, with a single supervisor. Others use these machines to curate pieces deemed less valuable, which varies from publications. *The Seattle Times* was one of the few with a full human staff, owned by an old woman who insists on dying before bots are used in her paper. Anita Agate, who Carmen had met years ago, before she founded the paper, was a firestorm, who recognized talent. That was probably why she hired Icarus, the man was a whirlwind, a force that pursued truth relentlessly.

"The Phoenix 10 mission, launched in 2055 with the goal of exploring Venus, ended in disaster after all but one crew member died." Icarus read aloud, dropping a hardcover book on the table hard enough to send ripples through Carmen's water. "And this man looks a lot like you." Carmen glared at the open book, it was the picture of the crew, taken during the launch ceremony. The five astronauts dressed in spacesuits, surrounded by NASA officials, wearing black suits, all in uniform. Icarus had drawn attention to a specific astronaut, the engineer, Carmichael Orion.

"I haven't gotten that comparison in a while," Carmen said, watching Icarus frown at the vague answer.

"Orion quietly exited NASA shortly after returning, and once the media died down and the mission fell out of the minds of the general public, he seemed to vanish. No record of any other life, no family, no children." Icarus paused, mentally working through all the possibilities, "So you can't be his kid, but he could've been your mentor." Icarus slid his notebook closer to himself. "He was 34 when the mission happened, so if he is still alive, Carmichael would only be 77. You," He pointed the pen at Carmen, "Are what, 31? 34? And you mentioned squatting at some point in your life, but you spend multiple days a week at a cafe, buying \$8 tea every time, which means since then you've come into money. Now that could mean you have a job, or it could mean you met an ex-astronaut who is paid to be quiet by the government." Icarus finished his rant with a flourish, his breathing a bit ragged from stringing together so many words. Unsure of what to do, Carmen politely clapped before speaking,

"That was impressive, unfortunately, you are very wrong."

"What?" Icarus said, shock evident in his voice.

"There are some things you don't know, that you would never think of, that disprove your theory."

"Like what," Icarus shot back, once again trying to dig the truth out of Carmen.

"I am Carmichael Orion,"

Cao: You keep talking about Venus as if she is sentient, is there a reason?

Orion: In the mythos of ancient civilizations on Earth, many have deities that represent the nine planets, Venus is no different. The Hindus called her Shukra, to the Greeks she was Heosphorus, and Lucifer to the Christians. Every myth is rooted in truth, and these myths tell of the *Mukhy, Umbilicus, Core*. A planet's center houses a creature, a protector, that shapes a planet, that keeps it from destruction. What we call Mother Nature, the center of our planet that makes the planet spin and keeps the plate shifting, is a force that we couldn't even comprehend back then. So when I reported back to NASA they opted to keep it out of public attention, and faked my death, setting me up with a new life and instructions that if I told anyone, they'd kill me.

[Tape Cuts]

Cao: So, what's the endgame?

Orion: Endgame?

Cao: We're recording this, why?

Orion: By the old model we drew up in '54, we're about 10 years out from the start of our Dooms Day. I don't know what we're going to do, or how we are going to fix this, but I think the people deserve the right to know, the right to decide if they are going to let this happen or if they are going to do something about it.

Cao: Are you calling for a revolution?

Orion: Maybe, that's up to the listener to decide.

"But that would make you 77 years old, you look 30." Icarus said, a furrow in his brow as he tried to wrap his head around the idea. Carmen grimaced,

"That was a gift from Alves, she made me her messenger, and to deliver my message, I'm going to be around for longer than the human lifespan."

"So, you're supposed to be like, a messenger of our doom." Icarus reasoned, "With the amount you talk about climate and everything, I'd assume you know something about the climate crisis."

"Yes, I'm here to warn that Earth is to become uninhabitable in the next century, maybe sooner depending on the escalation." Icarus nods,

"So why haven't you?"

"Why haven't I what?"

"Why haven't you delivered your message?"

"I need a trusted avenue to publish."

"Well you have me, is that why you came up to me today?" Carmen scoffed,

"I can't have you do that."

"Why not?" Icarus challenged, the windstorm back in his eyes, pulling apart each of Carmen's sentences.

"Because it's my burden to bear."

"That's just an excuse!"

"You don't know what it's like."

"Seriously? I'm the one who works days on end to write about Climate issues, only to be drowned out by others saying everything is fine. You could at least tell me why you don't want to work with me!"

"Fine. You want to know why this is so dangerous? Because the government will kill you if you pursue this. They'll kill you and wipe your work, and the only thing it'll earn you is a funeral!" They are both standing now, Carmen's eyes blazing with frustration and anguish, while Icarus' face is painted with emotion, too many to properly place. Carmen coughed awkwardly, and Icarus shook himself, collapsing into the chair.

"Sorry," He said, glancing at Carmen, who nodded in acceptance.

"Sorry, that was a lot." He said to the journalist, offering an awkward half smile. They sat in silence, Icarus turning the conversation over and over in his head, and Carmen watching his, watching the intensity of his eyes, the twitch of his fingers as his brain worked and reworded ideas.

"What if we recorded it on tapes?" The question cut the silence, startling Carmen from his staring.

"What?"

"Like, cassette tapes, something like that, so there's always a physical copy." Icarus explained. Carmen paused,

"That might work."

100 Years Later

"I met him at a small cafe just inside the city, it's long gone but I can show you where," Carmen spoke, his eyes staring at, but looking through, a lichen-covered gravestone. His words are directed to the man standing a few paces behind him, willowy in height with tiger's eye skin that matched the umber tone of his eyes. He's dressed in dark cloth, fitting with the dreary weather and dark shadows of the graveyard, underneath is a loose white shirt, fitted for traveling between the Biospheres. His hair falls in waves, curling as the artificial wind pulls stands this way and that. Carmen can picture the expression on his face without turning to look. "Icarus, that was his name, Icarus Cao. It's a Chinese name, Cao. Icarus is Greek I think, his mother was a history professor, she named him after the myth of a boy who flew too close to the Sun." Carmen rambled, flashes of memories melding together before his eyes; Alves, the love of his past, Icarus, the love of his present, and Surya, the love of his future.

"Carm," the soft English lilith muttered by Surya, who approached while Carmen was lost in memory. He curled a hand around Carmen's own, tangling their cold fingers. "He was beautiful." Carmen followed Surya's eyes to the faded photo frame, rusting on its edge, the picture behind the frame was still as vibrant as the day Carmen placed it there. Icarus, dark hair fell slightly over his forehead as he sat focused on the notebook he was writing in.

"He was writing our foreword, we'd spent a week on it when he awoke in the middle of the night, writing like a man who had seen the truths of the universe." Carmen laughed slightly, the soft scratching of a pen across paper whispered in his mind. "He was a storm, a man driven by passion, I loved that about him."

"He sounds amazing," Surya said, leaning a bit of his weight against Carmen's body, a tether to the world that kept Carmen from drifting away.

"He was." Carmen said, crouching down to clean off the stone, tracing the engraving on the tomb with his eyes.

ICARUS CAO
2068-2099
Shot in the Chest, May 21st
Four Days After the Release of
The Phoenix 10 Tapes

Fin.