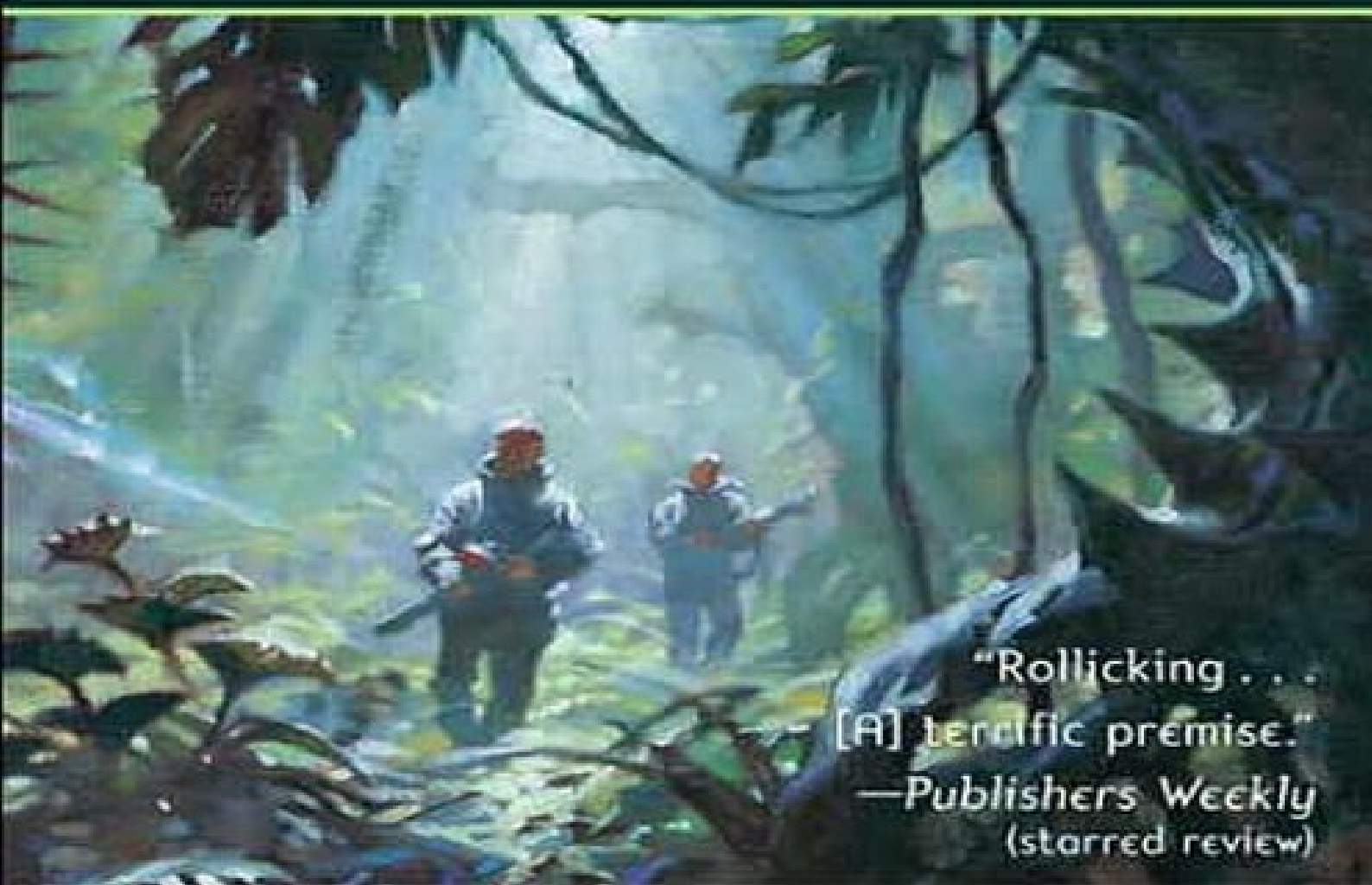


S.M. Stirling

Nationally bestselling author
of *Dies the Fire*

THE SKY PEOPLE



"Rollicking . . .
[A] terrific premise."
—*Publishers Weekly*
(starred review)

The Sky People

the
lords of creation
book i

S.M. Stirling

Synopsis

Marc Vitrac was born in Louisiana in the early 1960's, about the time the first interplanetary probe delivered the news that Mars and Venus were teeming with life—even human life. At that point, the “Space Race” became the central preoccupation of the great powers of the world.

Now, in 1988, Marc has been assigned to Jamestown, the US-Commonwealth base on Venus, near the great Venusian city of Kartahown. Set in a countryside swarming with sabertooths and dinosaurs, Jamestown is home to a small band of American and allied scientist-adventurers.

But there are flies in this ointment—and not only the Venusian dragonflies, with their yard-wide wings. The biologists studying Venus's life are puzzled by the way it not only resembles that on Earth but is virtually identical to it. The EastBloc has its own base at Cosmograd, in the highlands to the south, and relations are frosty. And attractive young geologist Cynthia Whitlock seems impervious to Marc's Cajun charm.

Meanwhile, at the western end of the continent, Teesa of the Cloud Mountain People leads her tribe in a conflict with the Neanderthal-like beastmen who have seized her folk's sacred caves. Then an EastBloc shuttle crashes nearby, and the beastmen acquire new knowledge... and AK47's.

Jamestown sends its long-range blimp to rescue the downed EastBloc cosmonauts, little suspecting that the answer to the jungle planet's mysteries may lie there, among tribal conflicts and traces of power that made Earth's vaunted science seem as primitive as the tribesfolk's blowguns. As if that weren't enough, there's an enemy agent on board the airship...

To Janet, Forever

Acknowledgments

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Thanks to Edgar Rice Burroughs, Leigh Brackett, Otis Adelbert Kline, Leinster, Heinlein, and all the other great pulpsters for gracing my childhood with John Carter, Northwest Smith, "Wrong Way" Carson of Venus, and all the heroes gifted with a better solar system than the one we turned out to inhabit. From the jungles of Venus and the Grand Canal of Marsopolis, I salute you!

All mistakes, infelicities, and errors are of course my own.

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Prologue

Venus
June 14, 1962

The sun rose in the west.

Deera of the Cloud Mountain People ran as she had through the short hours of darkness, without hope and without much fear. The mild, warm air of the midlands made the sweat on her face and her flanks feel almost cool as it dried, and the tall grass beat against her thighs as her long legs scissored endlessly. The morning sun was still low, casting the seven runners' shadows before them and turning the clouds to the color of raw gold. They had trotted through the short, bright summer night and would run on into the long span of daylight, until the great yellow globe of Kru sank in the east... if they lived that long, which was unlikely.

She would run until she could run no more. Then the Wergu would catch them, and they would die in a fight, and they would die. If they were fortunate, they would die quickly; her warriors had orders to make sure of that for her. There had been some slight chance that they would reach the foothills before the beastmen caught up with them, being longer-limbed, but their foes had gained too quickly for that to seem likely. The Cloud Mountain party had been tired from a long journey when the ambush struck, and those who broke away had not had time to snatch up more than their weapons, nor had they been able to build enough of a lead to hide their trail. Now hunger gnawed at them as well as weariness, and they had had no time to do anything but scoop up water in their hands as they forded pools or creeks. The Wergu were fresh, with gourds of water at their belts and dried meat in their pouches to eat as they pursued.

Then her mate, Jaran, broke the deep rhythm of his breath, sniffing deeply.

"What is it, my love?" Deera said. "What do you scent?"

Before he could answer, she smelled it herself, and spoke: "Fire!"

The land before the dozen-strong war party was gently rolling, covered in long green grass starred with flowers crimson and white, with copses of trees along the occasional small streams. They passed small herds of *tharg* and *churr*, but luckily nothing bigger, and most animals-of-fur avoided men. No longtooths or great-wolves or crescent-horns, but there weren't any of those in sight, either. Then they saw the thread of smoke rising skyward, and saw animals and fliers heading away. Men and beastmen used fire... or it might be wildfire from a lightning strike, deadly in grassland country if it spread.

"We go there," Deera said, pointing; the sunlight broke off the bright bronze of her spearhead.

She alone of their party carried metal weapons, the spear and the knife at her belt; their traditional mission to the coastal cities hadn't reached its goal before the Wergu found them.

"That is where the streak-of-light pointed," her mate said doubtfully. "A bad omen."

"It is a new-thing. If we go on with no new-thing, the beastmen will crack our bones for marrow before the sun sets. If it is not a new-thing we can use, we cannot be killed any more surely."

Their bare callused feet splashed through the creek, and they eeled through the brush and trees on either side. Fliers exploded from the boughs, *eeeking* indignantly, and a hawk pounced from the sky to harvest them, its wings as broad as a man's spread arms.

Then the tribesmen stopped. A few moaned aloud in fear.

Deera's eyes went wide in wonder. For a long moment the thing in the broad meadow ahead was s

strange that her eyes slid away from its shape, unable to comprehend.

Then there was a feeling like a *click* behind her brow, and she saw. It was twice the height of a tall man, and stood on three long, spidery legs amid a circle of burnt grass. The fire beneath was still working its way outward, slow and sullen in the wet growth of spring. The body above was a cone shape, the bottom blackened and with a smaller cone protruding from it; even at two hundred yards she could feel the heat. Holes like little caves or the windows of a hut opened in the upper body, and movement there brought a gasp from her people. The scent of burning was rank, and she coughed a little at the smoke. Slowly, mastering the fear that made her skin glisten with fresh sweat—was she not the heir to the Cave Master, initiate of the Mystery?—she approached and prodded the skin of the... thing with the tip of her spear. There was a hollow *clunk*.

“It is metal!” she said. “But not bronze or copper or tin or gold or silver!”

Suddenly her mate pushed her between the shoulder blades. She looked around in surprise.

“Go!” Jaran said with fierce hope in his eyes. “The Wergu will fear this thing of magic. We will fight them here. If we kill many, they will not pursue beyond it. Go! Run for the mountains!”

Agony spiked through her despair as he grounded the butt of his spear and took his blowgun from the sling across his back, reaching for a dart from his belt.

“I cannot leave you!”

“You are our people’s hope, and there is no time for talk. Go. Go *now!*”

Weeping, Deera obeyed.

* * * *

Baikonur Cosmodrome—Kazakhstan, USSR, June 14, 1962

“*Bozhemoi!*” the technician whispered.

The grainy image flickered on the video monitors. It was in color, for no expense had been spared. The smoke of landing had cleared, and the scientists behind him exclaimed sharply as the camera deployed and panned across a meadow scarred by fire. The audio pickups were functioning as well; there was a crackling of burning grass, the hiss of the wind, unintelligible cheeps and croaks.

“That is *grass*,” one of the biologists said, slurping at a glass of hot, sweet tea from the samovar in the corner. The scent of it was strong in the room, along with the scorched-insulation-and-metal smell of tube-driven electronics. “And I would swear some sort of field-poppy.”

“Parallel development under environmental influence,” another, older academician said, as the recording reels whirred. “Perhaps Comrade Lysenko was right after all!”

Both fell silent as something flicked by the video pickup. The technician kept his hands off the controls. The long feedback cycle to the probe’s robot mothercraft orbiting around Venus and from there to the surface and back made it impossible to track moving objects. A beaked head filled the pickup, a beak with fangs, blurred by the close-up. A tongue flicked within as the whatever-it-was gnawed at the lens and then fluttered off. It had teeth and feathered wings with claws on the forward edge... Then sky showed again, white with only a tint of blue, and full of flying creatures too distant to identify. The technician looked at some trees for reference, and his eyes widened again as he realized how large some of the fliers must be.

“Are the *Yanki* getting any of this?” a KGB bigwig asked unhappily.

“I’m afraid so, Comrade General,” the chief academician said. “There’s no way to narrowcast a beam over interplanetary distances. Just as we will intercept their Martian probe’s broadcasts when it lands next month. That is why it was decided to rebroadcast internally as well.”

The security officer opened his mouth to respond, then closed it again. This time *he* whispered a curse: “*Chto za chert?*” Even the most ideologically vigilant could be forgiven a *What the devil!*

what they saw next as a half-dozen figures pushed through the brush and stood staring at the probe.

~~They were men—human males, tall and fair. The one who approached and tentatively prodded~~ the lander with the point of her spear was a woman. Oh, it was no race that Earth had ever born; the combination of umber skin, white-blond hair, tilted, light eyes, snub nose, and full lips... perhaps somewhere in the Urals you might find a similar mix, but the overall impression was exotic. So was the garb: loincloths and halter of scaly leather, jewelry of raw gold nuggets and carved fangs. The head of the woman's spear looked like bronze; those of her five male companions were obsidian pressure-flaked to an almost metallic finish. All were tall and rangy, moving with a loose economy of motion like hunting wolves.

Utter silence fell. It lasted through the woman's flight, and the brief, savage battle with a large band of newcomers that followed—brutish thickset figures who seemed almost a different species. When that was over one of the victors approached the camera, his squat, massive naked body painted in crude patterns and splashed with blood, some of it his own; more blood and brains dripped from the knobkerrie he carried in one hand.

At last the face filled the pickup. It was covered in what was either hair or a sparse beard, the prognathous, thin-lipped mouth thrusting forward underneath a huge blobby nose, the forehead slanting back from brow ridges like a shelf of bone, the long skull ending in a bun at the rear. Feathered hair stood in a topknot of reddish-brown hair. Suddenly the brutish figure screamed, a long snarling wail that showed a gaping mouth full of square tombstone teeth. The ball-headed club swung and the video signal vanished in static; the microphones picked up crashing and rending sounds for an instant more.

“A Neanderthal,” one of the scientists said. “*Nu ni huy sebe!* What the *fuck?*”

Chapter One

Encyclopedia Britannica, 16th Edition
University of Chicago Press, 1988

VENUS: Parameters

ORBIT: 0.723 AU

ORBITAL PERIOD: 224.7 days

ROTATION: 30hrs. 6mins. (retrograde)

MASS: 0.815 x Earth

AVERAGE DENSITY: 5.2 g/cc

SURFACE GRAVITY: 0.91 x Earth

DIAMETER: 7,520 miles (equatorial; 94.7% X Earth)

SURFACE: land 20%, water 80%

ATMOSPHERIC COMPOSITION:

NITROGEN 76.2%

OXYGEN 22.7%

CARBON DIOXIDE 0.088%

TRACE ELEMENTS: Argon, Neon, Helium, Krypton, Hydrogen atmospheric pressure: 17.7 psi average at sea level

Venus differs from Earth, its sister planet, primarily in its slightly smaller size and slightly lower average density, as well as the lack of a moon or satellite, and its retrograde (clockwise) rotation. The composition of the atmosphere is closely similar to that of Earth, the main differences being the higher percentage of oxygen and the somewhat greater mass and density of the atmosphere as a whole.

Average temperatures on Venus are roughly 10 degrees Celsius higher than those on Earth, due to greater solar energy input moderated by the reflective properties of the high cloud layer; isotope analysis suggests that these temperatures are similar to those on Earth in the Upper Cretaceous period, at which time Earth, like Venus today, had no polar ice caps.

Most of Venus' land area of approximately 40,000,000 sq. miles is concentrated in the Arctic supercontinent of Gagarin, roughly the size of Eurasia, and the Antarctic continent of Lobachevsky, approximately the size of Africa. Chains of islands constitute most of the remaining land surface, ranging in size from tiny atolls to nearly half a million square miles...

* * * *

Venus, Gagarin Continent—Jamestown Extraterritorial Zone 1988

Unnnnngg-OOOK!

One of the ceratopsians in the spaceport draught team raised its beaked, bony head and bellowed stunningly loud, as the team was led around to be hitched to the newly arrived rocket-plane. The supersonic *crack* of the upper stage's first pass over the dirt runways at high altitude had spooked them a little, but they were used to the size and heat of the orbiters by now.

Some of the new arrivals from Earth filing carefully down the gangway from the rocket-plane passenger door started at the cry. When one of the giant reptiles cut loose it sounded a little like the world's largest parrot; the beasts were massive six-ton quadrupeds with columnar legs, eight feet to the shoulder and higher at their hips, twenty-five feet long from snout to the tip of the thick tail, and they had lungs and vocal cords to match their size. The long purple tongue within the beak worked as the beast called, and it shook its shield—the massive bony plate that sheathed its head and flared out behind to cover the neck. The shield was a deep bluish-gray, the pebbled hide green-brown above, with a stripe of yellow along each flank marking off the finer cream-colored skin of the belly.

Then it added the rank, musky scent of a massive dinosaurian dung-dump to the scorched ceramic odor of the orbital lander's heat-shield.

Welcome to Venus, Marc Vitrac thought, as the score or so of new base personnel and the spaceship crew gathered at the foot of the ladder. *I'm glad it waited until the harness was hitched. That could have landed on my feet if it had happened while we were getting things fastened.*

He switched his heavy rifle so that it rested in the crook of his left arm—it was a scope-sighted bolt-action piece with a thumbhole stock and chambered for a heavy big-game round, 9x70 mm Remington-Weaver Magnum. Then he waved his right arm forward and called:

“Take it away, Sally!”

“Get going, you brainless lumps!” the slender ash-blond woman shouted from her seat in a saddle high on the shoulders of the left-hand beast.

That was purely to relieve her feelings. Nobody really liked the dim-witted, bad-tempered dinosaurs, useful though they were. The joystick in her hand was the real control; she shoved it forward, and the unit relayed its signals to the receivers on each beast’s forehead, hidden under hemispheres of tough plastic. That triggered current through the implants running down through skulls and into the motor ganglions and pleasure-pain centers of their tiny brains. The two ceratopsians leaned into their harness, and the yard-thick hauling cable of braided dinosaur hide came taut with a snap. After a moment’s motionless straining, the rocket stage lurched into motion and trundled down the long strip of reddish dirt towards the hangars and cranes where it would be mated with the bullet-shaped booster and made ready for its next lift to orbit.

It was a *lot* cheaper to ship electronic controller units from Earth than tractors and bulldozers, not to mention the non-existent infrastructure of fuel and spare parts. All you needed to collect ceratopsians was a heavy-duty trunk gun; they’d eat anything that grew, including the trunks of oak trees, and they lived indefinitely unless something killed them.

Marc wiped his face on the sleeve of his jacket as the rocketplane left, trailing dust, taking with it the radiant heat still throbbing out of its ceramic underbelly and a stink of burnt kerosene. The coastal air of Gagarin flowed in instead, the iodine scent of the sea half a mile northward, and smells of vegetation and animals not quite Earthly. The sun was a little bigger in the sky than it would be on the third rock from the sun, partly because they *were* closer to it, and partly from the light white haze that never really cleared from the blue arch above. Otherwise, apart from the weird fauna—and the size of the bugs—it might have been a spring day in California, temperature in the seventies and air fairly dry, yellow flowers studding a rolling plain of waist-high grass around them, just turning from rainy-season green to champagne color. Already some of the birds and fliers scared off by the rocketplane’s descent were winging back in. Something with iridescent blue-and-yellow feathers, a twelve-foot wingspan, and a beak full of teeth screeched at him as it passed, snapping at dragonflies six inches across.

Okay.

Most of the *Carson*’s six-person crew were here as well, looking a little more relieved than usual. There had been some sort of problem with the main fission reactor this time, just after the final insertion burn. The Aerospace Force kept two nuclear-boost ships on the run between Venus and Earth, the *Carson* and the *Susan Constant*.

The little clump of new fish in their blue Aerospace Force overalls stood at the base of the wheelchair gangway, woozy even in Venus’ ninety-percent gravity after three months of zero-G despite all the exercise *en route* could do. At least they were used to the denser air and higher oxygen, since the passenger ships adjusted their own gradually on the trip. Some of them were looking a little stunned, others were grinning ear to ear. He knew exactly what they were thinking, and his lips turned up a little well—the thrill wasn’t gone for him yet, not by a long shot:

Yeah, I’ve finally made it! All the tests and psych tests and physical tests and trials and all the qualifications and all the millions who started out on the selections and I was the one who made it!

One young black woman with civilian-specialist shoulder-flashes—she looked to be a couple

years short of Marc's twenty-five—bent down and gently touched the Venusian soil; when she straightened, a look of astonished delight was on her face. He met her eye and winked; on *his* first day he'd gone down flat and kissed the dirt.

“Welcome to Venus in general and the Jamestown Extraterritorial Zone in particular, folks! I'm Lieutenant Marc Vitrac, US ASF, and one of the Ranger squad here, which means specimen-collector, liaison with the locals, and general dogsbody. We've got a howdah laid on. I know three months in zero-G makes you feel like a boiled noodle when you get back dirtside.”

A murmur of “no problem, feeling fine” and shaking of heads: You had to be nearly Olympian caliber physically as well as qualified in two or three degree-equivalents even to get onto the short list for Venus. All of them were probably proud of it, and they were all aggressive self-starters by definition. He shrugged mentally; he'd done exactly the same thing when he arrived, and had been puffing by the time he made it to the reception hall. The plain fact of the matter was that it took weeks to months of carefully phased acclimatizing before you got full function back. That was why they used the more expensive nuclear-rocket craft for shipping people between planets, instead of the cheap but slow solar-sail freighters. A big nuclear booster could get you here in a hundred and twenty days, give or take, depending on orbital positions—the robot freighters took three or four times that long, and nobody could stand a year and a half without gravity, not to mention the risk of solar flares *en route*.

Instead of arguing, he turned to the four spaceport laborers. “*ImiTaWok's'wee, tob*,” he said in the tongue of Kartahown: *Get it back to the building, guys.*

The locals grabbed the shamboo-framed wheeled staircase and began dragging it off after the rocket-plane. The newcomers spared a few startled glances at them: You had to look fairly closely to see that they weren't common garden-variety Caucasoid Earthlings. People around here tended to medium-tall height, olive coloring, and mostly brown or black hair, with a minority of blonds and a smaller one of redheads; only the sharply triangular faces and hooked noses were even a little out of the ordinary. The four workers were shaved and barbered Terran-style and dressed in ordinary-looking Jamestown pants and shirts of parachute cloth; they couldn't be told from Earthlings until they spoke. Put Marc Vitrac into an off-the-right-shoulder tunic, grow his hair long and tie it in a knot on the left side of his head, and give him a bronze sword, and he'd fit right in on this coast.

“Yeah, those guys are from Kartahown,” he said, pointing east along the coast. The Bronze Age city-state, which was Venus' highest civilization, was about forty miles thataway. “Some of them have picked up English, too, since they moved up this way looking for work.”

Including some escaped slaves we're sheltering from people who'd like to beat them to death with bronze-tipped scourges, but let's not get into that right now.

“That's quick,” said the oldest of the newcomers, in his midthirties and with a bird colonel's insignia. “We've only been here six years, and the base was pretty small for most of that period.”

“Well, we're even more exotic and interesting to them than they are to us, sir,” Vitrac said. “And by local standards, we're wizards and richer than God. A steel knife or a couple of yards of parachute fabric is real money here.”

Plus we don't beat people to death with bronze-tipped scourges.

“And if you'll all follow me...”

He led them off, slowly, across the cropped grass near the landing strip; there were two in an X-shaped combination, each several thousand yards long. Another ceratopsian stood waiting patiently; in fact, it was blissed out by a trickle charge to the pleasure center, drooling slightly onto the grass. On its back rested a twenty-foot howdah made of laminated shamboo, with a shaped and padded underside and two broad leather girths running under the dinosaur's belly to hold it on. The seats were stepped

like those in a movie theater to accommodate the slope of the animal's back from the high point over its hips. Marc stood by the short folding ladder at the right foreleg, once or twice discreetly helping passenger with his free hand.

More than one gave the bigger-than-elephantine beast a dubious look; its steady breathing was machinelike *whoosh... whoosh...* and the heavy reptile stink was strong, like a neglected cage full of iguanas at a pet shop. The massive columnar legs were taller than a big man, too.

When everyone was settled Marc folded up the ladder, put his foot on the ceratopsian's knee, grabbed the edge of the bony shield, and vaulted into the front seat to take up the controls. Once you got your muscle tone back, the combination of lower gravity and extra oxygen made you hell on wheels physically—and they'd all been distinctly above-average specimens to begin with.

"Fasten your seat belts, please," he said.

And keep your barf-bags handy. This thing sways like a sonofabitch.

Unlike many, he didn't bother to say *git* or the equivalent, just pushed the control forward a notch and rotated the joystick. The beast gave a low coughing grunt and then a wince-inducing screech of complaint as it came out of a daze of quasi-reptilian ecstasy and turned in place before pacing forward; the weight of howdah and passengers wasn't really noticeable to something that weighed about as much as a big dump truck, and everyone clutched the grab-bars. The strings of silver bells around the edges of the howdah chimed in chorus at the first lurch, then settled down into a *ting-ting-ting-ting* beneath the heavy thud of footfalls as the animal paced along. It wasn't doing more than walk, but each stride covered a lot of ground.

Marc did start a little as the black woman slid into the front seat beside him. He didn't think it was his own overwhelming attractiveness; he was a slim, wiry man of medium height for Jamestown—five-ten—built like a gymnast or track-and-field star, which he'd been, with a pleasant open face, olive skin, and dark green eyes. His black hair was cropped short. She just seemed exuberantly happy to be on Venus, and less returning-gravity-whipped by the voyage than most of the newcomers. And of course she was less constrained than someone in the Aerospace Force, although military formality was distinctly low-key here. For one thing, there was scarcely anyone below commissioned rank. A lieutenant was on the bottom of the heap.

She touched the plank of the seat as if seeking reassurance in the rough, slightly splintery surface.

"I like the bells," she said.

"Me too," he replied. "It's mostly to warn people out of the way. These things aren't what you'd call maneuverable, even Iced."

"Iced?"

"Ah, Jamestown slang. Internal Control Device: I-C-D, and so-Iced."

"You've been here awhile, right, Lieutenant?" she asked.

"*Weh*," he agreed cheerfully in the dialect of his childhood.

He was no more immune than most young men to attention from a good-looking woman, and on Venus you had the added pleasure of knowing she was in the top of the bell curve for brains and general ability, too. He went on:

"More than a year now, Venus year, that is. Mostly in construction, maintenance, supply, but just recently we've had more time for real exploring and research—fascinating stuff. What we're learning is going to shake the Earth. And a lieutenant is small potatoes here, ah, Miss..."

"Cynthia Whitlock, Lieutenant," she said, and held out a hand. "Sorry, I didn't catch your name—I was paying more attention to the surroundings than the spiel!"

"Marc Vitrac. Ethnology and linguistics, power systems and lighter-than-air pilot."

“Geology, minors in paleontology and information systems. And... *imiKartahownai* ‘n *dus-jas* she asked.

She had a pretty good accent for someone working from recordings rather than talking to native speakers. The hand that gripped his was firm and strong and dry, slender and long-fingered; shaking meant he had to juggle the rifle he was holding in the crook of his other arm.

“Yeah, I’ve picked up a fair amount of Kartahownian. It’s damned useful here; a lot of people along the coast speak it, sort of a lingua franca. Some of them have acquired a bit of English over the town, too. They’ve got some very smart people there—it doesn’t pay to underestimate them.”

She tilted her head to one side. “Louisiana?” she said.

“Evangeline, eh, she was my *mawmaw*,” he said, exaggerating the Cajun lilt for a moment. “Bayou born and bred. Grand Isle.”

“*Harlem* born and bred,” she replied, with only a trace of it in her General American.

Then her brows went up slightly as he took a quick glance skyward and started to raise the rifle. “Nope,” he said, lowering the weapon. “He’s not going for us. Guess we look too much like a ‘saur.”

When he’d relaxed, she went on, indicating the rifle with a glance, “That *cannon* is a bird-gun?”

“*Mais*, for those things, *weh*, certainly,” he said, turning a thumb upward.

He was unsurprised she knew her way around firearms, even though she was a civilian. The selection program tended to pick intellectuals who were also outdoors types or vice versa. Then he raised his voice a little so the rest of the score of passengers could hear, and it took on a slight tour guide tone. One that he realized was based on something he’d heard an uncle use when he conducted tours of the bayous in his swamp boat, throwing marshmallows to the quasi-tame gators for the tourists.

“Y’all might want to take a gander skyward. First big Quetza of the season, and they’re quite a sight.”

Most of the passengers did look up. He heard gasps. It was one thing to watch a video of a flying creature with a wingspan of eighty feet, but another to see one with your naked eye. Even back in the Cretaceous, nothing that size could have flown on Earth, but the gravity was a bit lower here, and the air wasn’t just thicker but also had more oxygen per unit to power flight muscles. This Quetza was coming in low, coasting down from the inland cliffs where they nested, banking to avoid the built-up area of Jamestown, and then sweeping back seaward.

The thin long-headed body was bigger than a man’s and roughly the same shape, but it was tiny between the vast leathery expanses of wing that caught the thermals; the eyes in its long, narrow beaked head were huge and yellow and it turned one of them towards the wagon as it went by overhead. Then the wings half-folded, and the great beast came down on the other side of the runway like an arching thunderbolt of brown hide and white-and-scarlet body-fuzz and yellow jaws. The legs were slender, like a great pickaxe beak, balanced by a bony crest behind, and full of jagged teeth.

“Ah, shit, it’s going for that herd of *churr*, probably after a *bebette*. Sorry, people—I’m going to have to take a shot. Fire in the hole!”

It was the claws on the ends of the long legs that struck first, in a puff of dust. More dust fountained into the air as the giant wings flogged the air, and something struggled beneath them as the thirty-odd adults and younglings in the herd splattered like water on a waxed floor, bawling and shrieking in terror. The week-old *churr* colt was the size of a medium pig except for the longer legs and it squealed like one. *Churr* were what the locals used instead of horses; Venus didn’t have an equivalent of equines, as far as they knew. The shaggy, social omnivores were actually more like bears, and still more like horse-sized dogs with the digestive systems of hogs.

The pterodactyl worked for height, looked down at the animal thrashing in its claws, and dropped him from two hundred feet. The squeal ran all the way down as the falling beast thrashed his legs, then cut off abruptly at the meaty *thud* of impact. The winged reptile turned in a circling gyre as it descended and then settled to the ground like a flying avalanche, mantling its wings over the dead animal as it fed. After an instant, the long head came up with a dripping chunk in its jaws. It bolted the food whole, and you could see the lump traveling down the throat.

Marc brought the ceratopsian around and pressed the *bliss-out* button to freeze it in place before he came up with one knee on the bench, taking a hitch of the rifle sling around his left elbow to give it a three-point rest and working the bolt to chamber one of the heavy rounds. Cynthia slid down and went flat to peer over the edge of the howdah, her thumbs on her ears and mouth open. The pterodactyl's huge eye with its star-shaped pupil leaped into view through the sight: about nine hundred yards. No shift a little for the wind, *stroke* the trigger...

CRACK!

Recoil punched into his shoulder despite the rubber pad and the weapon's muzzle brake and the fourteen-pound mass of the heavy rifle. Through the scope he had a brief glimpse of the predator's brain splashing away from the hollow-point bullet. When he took the scope from his eye, the forty-foot wings were thrashing the soil in a last frenzy. As they stilled to twitching, the *churr* herd closed back in, standing in a circle for a moment before settling in to feed amid ripping and crunching sounds; the shaggy animals liked meat more than acorns or grass, though they'd eat anything in a pinch. They'd have it down to tatters and a skeleton by sundown, with the corpse beetles making sure not enough was left to smell by tomorrow.

This planet had an *active* ecosystem.

Marc worked the action and caught the empty shell as it ejected. That was one hundred and seventy-five dollars of the taxpayers' money in shipping costs, right there, and they had their own reloading shop now. The sharp, acrid chemical stink of nitro powder hung in the air for a moment then drifted away into the flowers-hay-hot-dirt-and-ocean smells.

"Jesus, Lieutenant!" the bird colonel said reverently.

"Yeah, sir. You've got to watch out for the Quetzals, take a glance skyward every so often; the older ones like that can lift a grown man into the air with a high-speed snatch. They can't carry that much weight for long... but they don't have to. And you *don't* let kids go out without an armed escort! The First Fleet people shot a half-dozen daily around the town for a while and that seems to have taught them to avoid it. Lucky there aren't all that many of the really huge ones."

"They can learn?" the colonel asked. "The reports say they're not very big-brained."

"About like a smart bird, say a parrot or a bald eagle—some of the smaller dinosaurian land predators are like that, too. The herbivores like this one"—he kicked the ceratopsian's shield—"are as dumb as geckos. The big Quetzals migrate to the southern hemisphere in the winter, right down to the Antarctic continent, so you only have to worry about them from this time of year to the start of the fall rains. It's a good thing there aren't more of the thunder-lizards this far north, or it'd be impossible to live outside a cave."

The colonel nodded as Marc got their mount back into motion and headed into town. "What's that over there?" he said, pointing left and southward.

Everyone looked. *There* was a fifty-acre field densely planted with a reedlike crop about twelve feet high waving in the light breeze, each stem as thick as a woman's wrist. The stems were deep poplin green and the clusters of flowers on top were pink with white cores. They attracted clusters of palm-sized insects colored like monarch butterflies, orange, black, and yellow. There were millions of

them, and they made a dense twirling blanket like a translucent Persian carpet over the blossoms. ~~strong scent half like cloves and half like cut grass came with the breeze, together with an occasional fluttering winged drift of the insects.~~

“That’s our shamboo crop—the local name for it has this goddamned click sound in the middle, so we don’t use it. When its shoots are just showing aboveground, it tastes like asparagus crossed with candy. Harvest it when it’s four feet tall, and you can crush this sweet juice out of it and make sugar for a pretty good rum, and the Topsies—”

“Topsies?” the colonel asked.

“Ceraptopsians.” He slapped the shield of their mount to show what he meant “They eat it like bonbons. That’s what we use most of it for. At eight feet, it’s too tough even for the big critters to like much, but you can get fiber out of it that makes dandy rope and burlap and canvas, and just recently we’ve made some paper from it. When it’s mature, the seeds taste a lot like sesame and give good oil for cooking and soap, and the stems are like bamboo only a lot stronger and tougher; that’s what the howdah is made of.”

He cleared his throat, sat, and got their mount going again. “Jamestown proper is, as you know, closer to the water.”

That was because the first cargoes and personnel had come down in one-way capsules that had landed on the shallow bay with its half-moon curve of blinding white beach; it had taken years to get the runway and orbital boosters ready for two-way traffic. The cargo pods brought by the automated solar-sail craft that shuttled between the planets and Earth orbit on their long, leisurely arcs still do splash down there, floating the last few thousand feet on parachutes whose cloth itself had a dozen uses here. There was a long wooden dock stretching out into the clear green water of the bay now; the low solar-only tides made things easier around a port.

A native ship was tied up to the dock, a tubby fifty-footer with a mast and single square sail and twin steering oars. A Grand Banks-style schooner rested on the other side of the wharf. White sails showed farther out, where the water was purple-blue, with small whitecaps.

Marc pointed out the other features of the settlement: the helium-cooled pebble-bed reactor and generator emitting a plume of steam beneath its mound of dirt, a miniature version of the mass-produced types that generated most electricity back home these days; the airship mooring tower, built of shamboo and local woods (both the flying craft were out right now); and the semi-experimental fields growing crops from Earth alongside the Venusian plants domesticated by Kartahown. The town proper was made up of low adobe buildings lining the three dirt streets. All were whitewashed and most had roofs that were curves of green synthetic, each made of half a cargo pod; a few used reddish-brown homemade tile or brown wooden shingles instead. Workshops and laboratories vied with warehouses and residences. The houses had acre-sized walled gardens, and there was a small park and a fair number of big trees that looked a lot like live oaks and had been standing here before the Terrans came.

Hitching posts and watering troughs stood at intervals along the streets, and there were boardwalks on the main drag, with a proud but lonely stretch of brick in front of the town-hall-courthouse-commandant’s-office. Riders on *churr*-back and pedestrians and carts drawn by *churr* or *tharg*-oxen made room for the ceraptopsian. There were a couple of engine-powered ground vehicles in town, but they were carefully mothballed for emergencies.

Many of the people waved and called greetings, and Marc waved back. This *was* a small town. One hundred thirty-two Earthlings were here, not counting the score of newcomers. And counting the twenty or so who’d been born here, and the nine who’d died. Nobody here was old, and everyone was

top physical specimen, but there was a whole planet of unfamiliar perils around them. About twice as many Kartahownians and tribesfolk lived around the base, and there was a floating population of visitors from there and elsewhere, traders and pilgrims and the sheerly curious.

“Sort of an *acadaemogorsk* combined with frontier Deadwood,” an English voice said from among the passengers.

Marc nodded, chuckling. He’d been a little surprised himself when the final training courses had put so much emphasis on things like blacksmithing and carpentry, but it made sense when you remembered how far away Earth was and how much it cost to ship anything this far. Every ounce counted, and every ounce acquired on Venus meant spaceship cargo freed up for something that couldn’t possibly be made here, like scientific instruments.

Marc went on, “And that’s the chapel; the denominations use it on a rotating basis. And here’s HQ,” he concluded.

That was the largest of the buildings—three stories of adobe with the viga-beams that supported the floors poking through the whitewash, in an E-shape around courtyards, with a fountain and an arcade of tree trunks at the front. People bustled in and out, and traders squatted by blankets bearing the goods, everything from jewelry to colorful dyed cloth and cooking spices.

Marc pulled the joystick back to the neutral position and pressed the *park* button that stimulated the animal’s pleasure center; it put its head down and began to drool again. Ceratopsians were too invincibly stupid to learn much, but they would stand still if it made them feel very good. That let him jump down from the driver’s seat and put the ladder in place. A Hispanic woman in her early thirties appeared in the main doorway, waving a clipboard.

Marc gestured towards her. “Dr. Maria Feldman will give you all the standard familiarization lecture and assign quarters. I’m afraid we’re very shorthanded here, so I’ll be leaving you in her capable hands.”

“This way, people! This way!” she called.

The passengers began to file down. As they did, Marc noticed one of them had slipped out and was handing Cynthia down from the foremost seat; he was a man of about Marc’s own age, but two inches taller, blond, blue-eyed, and handsome in a way both rugged and somehow smooth at the edges. He gave a toothy smile and squeezed hard as he shook hands. His eyes went a little wider as the Cajun squeezed back with carefully calculated force.

“Wing Commander Christopher Blair, RAF,” the blond man said in an excruciatingly Etonian voice; he was the one who’d compared the place to an EastBloc research settlement crossed with frontier town. “Anthropology and linguistics, lighter-than-air pilot as well... as are you, I understand. Pleased to meet you, Lieutenant.”

“The pleasure’s mutual,” Marc said through slightly gritted teeth, surprised at the intensity of his sudden dislike.

Oh, well, they’ve all been together on the Carson for a quarter of a year, he thought as he climbed back into the howdah and watched the two of them walk side by side into HQ, chatting easily. *I just liked her on first acquaintance...*

In theory half the personnel here were supposed to be female. In practice it was hard to be precise about it with such a small population, and there was a slight but noticeable surplus of males, particularly among the younger, unmarried residents. It was annoying as hell and it meant that the single men among the Old Bulls had a built-in advantage.

He headed the ceratopsian down towards the docks, shouting reminders to get out of the way occasionally when it looked as if the bells weren’t enough. Most of the traffic was pedestrian.

including the odd kid, and once a Kartahownian noble in a fancy, gold-trimmed shamboo chariot gawking around in his saffron tunic and gaudy barbaric jewelry, and gawking hardest of all at a 'sar doing what people told it to. He nearly gawked too long. A ceratopsian just didn't stop, start, or turn quickly.

It was a relief to turn right, eastward, towards the stables, storage, and workshops out on the eastern edge of town; that was usually far enough for the stench to not bother people. The prevailing wind blew south to north here in the summer, and in from the ocean in winter. Iced ceratopsians didn't need much stabling; when you pressed the right button, a ceratopsian felt increasingly bad if it walked away from the fixed broadcaster. That kept them quiet even when their instincts said they should be migrating to the highlands for the summer. There were ditches and fences made of a lattice of two-foot-thick tree trunks as backup, but privately Marc doubted they'd hold the beasts if the signal ever failed.

Real split-rail corrals confined the domestic *tharg* and *churr* they'd bought from the locals, and beyond them were tilled fields. Marc noted where a bustle of construction work was adding to the barns and storage sheds, and caught a strong whiff from the steeping vats where mammal and dinosaur hide was being tanned. They could have bought everything from the Kartahownians, of course, but sacred Policy said otherwise.

Okay, it's a fairly smart policy, he thought. Relations with Kartahown's kings were good, but with the city as a whole were at best... "fraught" was the word he'd heard General Clarke use. *I'd be le grudging if it all didn't take up so much research time.*

He turned draught-beast and howdah over to the staff, slung his rifle across his back, and walked over to the slaughterhouse that also served as a processing point for specimens. It was cool inside, cool enough to dry his sweat and even raise a few goose bumps, courtesy of a wind-vent system. It didn't even smell too bad, since the blood-beetles took care of scraps—and of the meat, unless you took elaborate precautions. Dr. Samuel Feldman, doctor of paleontology and ethnology, was watching while a crew disassembled the hung-up carcasses of six *tharg* Marc and the other Rangers had shot for tonight's Welcome-to-Venus barbeque, the giant wild variety that could weigh in at a ton and a half.

Feldman looked as much like a rumples, absentminded professor as it was possible for anyone who made the Jamestown selection to do. Mostly that meant he forgot to shave sometimes and never quite got around to growing a beard. His pants and pocketed shirt jacket were the same as those of nearly everyone else and he had twenty-thirty vision, but somehow the lab coat and glasses were there as an intangible spiritual essence; for the rest, he was a short, fairly stocky thirty-something man with dark curling hair, brown eyes, and a round, big-nosed face, and the body of a wickedly effective soccer goalie, which was exactly what he was in his off-hours.

"You know, dis ting is *definitely* a bovine," he said in purest Brooklyn, an accent that hadn't disappeared even while he was earning his first degree from New York University and after the time he'd spent at Stanford.

"Certainly tastes like beef. But come on, Doc. Billions of years of separate evolution here!"

It wasn't the first time they'd had this discussion; *tharg* was the commonest type of meat in the local diet after pork. Feldman prodded a finger towards the big animal whose flayed body hung head down from a wooden hook over a big tub of oat-hulls.

"The anatomy is just too damned similar for a doubt."

"*Mais*, I think it looks a lot like a buffalo, me. Call it a bovinoid?"

"Or a tall, mean wisent," Feldman said, smiling. "But no, it's not 'bovinoid.' Clade *bovidae*, genus *bos*. This thing is descended from the same ancestors as the ones we make brisket out of back home."

It's even kosher—it divideth its hooves and cheweth the fucking cud!”

“It's a buffalo that can fly interplanetary distances? I know they're pretty flatulent when they've been eating those breadnut things, but not to escape velocity, I think.”

Feldman's smile turned into a grin, then died. “Dammit, Marc, this is driving me nuts. What we need is a way to directly compare DNA... they're working on it, but it's going to be a while. Maybe we shouldn't have put all our R and D money into rocket science for the past thirty years. The serum immunology reactions, though... dammit...”

Marc nodded; he didn't have the older man's terrier obsession, but it *was* something to worry about and they'd come here for knowledge—officially.

And to make sure the EastBloc don't snaffle off a whole planet, and to taunt the Euros once again for following de Gaulle into a blind alley. Everyone had expected wonders on Mars and Venus. Nobody had expected what they found. He ventured, “Panspermia? Microbes on meteors?”

The scientist shook his head. “Not a prayer. Okay, say life gets its start from complex molecules from space. We've *found* complex molecules in space that look like amino acids. That could get you something that's *generally* similar, starting with single-celled organisms in primordial oceans. Bugs on rocks, yeah, that would make things a bit *more* generally similar, say in the structure of genes and chromosomes. But evolution's a chaotic process; you get general similarities, but not identities. Hell, even on Earth, dolphins aren't fish and seals aren't dolphins and birds aren't bats. No way a couple billion years of random evolution could reproduce, oh—”

He paused and caught a buzzing fly on the wing with the same smooth snap that he used to stop a soccer ball, then held it out in a cage of fingers, reciting in a singsong tone:

“Two-winged flying insects with distinctive wing venation: *spurious vein* usually present between R and M; cells R5 and M1 closed, resulting in a vein that runs *parallel to posterior* margin of the wing; anal cell closed near wing margin. Hoverflies, to you. The only difference between this and a Syrphid hoverflies on Earth is that it's as big as your little finger—and *that's* because the air here has a higher partial pressure of oxygen. You could get bugs here the size of Chihuahuas and I suspect that in the warmer areas you do.”

He released the insect and stopped the butchering of the *tharg* for a second to pry things open.

“Look at *that* and *that*. Look at the structure of the shoulder joint! And the digestive tract's not just *grossly* similar; it's similar in *detail*. It's not a different structure developed to do roughly the same thing; it's the same structure doing exactly the same thing; with only very minor differences. It's not more different from a Jersey cow than the cow is from a water buffalo. It's a *ruminant*, for Chrissakes!”

“There's grass here, too,” Marc pointed out.

Feldman began to run his hands through his hair, then noticed the blood on them and poured a dipperful of water over them, wiping down on a coarse burlap sack hanging from a peg.

“Yeah. And that's way too similar to our grass.”

“*Mais*, then the evidence would suggest that our theories of evolution are wrong,” Marc argued. “Maybe separate evolutionary paths *can* reproduce fine details, at least when they get the same initial conditions. Remember, evidence first, theory second.”

Feldman glared at him balefully. “But the facts are supposed to make *sense*. We've got to get started on a good survey of the geological strata and fossil record for this planet. Bovines date back about twenty million years on Earth. If we could compare the fossils—”

“Collected by all one hundred and forty-six of us?” Marc asked reasonably, and grinned inwardly as the paleontologist kicked the hanging carcass with concentrated venom. “Of course, maybe the

God-did-it crowd is right—”

“*Them!*”

Feldman started swearing; when he switched to Yiddish, Marc had to fight to keep the grin inward.
He’s a good boss, him, but sometimes I just can’t resist.

* * * *

Venus, EastBloc Station Kusnetsov—Low Venus Orbit

The upper stage of the EastBloc shuttle *Riga* was an elongated wedge with two vertical stabilizers at the rear. Its rocket engines were strictly for the ascent to orbit, when its first stage carried it to twenty-five thousand meters and Mach 3. It was designed to dead-stick to a landing, using its belly as the heat-shield and lifting body. Captain and pilot Franziskus Binkis floated in through the docking tunnel that clamped to the lower spindle of the wheel-and-axle configuration of the station and sighed in relief as he deftly dogged the hatch and then pushed himself down to strap into the central pilot’s station. There wasn’t really any difference in the stale, recycled taste of the dry air with its tang of ozone, since the *Riga* had been docked here for three days, but his lungs and nose insisted it felt not quite alive.

His glance skipped over gauges and readouts. Most were old-fashioned analogue devices, it being resentfully accepted that the *Yanki* were ahead in plasma-screen technology, even with the latest Chinese improvements. Officially, digital readouts and touch screens were regarded as unnecessary luxuries. Li was ready at the engineer’s console, and Nininze in the copilot’s seat.

“Glad to get the cargo stowed,” the Georgian said. “It must be important, not to be sent down with a cargo pod to Cosmograd. I wonder what it is?”

The pilot grunted. It was important, which was exactly why Nininze shouldn’t have asked the question. But the Georgian was short, dark, lively, and talkative—exactly what a Georgian was supposed to be like. Binkis knew he was an equally archetypical Lithuanian in looks, tall and as blond with pale gray eyes, and just like the stereotype he was also closemouthed. Li was from Canton and doll-pretty; she was also even more silent than the pilot, except where her machinery was concerned, and he was fairly sure she reported to Base Security.

“Part of it is computer parts,” Binkis said. “Let’s get the checklist completed.”

Li and Nininze nodded with a chorus of, “Yes, Captain.” The “Comrade” was best left off these days except on formal occasions.

Otherwise you were likely to be suspected of left-deviationist hankerings for the old days, which wouldn’t do your career any good. A sensible man kept up with the changes.

“Poor Alexi,” Nininze said, after they finished the run-through on the maneuvering jets. “Three more weeks up here, and not even any brandy!”

Binkis grinned as he watched Li finish the checklist on the navigational computer. He happened to know that a friend on the last visit of the nuclear-boost ship *Zuhkov* had left several bottles of quite good Stolichnaya with Alexi in return for a small stuffed pterodactyl, priceless on the black market back home if you could get it past the inspectors, or cut one of them in on the deal. Anyone who thought they could forbid liquor traffic in an organization founded by Russians was crazy. That didn’t stop Security from trying, of course, and even trying to prevent people from making their own untaxed hooch down planetside, which showed you how in touch with reality *they* were. Of course, the current Security chief was a German named Bergman, with a spring-steel poker up his arse.

He’d been a compromise after the Chinese wouldn’t accept a Russian and the Russians balked at having the commandant *and* the police general Chinese.

“Cosmograd Control, this is *Riga-alpha*, reporting all systems functional for descent,” Binkis said

On the second try, the message went through. Venus had a turbulent atmosphere with a great deal of radio noise; it made longdistance communications awkward. He used Russian, which was still the common language of the EastBloc space service.

He'd also meticulously checked everything twice, most particularly the parts that were the Station chief's responsibilities.

Alexi is a good man to have a drink with, but at seventh and last, he is a Russian, and thin machinery will perform if you give it a good kick. A Russian is a Mongol with blue eyes—halfway to black-arse.

There was the odd token Tajik or Uzbek, but the core of the program was still Slav, with a faint sprinkling of minor Soviet nationalities: Baits like him, people from the Caucasus like Nininze, plenty from the other Warsaw Pact countries... and an ever-increasing percentage of Chinese. It was all supposed to show true internationalism at work. He liked the Chinese more than the Russians on the whole; they were better at detail work, and they took the new regulations on private initiative to heart rather than grumbling at them. Since a couple of them had started restaurants, you could finally get a decent meal in Cosmograd that you didn't cook yourself, and it was also now possible to get a broken light replaced without waiting three weeks.

The accented voice of the Hungarian duty officer groundside crackled through the speaker: "Cosmograd Control here. You are cleared for landing, Captain Binkis. Transmitting code."

"Spacebo" Binkis said

For a moment he looked at the great mottled disk of Venus through the windows, thick white cloud masses and thinner upper-level haze and streaks of blue below. *Coming home, Jadviga*, he thought, and punched the *execute* button.

A loud *clunk* sounded from above as the docking collar disengaged. They were already weightless but there was a peculiar feeling in the inner ear as the big gyroscopes whined and twisted the nose of the *Riga* to the proper alignment.

"Commence," he began. Then a startled obscenity: "*Pisau!*"

The ripple of action on the dials showed the firing sequence for the retro-rockets! "Li, overriding that!"

The Chinese woman's hands danced on the flight control console. "Negative, Captain," she said tonelessly. "The flight computer is not responding."

Binkis slapped the main manual override switch. He couldn't do a reentry burn by hand, but he could stop it until they'd figured out what had gone wrong. Nothing... and then the huge, impalpable hand slamming him back into his seat as the retro-rockets blasted and the view ahead vanished in a haze of burning gas.

Trilinkas sau ant kelio triesk! he screamed mentally at the useless controls. *Fold yourself in three and shit!*

Then with an effort that made sweat break out on his forehead: "Li, see what trajectory this puts me on."

For as the rockets killed some of its orbital velocity, the *Riga* had begun to fall.

Chapter Two

Encyclopedia Britannica, 16th Edition
University of Chicago Press, 1988

VENUS: History of observation

... in 1927 and 1928 ultraviolet photographs were taken by the American astronomers William H. Wright and Frank E. Ross. The first studies of the infrared spectrum of Venus, by Walter S. Adams and Theodore Dunham (also of the United States) in 1932, showed that the atmosphere of the planet was possibly an oxygen-nitrogen one. Observations in the microwave of the spectrum beginning in earnest in the late 1940s, provided the first evidence of the Earth-like surface temperatures.

The greatest advances in the early study of Venus were achieved through the use of unmanned spacecraft. The era of spacecraft exploration of the planets began with the Soviet *Pioneer* orbiter mission to Venus in 1960, which placed a spacecraft in orbit around the planet and sent four entry probes deep into the Venusian atmosphere. The entry probes provided data on atmospheric structure and composition, while the orbiter observed from above. The orbiter also provided the first high-quality map of Venus' surface topography and resulted in the naming of the continents, oceans, and major islands. Most important, it also provided the first positive indications of intelligent life...

* * * *

Venus, Gagarin Continent—south of Jamestown Extraterritorial Zone

The night would be cold, but at noontime in the canyon the late-summer heat was dense enough to cut you off, trapped by the fifty-foot walls of dark rock on either side. Beech trees lined the edges of the cliffs, and their branches arched over the narrow slit in the rock; bright sunlight filtered through the drying fall leaves and the canopy, turning daylight into a green-gold twilit shade; enough of the leaves had fallen to make gold drift down the banks, and more floated downstream past the feet of their *churr*.

The stream was low now, trickling ankle-deep over brown polished rock, but you could see that the winter torrents stretched halfway to the top of the cliffs and across the full twenty-yard width of the water-cut groove in the earth. The *churr* of the five riders were panting a little, tossing their shaggy heads, blocking their blocky heads and stopping frequently to lap from pools; the beasts smelled hot and musky, like overworked dogs, and they panted with tongues the size of dish towels. Now and then one would snarl at a passing insect with a wet *chomp!* like a door slamming.

The five riders kept going even when they took swigs from their canteens or gnawed biscuit and dried fruit. Three were Terrans in outfits of camouflaged parachute cloth, and two were hunters of the Kudlak tribe in straw hats like Earth's Chinese coolie type and knee-length leather pants held up by cross-belted suspenders. The Venusian tribesmen had quivers over their backs and short recurved bows made of laminated shamboo and *tharg*-horn in their fists, with steel trade-knives at their belts. The Earthlings carried their rifles across their saddlebows. Humans and *churr* all looked tired and worn, sweat cutting runnels in the dust on faces, brown fur matted and dusty.

Marc blew out a long sigh of relief and blinked in the bright sunlight as they came out into a broad open circle where a sinkhole had collapsed long ago.

"I was beginning to doubt my memory," he said thankfully. "*Mais*, here we are."

The depression was a mile or so across, an irregular oval with walls that were near-vertical in part and in others collapsed into steep scree covered in thorny bushes. The little river spread more broadly here, in wide, shallow pools edged with rushes; those were dry with autumn, their tops shedding white seed-fluff that mingled with insects whose wings glittered gaudy or iridescent, many of them six inches across. The largest of all were the dragonfly-like predators; those buzzed like miniature crocodusters as they swooped, feeding, in lethal arcs. Birds larger still had been taking all of them impartially; they exploded upward in a multicolored swarm as the humans came into view, and the

noise level dropped. Cliffsides were streaked with droppings, the guano adding an ammonia pungence to the air and showing where rookeries were in the spring, but the big, shaggy twig-bundles of nests were unoccupied right now.

Cynthia Whitlock pushed back her sweat-stained bush hat and glanced at Marc sharply. “Did you just escape something?” she asked.

“Not exactly,” he said, scanning for the good campsite he remembered from his previous visit.

There were a couple of running springs around the edge of the sinkhole even this late in the year, each marked by a clump of trees and bright green grass and bush. The best was at the top of a short rise, on a knee of rock more than head-height above the level floor. A steady trickle of water as thick through as a man’s wrist fell down into a pool before draining farther down, providing clean water and a ready-made shower. The cliff overhead was steep, inclined inward towards the base, which would give shade. Just beyond was a section that had collapsed into a steep slope, which gave a route out if necessary.

“In other words, yes, there *was* something to worry about,” Christopher Blair said dryly. “Was that why you’ve been pushing us so hard?”

Marc shrugged. “*Weh*. Thing is, it’s getting on towards the winter rainy season. That usually starts with cloudbursts up in the hills before the lowlands get any rain. Flash floods can come down this way *fast*.”

Cynthia Whitlock had trained as a geologist. She looked at the way the rock had been gouged by water and nodded.

Zhown nodded, too, as he dismounted, looking around. “*Toob! Toob!*” he said, pointing at the canyon they’d just left, then around at the sinkhole and up at the cliffs around it. “Bad, *much* bad in a narrow place if rains come. Better here. Better still if we go up there.”

Blair raised one blond brow. “You might have mentioned that before we spent two days in a blood-wadi with no way out, old chap,” he said to Marc.

“Dr. Feldman and Cynthia thought it was important to get those samples. So it was worth the risk to save a week’s travel time,” Marc retorted. “I was keeping an eye out for clouds, and I knew we’d reach this opening today. Otherwise we’d have had to wait until the next dry season.”

I like Cynthia, Marc thought. *Hell, I like Zhown and Colrin. Blair... I don't know exactly why I don't like him. Well, weh, I do know why, but it's not just that.*

There wasn’t any flotsam on the knee of rock, and there was enough level ground for themselves and their beasts as they set about making camp. That didn’t take much time. They unsaddled and hobbled the riding-*churr*, unloaded the four pack-*churr* and hobbled them, and turned them all loose to browse. At sundown they’d give the *churr* some of the smelly, oilseed-oats-dried-offal pellets and scraps. *Churr* would eat nearly anything, and until then they’d have plenty of browsing around the spring-fed pools and along the ponds.

With rain unlikely the humans didn’t need a tent, and setting out bedrolls took only a moment. Late spring’s floods had left plenty of deadwood around the perimeter of the sinkhole, and they soon had campfire going. Colrin put a pot of water on to boil, and started stringing lumps of meat from a small antelope they’d shot earlier today on skewers, along with chunks of onion from a sack they had with them, then set the meat and onions in a plastic basin and poured beer, chopped garlic, and ground *eesum* spice in with them. The kebabs, some it-might-as-well-be-rice and dried vegetables and fruit would make a good enough meal. They’d also dug a couple of sacks’ worth of tubers from a vine that grew along sandy riverbanks. Something very close to it was a cultivated crop called a breadnut. The tame variety was about the size of a fist, while the wild ones were the size of walnuts, but both tasted

lot like potatoes with a sweetish overtone when roasted in the embers.

After their meal, they got to work, each group in its own way. The two native hunter-guides unlimbered their horn-and-shamboo bows and started shooting at stumps and logs. Archery was new to them, introduced by the Earthlings—nobody on Venus had invented the bow yet, as far as they could tell—and so was riding on a *churr*'s back rather than in a chariot behind it, but they'd taken to both like Russians to strong drink, and practiced relentlessly. It was something they understood and could copy themselves, and it was a tactful way for the Earthlings to refuse to sell them guns.

The Earthlings got out their rock hammers and sample boxes.

"Is Zhown and Colrin's Kartahownian as lousy as it sounds to me?" Cynthia asked, as they walked towards the southern rim of the sinkhole.

The hills rose steeply there, several hundred feet; the knife-edged cleft where uncounted seasons had sliced through the rock showed bands in colors from fawn through dull yellow to black. Marc kept up a wary scan and the rifle in the crook of his arm ready to go, which wasn't easy as the footing changed from rock and mud to stream-smoothed rock alone. The stones rattled under the tough ceratopsian-hide soles of their boots.

"It sure is," Marc said. "It's not their native language, either, and some of the sounds are hard for them."

"It's related," Blair cut in "but distantly, much the way English is to Russian."

"*Weh*," Marc agreed. "A few of them learn Kartahownian so they can trade with the river valley people, but not that many. They're herders and hunters, mainly."

Blair stopped. "And how are their relations with the city?"

The Englishman had spent a lot of time in Kartahown's territory since he'd arrived, which was to be expected of a linguist and anthropologist.

Marc's duties as a Ranger took him more among the wild peoples. With a shrug, he replied, "Like the Bedouin or Mongols in the old days back on Earth. Sometimes they trade or work as caravan guards and suchlike; sometimes they raid and steal stuff; sometimes they and the sedentary peoples fight big wars. There's some intermarriage, too, along the edges."

"That's roughly what I thought. Whose idea was it to teach them how to make bows and ride?" Blair asked, flushing under his tan. "Is someone trying to re-create Genghis Khan?"

Cynthia looked at Marc, too. He shrugged again.

"The high command sets the policy—we've given the city-folk a lot of new ideas, too. Personally, I don't approve. The nomads can be almighty rough, but they need an equalizer. To the city-folk here you don't have any rights unless you're a free Kartahownian or a damned powerful foreigner. They think of the nomads as monkeys from the wilds and treat them like dirt if they can get away with it."

"Most of this planet is pre-agricultural, not even as far along as the Neolithic," the Englishman snapped. "Civilization is a new and fragile thing here. It can't take chances."

Marc grinned innocently. "Guess us Americans just can't help sympathizing with a bunch of wild ass cowboys," he said. "Even if they *are* wearing lederhosen."

Cynthia snorted laughter. Marc bowed, and then turned to the Englishman. "Scissors-paper-rock for who keeps first watch?"

They both turned their backs on Cynthia. *Now, what do I think Mr. Bloody Blair will pick?* 'I mused. That needed only a moment's consideration: He flattened his hand.

"Marc has paper; Chris has rock," Cynthia said, her voice carefully neutral. "Let's get going."

Marc nodded easily to both of them as he and Cynthia leaned their rifles carefully against the boulder, keeping his smile from getting too broad. Blair had certain things going for him; he was

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