

# The cloud diver

"He did it again. Another best seller in the XP industry!! Everybody thinks he's brave daring genius, and a very wealthy one too! After all this is what it's all about, daring 'till the limit of you morph and mind, in that order. A morph can be replaced nowadays, ..."

He waits in the backstage from the end of the introduction while internally chatting with his muse.

: This guy is really boring, hope the whole thing doesn't last too long Kami! :

"...and it often happens actually, be it a whim or a necessity. Mind can be restored from backup, and it happens every now and then. All of his XP start..."

: *Don't worry Tomoyuki, you'll survive.* :

"...with the same astonishingly brief thoughts and then you get overwhelmed with this sense of being-exactly-where-you-always-wanted-to-be and the greatness and euphoria of the moment. Although he cloud-dives regularly, ..."

: I know. Just smile and be polite. Protocol, Kami, protocol! :

"...his XPs continue to have, every single one of them, this genuine emotions at the beginning that make them simply the best. Now we'll have the opportunity to meet this fabulous sportsman, ..."

: *Exactly. As always.* :

"...this daring example of what a transhuman can do. Directly from the martian outback but now steadily living in Venus, ladies and gentleman, please welcome.....Tomoyuki...Koukasuru!"

: Let's go then! :

Cheering in the background, faint change of colour of the screen while Tomoyuki steps smiling down the stairs to meet the host. Doing so he waves to the left and the camera zooms on his face for a second. Then the screen is occupied by the crowd and shortly afterwards the vid starts. It's of his latest dive. His characteristic light-green suit with the black and violet patterns is clearly visible.

"So how do you feel being the king of the XP industry?"

He switches his mental speed nanoware system off, not to be distracted during the interview, and answers.

"Actually I'm positively surprised. I think that if something should dominate the XP industry it should be some kind of sport. I'm astonished that so many people follow and like my XPs, but it makes me really happy."

"Very true! And you even manage to out-sell all of the illegal XPs out there...that's fantastic! Could you give us a preview of your, or should I say "our", next adventure?"

"Sure. As always the XP is divided into two parts, preparation and diving. You'll experience all of the preparation and then the best part is the jump, with a new twist that I won't tell you right now. You won't be disappointed, I promise!"

"Ah, so guys this is going to be different! Watch out!"

"Absolutely!"

"Wow, this sounds great! I can't wait to grab my copy! And what do you tell me about the latest competitions? When you take part in one you win it. What do you have that the others don't?"

"Ah, yes. When I take part. True, some of the formats are not of my liking, you know..."

The interview continues with the usual small talk, the host asking the same array of question as one would expect and he answering every one of them with the precision and charisma that always distinguish him.

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Finally he is here again. He's preparing his wingsuit. Tomoyuki admires the view out of the window of the suborbital plane. He always marvels at the colours and shapes of the venusian atmosphere. The glimpse of a pair of venusian glider morphs soaring the atmosphere down below reminds him that he tried that morph a couple of times but wasn't of his liking. Tomoyuki prefers his usual setup of olympian morph plus wingsuit, which basically is a vacsuit with gliding



membranes fitted on and some minor improvements. "Old school" some people say, but he's still at the top of the XP industry and the competitions, so it's a school not old enough. He wears his characteristic suit and starts to smile as the adrenaline is pumped throughout his whole body. Such a sweet sensation! After all he couldn't be so successful if he wasn't extremely spontaneous. These days, where copying, pretending or simulating convincingly is easy, only the true genuine people stand out. And he happens to be one of them.

*: It's about time we get ready to jump. :*

*: Sure, I'm ready, as always. You know Kami, I can't wait to do this jump! :*

*: I know, I know. After all I'm your muse and I tend to know what you like doing. This time though I must remind you of the challenge, as it's not an easy one. As far as I know no one did this, or if someone did, he was restored from backup shortly afterwards. :*

*: Oh please, you know what I think about it! We are well equipped and after all we're the best. So far nothing has happened to us, even if it should have. Do you remember the seventh jump we did? Or the one before where nearly missed the net? And four years ago with the plane crash on that same net? I haven't been restored from backup not a single time! And I intend to keep this record! :*

*: I have access to all of the recordings, yes. But this time the odds are even worse. :*

*: I know, but I've got a good feeling. This time we'll make the best jump ever. We are very well prepared and I'm feeling luckier than usual. So...don't worry Kami. Wait and see! :*

*: Sure I don't worry, I'm a muse, why should I worry? Same music by the way? And as usual I deactivate the gliding programs? :*

*: Thanks. After all it's the only way to make it true, isn't it? Besides, I prefer to do everything by myself. Guess it's my high opinion of myself. But why are we having this conversation again? We discuss the same things every time! :*

*: You know, my duty is to try to help you, so I guess I tried. :*

*: Yep. Let's go. :*

A voice echoes in his mesh inserts. They are approaching the selected jump zone. The pilot continues talking but he already knows that the conditions are perfect, he senses it deep inside him. The back of the suborbital plane slides open and the air hisses as it escapes. The wingsuit instantly seals Tomoyuki. He has already switched the XP recording device on as well as his heavily personalized gnats\*.

*: Wingsuit and gnats working perfectly. :*

*: Thanks Kami. :*

*: You're welcome Tomoyuki. :*

His favourite punk-rock music fills part of his audio input but stays in the background, helping to set the atmosphere. He jumps. All of his senses are deeply concentrated on the fall as he races downwards. Wonderful instants go by. Such a sweet sensation! He checks the time. Perfect. He turns and steadied himself and starts to glide horizontally, losing almost no altitude while approaching the swirling white and ochre clouds.

*: Ok Kami, let's get serious. :*

Immediately his AR entoptics light up. The clouds become all of the same greenish-blue colour while many numbers appear on the corners of his vision. Flying information such as trajectory and horizontal/vertical meters ratio plus weather forecast and the usual suit and body status parameters. A number flashes as it becomes 65,000. 15 kilometres gone, 40 more to go. Tomoyuki engages in a series of breathtaking aerobatics just to exalt his fans. They always love this kind of stuff. Feel this Immelman! He then backflips for a few minutes and enters a series of turns and loops and other sensational manoeuvres.



#### \* HEAVILY PERSONALIZED GNATS

Tomoyuki uses gnats fitted into a zephyr shell to record his jumps. The zephyr shell is in turn modified with the addition of a thrust vector mobility system. The result is a gnat by all means, only bigger, able to fly much faster and with a proper frame to do so. He uses these robots to record his jump from different points of view, both to see his technique so he can improve it and to have cool pictures and vids to advertise his XPs on the mesh or via AR.



: *We are doing good. Now let's see if we can take on those currents.* :

He doesn't even answer. Warning signals flashing, Tomoyuki flies right in the middle of the current and exploits it to gain some altitude, then he sets his course to the point where the smallest net ever to be used for this kind of diving will be. The pilot should deploy it there soon. They pierce the cloud layer and he is able to see much further in there than the usual two to ten kilometres thanks to his suit's built-in specs. Like he expected there is nothing too see except for the beautiful clouds. There are no obstacles between him and his new record. Tomoyuki continues to fly without help from the gliding program, as usual. He's approaching Octavia right on time according to Kami. Tomoyuki is concentrated and doesn't even bother to answer. 55,000. The meters above the Venus surface. Medium aerostat height. He has already dropped for more than 25 kilometres in what seems like an heartbeat to him. Kami reminds him that it's actually more than quarter of an hour since they jumped.

He stops worrying about it for an instant to admire some jelly-floats gently hovering between the clouds. He takes a good look at them thanks to his mental speed augmentation. They are much prettier here in the clouds than in the aviary. He smiles. 50,000. He going straight down now, fast as a railgun bullet. The wingsuit compensates smoothly for the increase of temperature and pressure and has no problem dealing with the corrosiveness of the atmosphere either. Nearly there. 45,000 mark passes by in a blink and so does and indistinct blur which was the 40k net under the aerostat according to Kami. They are getting closer.

The pilot calls. The net is in place. Only 5,000 meters to go. He replays in his mind the movements he has to make. He can feel the pressure now, something like 6-7 times what he's used to. It's hard to manoeuvre the wingsuit in these conditions, but he still refuses to activate the gliding program. The wingsuit is overheating but he knows they are almost there. Red lights start to flash in his entoptics. The altimeter has passed the 39,000 mark. Kami tries to say something but he shuts the muse out. It's now or never. The music fills his ears and he screams. The small net is there...but not in position! Something is crawling over it. A swarm of dirty black appendices is attached to it, feverishly enveloping it. The things seems to notice that something is approaching. They detach one after the other, disappearing in the deadly layer of clouds below. This can't be...it looked too much like a swarm of insects. What are these organisms doing here and how can they survive at these altitudes? How come he didn't detect them?

With his mind full of these thoughts he completely messes up the landing sequence. He doesn't slow down at all and hits the net at the worst possible angle. Thus he lands rather roughly, ripping the wingsuit, braking his left leg, dislocating both his arms and badly straining his back.

Hitting even the softest net without slowing down properly is like being hit by a maglev train while riding a bike.

: *The medichines can't repair all of the damage but the morph should resist until the plane gets us to Octavia...* :

He passes out with his mind full of the creepy image of that distinctively live cloud scrabbling onto his net and then jumping off.

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He's back in his living quarters in Aphrodite Prime. He takes a few steps towards the window. Perfect. It's amazing what a healing vat can do given enough time. It took three days to heal completely from the jump.

: This one was close, really close! The recordings are perfect though! That was a fantastic jump! :

: *It seems that this one was even better than we thought. With the completely unpredicted crash landing it became so much more real it seems. Well, I just don't know what those things could have been, but it was a good idea to edit those emotions and visuals slightly.* :

: Yes, it would have raised too many questions and paranoia. I still wonder what the hell were those things down there.

I can't make up my mind about them. Just terribly weird. :

: *Don't bother, there are no sensory readings to prove that they were even there other than visuals!* :

: And this freaks me out even more to be honest! I gave the uncut XP and the recordings to that scientist girl fan of mine. She had no clue either but was very surprised too, it seemed. I just don't know what to make of it. :

: *I know, I was there too you know.* :

: Yeah sorry obviously. Just talking to myself really. I'm still shocked. :

: *I've noticed. I'll keep in touch with the scientist if you want, it could be enlightening and very interesting.* :

: Why not, maybe one day we'll know what those things where. :

A dragon-shaped creepy brings Tomoyuki his favourite drink and he sips it staring thoughtfully out of the window of at the magnificent venusian cloud formations.

[Incoming message received. Source: Sentinel **Jamina C.**]

[Quantum Analysis: no interception detected]

[Decryption complete]

Here this! Today the famous cloud diver Tomoyuki Koukasuru came to me and gave me **this**. He recorder it during his latest jump. I don't know what to say. We have no recording of nanoswarms in the venusian atmosphere, but that cloud looks suspiciously familiar. He was clever enough to edit it out of his latest XP though, so it shouldn't go public, fortunately. I thought I'd let you know. I'll check to see what my team is doing, just in case, and I'll keep an eye on Tomoyuki too, in case he makes enquiries.

Jamina out.

[End message]



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