

# PLATINUM POHL

THE COLLECTED BEST STORIES

FREDERIK POHL



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P L A T I N U M

P O H L

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THE COLLECTED BEST STORIES

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F R E D E R I K P O H L



ORB

A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK

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For my great-granddaughter,  
~~ALEXANDRA EMŐKE VIOLET ANN POHL-WEARY~~  
(better known as Sasha),  
and for all who come after

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# INTRODUCTION

**FREDERIK POHL HAS DONE** just about everything that one can do in the field of science fiction. When he was still a teenager he began to edit science fiction magazines; he started getting his stories published when he was even younger. He has won all the major awards—the Hugo, Nebula, and Campbell for best novel; he has been lauded as a Grand Master by the Science Fiction Writers of America; he’s written an enormous number of very good short stories; and he has collaborated on both short stories and novels, both with great success.

If this weren’t enough, he has also edited anthologies, including the groundbreaking *Star Science Fiction* anthologies of original stories. In addition, he’s edited lines of SF books for Bantam and Ace at different times. He has been an agent; he has been president of the SFWA.

He has achieved other notable feats in the field as well, but I think you can get an idea. This man is one of the giants in the field.

Editing this volume of his collected best stories was both a joy and a nightmare. In the course of his career so far, he has written hundreds of stories. Some were originally published under pseudonyms; others were collaborations with other authors. (Still others were pseudonymous collaborations!) When you count up the stories and the total wordage, he has produced more than a million words of short fiction—this in addition to his many novels.

The thirty stories that follow represent fiction from as early as the 1940s and as recent as just a few years ago. Our goal in this collection is to present the best short stories, novelettes, and novellas from Frederik Pohl’s career to date. He’s still writing, of course, but we had to stop somewhere ... though we reserve the right to include new stories in a subsequent edition of this book. There are some exclusions. Some of Pohl’s short stories have been incorporated into his novels, and we have not included stories that he later used in creating longer works. Nonetheless, we have included stories from two books that could easily be considered novels: *The Day the Martians Came* and *The Years of the City*. In both these books, the stories are identifiable as discrete stories, but also exist as elements in a longer narrative.

Frederik Pohl started writing science fiction when he was very young, when the field itself was pretty young, too. In many of the stories reprinted here one can clearly see what many call the “sense of wonder” that inspired Pohl and his young contemporaries—authors such as Isaac Asimov, Damon Knight, Richard Wilson, Donald A. Wollheim, and others—when they were starting to write and publish stories in the 1930s, and that still inspires science fiction writers—and editors and readers—today.

Many young people have that sense of wonder—a curiosity about what lies outside the bounds of our world or in the future. However, most people lose that curiosity—the need to explore, to play in realms outside their experience—as they get older. One of the many pleasures of this collection is seeing the persistence of Pohl’s sense of wonder in stories penned over more than a half century.

In a very real way, these stories are twentieth-century fiction, marked by the events and reflecting the sociopolitical currents of the century. Yet like any really good literature, they also transcend the time, because of their profound humanity, the universality of their themes, and overarching concerns.

We’ve included some stories that put the reader in a specific place and time that Pohl captures with unerring accuracy—in some cases the time of the story’s creation, in others a time or a scenario perhaps yet to come. Pohl is gifted with a very sharp eye for human behavior and with a great ear for dialogue, and these talents hold him in very good stead when he is evoking the *now*—whether in



contemporary setting or an entirely alien one.

He also has a fine grasp of politics and for the workings of legislative bodies, the courts, and other human institutions. To be sure, his models tend to be United States institutions, but he does excellent research, and when he's writing about someplace other than the United States, you can depend on his observations of those places being accurate; like many authors, Pohl has traveled widely, and he brings to stories set overseas his careful first-person observations.

Readers who did not experience much of the twentieth century will find among these stories a considerable amount of cultural and social history expertly masked in the guise of necessary background, for Pohl, like generations of savvy observers, has always made society a big part of the story. Sociopolitical issues such as the threat of global nuclear war, overpopulation, pollution, and dependence on fossil fuels, to name but a few, are key elements in some of the stories. So are issues of social justice, about which Pohl is passionate.

Yet the issues that run through many of these stories never overwhelm the stories themselves. Pohl's characters just won't let them. Those characters are a varied and fascinating bunch—young and old, male and female, nasty and nice—they're all people who engage your interest, whether or not you agree with what they say and do. That, perhaps, is Pohl's greatest achievement. Creating characters that come to seem vividly alive and real may not sound very difficult, but there are many writers who fail to create such characters despite possessing other formidable skills. And his stories move. No matter what the tale, there is invariably something intriguing going on, something that engages your interest and won't let you stop reading.

Some of these stories are very serious, while others are just fun. Long hours were spent by the editor trying to decide which stories to keep and which to exclude, and there were dozens of very entertaining stories that had to be left out, because this book could not be a thousand pages long.

When all was said and done, we ended up with stories that showcase the enormous range of tone and texture, concepts and themes, plots and characters that Frederik Pohl has brought to life in his fiction. Early in this introduction I wrote it had been a joy and a nightmare to edit this collection, but that's not really true. Though deciding what should stay and what must go was terribly difficult, it was also an enormous amount of fun, because it gave me a chance to experience the richness of the stories.

May you enjoy these choices as much as I have.

—James Frenk  
Madison, Wisconsin  
March 1, 2000

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# THE MERCHANTS OF VENUS

Frederik Pohl has probably heard from too many readers about the pun in the title of this suspenseful novella. The answer to your question is: No. This has nothing much to do with Shakespeare's play. It has a lot to do with Venus, with people living on the edge, with the spirit of exploration, and the reasons people have for doing dangerous and otherwise risky business.

"The Merchants of Venus," first published in 1972, was also the first story Pohl wrote about the presence of mysterious alien Heechee in the solar system. Since then, he has written a *lot* about the Heechee, and readers have been much the better for his interest in the artifacts and other leavings of that race. *Gateway*(1976), his first novel about our discovery of the Heechee, won the triple crown of science fiction—the Hugo, Nebula, and John W. Campbell Memorial Awards for best novel—and that was just the beginning of a memorable series of books.

Before *Gateway* came "The Merchants of Venus."

## 1

My Name, Audee Walthers. My job, airbody driver. My home, on Venus, in a Heechee hut most of the time; wherever I happen to be when I feel sleepy otherwise.

Until I was twenty-five I lived on Earth, in Amarillo Central mostly. My father, a deputy governor of Texas. He died when I was still in college, but he left me enough dependency benefits to finish school, get a master's in business administration, and pass the journeyman examination for clerical typist. So I was set up for life.

But, after I tried it for a few years, I discovered I didn't like the life I was set up for. Not so much for the conventional reasons; I don't mind smog suits, can get along with neighbors even when there are eight hundred of them to the square mile, tolerate noise, can defend myself against the hood kids. It wasn't Earth itself I didn't like, it was what I was doing on Earth I didn't like, and so I sold my UOPWA journeyman's card, mortgaged my pension accrual, and bought a one-way ticket to Venus. Nothing strange about that. What every kid tells himself he's going to do, really. But I did it.

I suppose it would have been all different if I'd had a chance at Real Money. If my father had been full governor instead of a civil-service client. If the dependency benefits had included Unlimited Medicare. If I'd been at the top instead of in the middle, squeezed both ways. It didn't happen that way, so I opted out by the pioneer route and wound up hunting Terry marks at the Spindle.

Everybody has seen pictures of the Spindle, the Colosseum and Niagara Falls. Like everything worth looking at on Venus, the Spindle was a Heechee leftover. Nobody had ever figured out what the Heechee wanted with an underground chamber three hundred meters long and spindle-shaped, but it was there, so we used it; it was the closest thing Venus had to a Times Square or a Champs Elysées. All Terry tourists head for it first. That's where we fleece them.

My airbody-rental business is reasonably legitimate—not counting the fact that there really isn't much worth seeing on Venus that wasn't left there, below the surface, by the Heechee. The other tourist traps in the Spindle are reasonably crooked. Terries don't mind, although they must know they're being taken; they all load up on Heechee prayer fans and doll-heads, and those paperweights in transparent plastic in which a contoured globe of Venus swims in a kind of orange-brown snowstorm of make-believe fly ash, blood-diamonds, and fire-pearls. None of them are worth the price of the mass-charge back to Earth, but to a tourist who can get up the price of passage in the first place I don't suppose that matters.

To people like me, who can't get the price of anything, the tourist traps matter a lot. We live on them. I don't mean we draw our disposable income from them; I mean that they are how we get the price of what to eat and where to sleep, and if we don't have the price we die. There aren't too many ways of earning money on Venus. The ones that might produce Real Money—oh, winning a lottery; striking it rich in the Heechee diggings; blundering into a well-paying job; that kind of thing—are a real long-shots. For bread and butter everybody on Venus depends on Terry tourists, and if we don't milk them dry we've had it.

Of course, there are tourists and tourists. They come in three varieties. The difference between the cheap and the expensive is celestial mechanics.

There's the quick-and-dirty kind. On Earth, they're just well-to-do; they come every twenty-six months at Hohmann-orbit time, riding the minimum-energy circuit from Earth. Because of the critical times of a Hohmann orbit, they never can stay more than three weeks on Venus. So they come on the guided tours, determined to get the most out of the quarter-million-dollar minimum cabin fare the rich grandparents had given them for a graduation present, or they'd saved up for a second honeymoon, or whatever. The bad thing about them is that they don't have much money, since they've spent it all on fares. The nice thing about them is that there are a lot of them. While they're on Venus all the rental rooms are filled. Sometimes they'd have six couples sharing a single partitioned cubicle, two pairs at a time, hot-bedding eight-hour shifts around the clock. Then people like me would hold up in Heechee huts on the surface and rent out our own belowground rooms, and maybe make enough money to live a few months.

But you couldn't make enough money to live until the next Hohmann-orbit time, so when the Class A tourists came along we cut each other's throats over them.

They were medium-rich. What you might call the poor millionaires: the ones whose annual income was barely in seven figures. They could afford to come in powered orbits, taking a hundred days or so for the run, instead of the long, slow Hohmann drift. The price ran a million dollars and up, so there weren't nearly as many of them; but they came every month or so at the times of reasonably favorable orbital conjunctions. They also had more money to spend. So did the other medium-rich ones who hit us four or five times in a decade, when the ballistics of the planets had sorted themselves out into a low-energy configuration that allowed three planets to come into an orbit that didn't have much higher energy cost than the straight Earth-Venus run. They'd hit us first, if we were lucky, then go on to Mars. If it was the other way around, we got the leavings. The leavings were never very much.

But the very rich—ah, the very rich! They came as they liked, in orbital season or out.

When my tipper on the landing pad reported the *Yuri Gagarin*, under private charter, my money no longer began to quiver. It was out of season for everybody except the very rich; the only question on my mind was how many of my competitors would be trying to cut my throat for its passengers while I was cutting theirs.

Airbody rental takes a lot more capital than opening a prayer-fan booth. I'd been lucky in buying my airbody cheap when the fellow I worked for died; I didn't have too many competitors, and a couple of them were U/S for repairs, a couple more had kited off on Heechee diggings of their own.

So, actually, I had the *Gagarin's* passengers, whoever they were, pretty much to myself. Assuming they could be interested in taking a trip outside the Heechee tunnels.

I had to assume they would be interested, because I needed the money very much. I had this little liver condition, you see. It was getting pretty close to total failure. The way the doctors explained it to me, I had like three choices: I could go back to Earth and linger a while on external prostheses; or I could get up the money for a transplant. Or I could die.

## 2

The name of the fellow who had chartered the *Gagarin* was Boyce Cochenour. Age, apparently forty. Height, two meters. Ancestry, Irish-American-French.

He was the kind of fellow who was used to command. I watched him come into the Spindle though it belonged to him and he was getting ready to sell it. He sat down in Sub Vastra's imitation Paris Boulevard-Heechee sidewalk cafe. "Scotch," he said, and Vastra hurried to pour John Begg over super-cooled ice and hand it to him, all crackling with cold and numbing to the lips. "Smoke," he said, and the girl who was traveling with him instantly lit a cigarette and passed it to him. "Crumm, looking joint," he said, and Vastra fell all over himself to agree.

I sat down next to them—well, not at the same table, I mean; I didn't even look at them. But I could hear what they said. Vastra didn't look at me, either, but of course he had seen me come in and knew I had my eye on them. But I had to let his number-three wife take my order, because Vastra wasn't going to waste any time on me when he had a charter-ship Terry at his table. "The usual," I said to her, meaning straighttalk in a tumbler of soft drink. "And a copy of your briefing," I added, more softly. Her eyes twinkled at me over her flirtation veil. Cute little vixen. I patted her hand in a friendly way and left a rolled-up bill in it; then she left.

The Terry was inspecting his surroundings, including me. I looked back at him, polite but distant, and he gave me a sort of quarter-nod and turned back to Subhash Vastra. "Since I'm here," he said, "I might as well go along with whatever action there is. What's to do here?"

Sub grinned widely, like a tall, skinny frog. "Ah, whatever you wish, sah! Entertainment? In our private rooms we have the finest artists of three planets, nautch dancers, music, fine comedians—"

"We've got plenty of that in Cincinnati. I didn't come to Venus for a nightclub act." He wouldn't have known it, of course, but that was a good move; Sub's private rooms were way down the list of night spots on Venus, and the top of the list wasn't much.

"Of course, sah! Then perhaps you would like to consider a tour?"

"Aw." Cochenour shook his head. "What's the point? Does any of it look any different than the space pad we came in on, right over our heads?"

Vastra hesitated; I could see him calculating second-order consequences in his head, measuring the chance of the Terry going for a surface tour against what he might get from me as commission. He didn't look my way. Honesty won out—that is, honesty reinforced by a quick appraisal of Cochenour's

gullibility. “Not much different, no, sah,” he admitted. “All pretty hot and dry on the surface, at least for the next thousand kilometers. But I wasn’t thinking of the surface.”

“What then?”

“Ah, the Heechee warrens, sah! There are many miles just below this settlement. A guide could be found—”

“Not interested,” Cochenour growled. “Not in anything that close.”

“Sah?”

“If a guide can lead us through them,” Cochenour explained, “that means they’ve all been explored. Which means they’ve been looted. What’s the fun of that?”

“Of course,” said Vastra immediately. “I see what you’re driving at, sah.” He looked noticeably happier, and I could feel his radar reaching out to make sure I was listening, though he didn’t look in my direction at all. “To be sure,” he said, “there is always the chance of finding new digs, sah, provided one knows where to look. Am I correct in assuming that this would interest you?”

The third of Vastra’s house brought me my drink and a thin powder-faxed slip of paper. “Thirty percent,” I whispered to her. “Tell Sub. Only no bargaining, no getting anybody else to bid—” She nodded and winked; she’d been listening too, and she was as sure as I that this Terry was firmly on the hook. It had been my intention to nurse the drink as long as I could, but prosperity loomed before me. I was ready to celebrate; I took a long happy swallow.

But the hook didn’t have a barb. Unaccountably the Terry shrugged. “Waste of time, I bet,” he grumbled. “I mean, really. If you knew where to look, why wouldn’t you have looked there already, right?”

“Ah, mister,” cried Subhash Vastra, “but there are hundreds of tunnels not explored! Thousands. And in them, who knows, treasures beyond price!”

Cochenour shook his head. “Skip it,” he said. “Bring us another drink. And see if you can’t get the ice *cold* this time.”

Somewhat shaken, I put down my drink, half-turned away to hide my hand from the Terries, and looked at the facsimile copy of Sub’s report on them to see if it could tell me why Cochenour had lost interest.

It couldn’t. It did tell me a lot, though. The girl with Cochenour was named Dorotha Keefer. She had been traveling with him for a couple of years now, this being their first time off Earth; there was no indication of any marriage, or any intention of it, at least on his part. She was in her early twenties—real age, not simulated by drugs and transplants. Cochenour himself was well over ninety.

He did not, of course, look anywhere near that. I’d watched him come over to the table, and he moved lightly and easily, for a big man. His money came from land and petro-foods; according to the synopsis on him, he had been one of the first oil millionaires to switch over from selling oil as fuel for cars and heating plants to food production, growing algae in the crude that came out of his wells and selling the algae in processed form for human consumption. So he’d stopped being a mere millionaire and turned into something much bigger.

And that accounted for the way he looked. He’d been on Full Medical, with extras. The report said his heart was titanium and plastic. His lungs had been transplanted from a twenty-year-old killed in a helicopter crash. His skin, muscles and fats—not to mention his various glandular systems—were sustained by hormones and cell-builders at what had to be a cost of well over a thousand dollars a day. To judge by the way he stroked the girl sitting next to him, he was getting his money’s worth. He looked and acted no more than forty, at most—except perhaps for the look of his pale-blue, diamond-bright, weary and disillusioned eyes.

What a lovely mark! I swallowed the rest of my drink, and nodded to the third for another. The

had to be a way to get him to charter my airbody.

All I had to do was find it.

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Outside the rail of Vastra's cafe, of course, half the Spindle was thinking exactly the same thought. This was the worst of the low season, the Hohmann crowd were still three months in the future; all of us were beginning to run low on money. My liver transplant was just a little extra incentive; of the hundred maze-runners I could see out of the corner of my eye, ninety-nine needed to cut in on this rich tourist's money as much as I did, just for the sake of staying alive.

We couldn't all do it. Two of us, three, maybe even half a dozen could score enough to make a real difference. No more than that. And I had to be one of these few.

I took a deep swallow of my second drink, tipped Vastra's third lavishly—and conspicuously—and turned idly around until I was facing the Terries dead-on.

The girl was talking with a knot of souvenir vendors, looking interested and uncertain. "Boyce!" she said over her shoulder.

"Yeah?"

"What's this thing for?"

He bent over the rail and peered. "Looks like a fan," he said.

"Heechee prayer fan, right," cried the dealer; I knew him, Booker Allemang, an old-timer in the Spindle. "Found it myself, miss! It'll grant your every wish, letters every day from people reporting miraculous results—"

"Sucker bait," grumbled Cochenour. "Buy it if you want."

"But what does it do?"

He laughed raucously. "What any fan does. It cools you down." And he looked at me, grinning.

I finished my drink, nodded, stood up and walked over to the table. "Welcome to Venus," I said. "May I help you?"

The girl looked at Cochenour for approval before she said, "I thought this was very pretty."

"Very pretty," I agreed. "Are you familiar with the story of the Heechees?"

Cochenour pointed to a chair. I sat and went on. "They built these tunnels about a quarter of a million years ago. They lived here for a couple of centuries, give or take a lot. Then they went away again. They left a lot of junk behind, and some things that weren't junk; among other things they left a lot of these fans. Some local con man like BeeGee here got the idea of calling them 'prayer fans' and selling them to tourists to make wishes with."

Allemang had been hanging on my every word trying to guess where I was going. "You know it's right," he said.

"But you two are too smart for that kind of come-on," I added. "Still, look at the things. They're pretty enough to be worth having even without the story."

"Absolutely!" cried Allemang. "See how this one sparkles, miss! And the black and gray crystal—how nice it looks with your fair hair!"

The girl unfurled the crystalline one. It came rolled like a diploma, only cone-shaped. It took just the slightest pressure of the thumb to keep it open, and it really was very pretty as she waved it gently. Like all the Heechee fans, it weighed only about ten grams, and its crystalline lattice caught the light from the luminous Heechee walls, as well as the fluorescents and gas tubes we maze-runners had installed, and tossed them all back in iridescent sparks.

"This fellow's name is Booker Garey Allemang," I said. "He'll sell you the same goods as any of the others, but he won't cheat you as much as most of them."

Cochenour looked at me dourly, then beckoned Sub Vastra for another round of drinks. "All right," he said. "If we buy, we'll buy from you, Booker Garey Allemang. But not now."

He turned to me. "And what do you want to sell me?"

"Myself and my airbody, if you want to go looking for new tunnels. We're both as good as you can get."

"How much?"

"One million dollars," I said immediately. "All found."

He didn't answer at once, though it gave me some pleasure to notice that the price didn't seem to scare him. He looked as pleasant, or anyway as unangrily bored, as ever. "Drink up," he said, as Vastra and his third served us, and gestured with his glass to the Spindle. "Know what this was for?" I asked.

"You mean why the Heechees built it? No. They were pretty small, so it wasn't for headroom. And it was entirely empty when it was found."

He gazed tolerantly at the busy scene, balconies cut into the sloping sides of the Spindle with eating and drinking places like Vastra's, rows of souvenir booths, most of them empty at this idle season. But there were still a couple of hundred maze rats around, and the number had been quietly growing all the time Cochenour and the girl had been sitting there.

He said, "It's not much to see, is it? A hole in the ground, and a lot of people trying to take my money away from me."

I shrugged.

He grinned again. "So why did I come, eh? Well, that's a good question, but since you didn't ask it, I don't have to answer it. You want a million dollars. Let's see. A hundred K to charter an airbody. A hundred and eighty or so to rent equipment, per week. Ten days minimum, three weeks a safer guess. Food, supplies, permits, another fifty K. So we're up to close to seven hundred thousand, not counting your own salary and what you give our host here as his cut for not throwing you off the premises. Right, Walthers?"

I had a little difficulty in swallowing the drink I had been holding to my mouth, but I managed to say, "Close enough, Mr. Cochenour." I didn't see any point in telling him that I already owned the equipment, as well as the airbody, although I wouldn't have been surprised to find out that he knew that too.

"You've got a deal, then. And I want to leave as soon as possible, which should be, um, about the same time tomorrow."

"Fair enough," I said, and got up, avoiding Sub Vastra's thunderstricken expression. I had some work to do, and a little thinking. He'd caught me off base, which is a bad place to be when you can't afford to make a mistake. I knew he hadn't missed my calling him by name. That was all right; he had known that I had checked him out immediately. But it was a little surprising that he had known mine

### 3

The first thing I had to do was double-check my equipment; the second was go to the local, validate the contract, and settle up with Sub Vastra; the third was see my doctor. The liver hadn't been giving me much trouble for a while, but then I hadn't been drinking grain alcohol for a while.

It took about an hour to make sure that everything we would need for the expedition was i.s., with all the spare parts I might reasonably fear needing. The Quackery was on my way to the union office, so I stopped in there first. It didn't take long. The news was no worse than I had been ready for; Dr. Morius studied the readout from his instruments carefully. It turned out to be a hundred and fifty dollars' worth of carefully, and expressed the guarded hope that I would survive three weeks away

from his office, provided I took all the stuff he gave me and wandered no more than usual from his dietary restrictions. "And when I get back?" I asked.

"About the same, Audee," he said cheerily. "Total collapse in, ah, oh, maybe ninety more days."

He patted his fingertips. "I hear you've got a live one," he added. "Want me to book you for transplant?"

"How live did you hear he was?" I asked.

"Oh, the price is the same in any case," he told me good-humoredly. "Two hundred K, plus the hospital, anesthesiologist, preop psychiatrist, pharmaceuticals—you've already got the figures."

I did, and I knew that with what I might make from Cochenour, plus what I had put away, plus a small loan on the airbody, I could just about meet it. Leaving me broke when it was over but, of course, alive.

"Go ahead," I said. "Three weeks from tomorrow." And I left him looking mildly pleased, like a Burmese hydro-rice man watching another crop being harvested. Dear daddy. Why hadn't he sent me through medical school instead of giving me an education?

It would have been nice if the Heechee had been the same size as human beings, instead of being about 40 percent shorter. In the smaller tunnels, like the one that led to the Local 88 office, I had to half-crouch all the way.

The deputy organizer was waiting for me. He had one of the few good jobs that didn't depend on tourists, or at least not directly. He said, "Subhash Vastra's been on the line. He says you agreed to thirty percent, and besides you forgot to pay your bar bill to the third of his house."

"Admitted, both ways."

"And you owe me a little too, Audee. Three hundred for a powderfax copy of my report on your pigeon. A hundred for validating your contract with Vastra. And if you want guide's papers, sixteen hundred for that."

I gave him my credit card and he checked the total out of my account into the local's. Then I signed and card-stamped the contract he'd drawn up. Vastra's 30 percent would not be on the whole million-dollar gross, but on my net; even so, he might make as much out of it as I would, at least in liquid cash, because I'd have to pay off all the outstanding balances on equipment and loans. The factory would carry a man until he scored, but then they wanted to get paid. They knew how long it might last until he scored again.

"Thanks, Audee," said the deputy, nodding over the signed contract. "Anything else I can do for you?"

"Not at your prices," I told him.

"Ah, you're putting me on. 'Boyce Cochenour and Dorothea Keefer, Earth-Ohio, traveling *S. V. Yuri Gagarin*, Odessa registry, chartered. No other passengers.' No other passengers," he repeated, quoting from the synoptic report he'd furnished. "Why, you'll be a rich man, Audee, if you work this pigeon right."

"That's more than I ask," I told him. "All I want is to be a living one."

But it wasn't entirely true. I did have some little hope—not much, not enough to talk about, and in fact I'd never said a word about it to anyone—that I might be coming out of this rather better than merely alive.

There was, however, a problem.

See, in the standard guide's contract and airbody leasing terms, I get my money and that's all I get. If we take a mark like Cochenour on a hunt for new Heechee tunnels and he finds something valuable—marks have, you know; not often, but enough to keep them hopeful—then it's his. We just work for him.



On the other hand, I could have gone out by myself any time and prospected; and then anything found would be all mine.

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Obviously anybody with any sense would go by himself if he thought he was really going to find anything. But in my case, that wasn't such a good idea. If I staked myself to a trip and lost, I hadn't just wasted time and maybe fifty K in supplies and wear and tear. If I lost, I was dead.

I needed what I would make out of Cochenour to stay alive. Whether we found anything interesting or not, my fee would take care of that.

Unfortunately for my peace of mind, I had a notion that I knew where something very interesting might be found; and my problem was that, as long as I had an all-rights contract with Cochenour, I couldn't afford to find it.

The last stop I made was in my sleeping room. Under the bed, keystoneed into the rock, was a guaranteed break-proof safe that held some papers I wanted to have in my pocket from then on.

When I came down on to Venus for the first time, it wasn't scenery that interested me. I wanted to make my fortune.

I didn't see much of the surface of Venus then, or for nearly two years after that. You don't see much in the kind of spacecraft that can land on Venus; a twenty-thousand-millibar surface pressure means you need something a little more rugged than the bubble-ships that go to the Moon or Mars farther out, and there's not much tolerance in the design for putting unnecessary windows into the hull. It didn't matter much, because anywhere except near the poles there's not much you can see. Everything worth seeing on Venus is *in* Venus, and all of it once belonged to the Heechees.

Not that we know much about the Heechees. We don't even rightly know their name—"heechee" how somebody once wrote down the sound that a fire-pearl makes when you stroke it, and as that's the only sound anybody knows that's connected with them, it got to be a name.

The hesperologists don't know where the Heechees came from, although there are some markings on scraps of stuff that the Heechees used for paper that seem to be a star chart—faded, incomplete, pretty much unrecognizable; if we know the exact position of every star in the galaxy two hundred fifty thousand years ago, we might be able to locate them from that, I suppose. Assuming they came from this galaxy. There are no traces of them anywhere else in the solar system, except maybe Phobos; the experts still fight about whether the honeycomb cells inside the Martian moon are natural or artifacts, and if they're artifacts they're no doubt Heechee. But they don't look much like ours.

I wonder sometimes what they wanted. Escaping a dying planet? Political refugees? Tourists that had a breakdown between somewhere and somewhere, and hung around just long enough to make whatever they had to make to get themselves going again? I used to think that they'd maybe come here to watch human beings evolving on Earth, sort of stepfathers beaming over the growing young race, but we couldn't have been much to watch at that time, halfway between the Australopithecines and the Cro-Magnards.

But, though they packed up nearly everything when they left, leaving behind only empty tunnels and chambers, there were a few scraps here and there that either weren't worth taking along or we overlooked: all those "prayer fans," enough empty containers of one kind or another to look like picnic ground at the end of a hard summer, some trinkets and trifles. I guess the best known of the "trifles" is the anisokinetic punch, the carbon crystal that transmits a blow at a ninety-degree angle that made somebody a few billion just by being lucky enough to find one, and smart enough to analyze and duplicate it. But all we've ever found is junk. There must have been good stuff worth a million times as much as those sweepings.

Did they take all the good stuff with them?

Nobody knew. I didn't know, either, but I thought I knew something that had a bearing on it.

I thought I knew where the last Heechee ship had taken off from; and it wasn't near any of the explored diggings.

I didn't kid myself. I knew that wasn't a guarantee of anything.

But it was something to go on. *Maybe* when that last ship left they were getting impatient, and maybe not as thorough in cleaning up behind themselves.

And that was what being on Venus was all about. What other possible reason was there for being there? The life of a maze rat was marginal at best. It took fifty thousand a year to stay alive. If you had less than that you couldn't pay air tax, capitation tax, water assessment, or even a subsistence-level bill for food. If you wanted to eat meat more than once a week, and demanded a cubicle of your own to sleep in, it cost more than that.

Guide's papers cost a week's life; when any of us bought them, we were gambling that week's cost of living against the chance of a big enough strike, either from the Terry tourists or from what we might find, to make it possible to get back to Earth—where no one starved, no one died for lack of air, and no one was thrust out into the high-pressure incinerator that was Venus's atmosphere. Not *just* to get back to Earth. To get back in the style every maze rat had set himself as a goal when he headed sunward in the first place: with money enough to live the full life of a human being on Full Medical.

That was what I wanted. The big score.

## 4

Not by accident, the last thing I did that night was to visit the Hall of Discoveries.

The third of Vastra's house winked at me over her flirtation veil and turned to her companion, who looked around and nodded.

I joined them. "Hello, Mr. Walthers," she said.

"I thought I might find you here," I said, which was no more than the truth, since Vastra's third had promised to guide her this way. I didn't know what to call her. "Miss Keefer" was accurate, "Mr. Cochenour" was diplomatic; I got around it by saying, "Since we'll be seeing a lot of each other, how about getting on to first names?"

"Audee, is it?"

I gave her a twelve-tooth smile. "Swede on my mother's side, old Texan on my father's. Name has been in his family a long time, I guess."

The Hall of Discoveries is meant to get Terry prospects hotted up, there's a little of everything in it, from charts of the worked diggings and a full-scale Mercator map of Venus to samples of all the principal finds. I showed her the copy of the anisokinetic punch, and the original solid-state piezophone that had made its discoverer almost as permanently rich as the guy who found the punch. There were about a dozen fire-pearls, quarter-inch jobbies, behind armor glass, on cushions, blazing away with their cold milky light.

"They're pretty," she said. "But why all the protection? I saw bigger ones lying on a counter in the Spindle without anybody even watching them."

"That's a little different, Dorotha," I told her. "These are real."

She laughed out loud. It was a very nice laugh. No girl looks beautiful when she's laughing hard, and girls who worry about looking beautiful don't do it. Dorotha Keefer looked like a healthy, pretty girl having a good time, which when you come down to it is about the best way for a girl to look.

She did not, however, look good enough to come between me and a new liver, so I took my mind off that aspect of her and put it on business. "The little red marbles over there are blood-diamonds," I to

her. "They're radioactive and stay warm. Which is one way you can tell the real one from a fake. Anything over about three centimeters is a fake. A real one that big generates too much heat—square-cube law, you know—and melts."

"So the ones your friend was trying to sell me—"

"—are fakes. Right."

She nodded, still smiling. "What about what you were trying to sell us, Audee? Real or fake?"

The third of Vastra's house had discreetly vanished, and there was nobody else in the Hall of Discoveries but me and the girl. I took a deep breath and told her the truth. Not the whole truth, maybe; but nothing but the truth.

"All this stuff," I said, "is what came out of a hundred years of digging. And it's not much. The punch, the piezophone, and two or three other gadgets that we can make work; a few busted pieces of things that they're still studying; and some trinkets. That's all."

She said, "That's the way I heard it. And one more thing. None of the discovery dates on these things is less than fifty years old."

She was smart and better informed than I had expected. "And the conclusion," I agreed, "is that the planet has been mined dry. You're right, on the evidence. The first diggers found everything there was to be found ... so far."

"You think there's more?"

"I *hope* there's more. Look. Item. The tunnels. You see they're all alike—the blue walls, perfectly smooth; the light coming from them that never varies; the hardness. How do you suppose they were made?"

"Why, I don't know—"

"Neither do I. Or anybody else. But every Heechee tunnel is the same, and if you dig into them from the outside you find the basic substrate rock, then a boundary layer that's sort of half wall-stuff and half substrate, then the wall. Conclusion: The Heechees didn't dig the tunnels and then line them, they had something that crawled around underground like an earthworm, leaving these tunnels behind. And one other thing: They overdug. That's to say they dug tunnels they didn't need, lots of them, going nowhere, never used for anything. Does that suggest anything to you?"

"It must have been cheap and easy?" she guessed.

I nodded. "So it was probably a machine, and there really ought to be at least one of them somewhere on this planet, to find. Next item. The air: They breathed oxygen like we do, and they must have got it from somewhere. Where?"

"Why, there's oxygen in the atmosphere—"

"Sure. About a half of one percent. And better than 95 percent carbon dioxide; and somehow they managed to get that half of one percent out of the mixture, cheaply and easily—remember those extra tunnels they filled!—along with enough nitrogen or some other inert gas—and they're present in only trace amounts—to make a breathing mixture. How? Why, I don't know, but if there's a machine that did it, I'd like to find that machine. Next item: Aircraft. The Heechee flew around the surface of Venus at will."

"So do you, Audee! Aren't you a pilot?"

"Sure, but look at what it takes. Surface temperature of two-seventy C. and not enough oxygen to keep a cigarette going. So my airbody has two fuel tanks, one for hydrocarbons, one for oxidants. And—did you ever hear of a fellow named Carnot?"

"Old-time scientist, was he? The Carnot cycle?"

"Right again." That was the third time she'd surprised me, I noted cautiously. "The Carnot efficiency of an engine is expressed by its maximum temperature—the heat of combustion, let's say—"

over the temperature of its exhaust. Well, but the temperature of the exhaust can't be less than the temperature of what it flows into—otherwise you're not running an engine, you're running a refrigerator. And you've got that two-seventy ambient air temperature; so you have basically a lousy engine. Any heat engine on Venus is lousy. Did you ever wonder why there are so few airbodies around? I don't mind; it helps to have something close to a monopoly. But the reason is they're so damn expensive to run."

"And the Heechees did it better?"

"I *think* they did."

She laughed again, unexpectedly and once more very attractively. "Why, you poor fellow," she said in good humor, "you're hooked on the stuff you sell, aren't you? You think that some day you're going to find the mother tunnel and pick up all this stuff."

Well, I wasn't too pleased with the way things were going; I'd arranged with Vastra's third to bring the girl here, away from her boyfriend, so I could pick her brains in private. It hadn't worked out that way. The way it was working out, she was making me aware of her as a person, which was a bad development in itself, and worse than that, making me take a good look at myself.

I said after a minute, "You may be right. But I'm sure going to give it a good try."

"You're angry, aren't you?"

"No," I said, lying, "but maybe a little tired. And we've got a long trip tomorrow, so I'd better take you home, Miss Keefer."

## 5

My airbody lay by the spacepad and was reached the same way the spacepad was reached. Elevator to the surface lock, a tractor-cab to carry us across the dry, tortured surface of Venus, peeling under the three-hundred-kilometer-an-hour wind. Normally I kept it under a foam housing, of course. You don't leave anything free and exposed on the surface of Venus if you want to keep it intact, not even if it's made of chrome steel. I'd had the foam stripped free when I checked it out and loaded supplies the morning before. Now it was ready. I could see it from the bull's-eye ports of the crawler, through the greenish-yellow murk outside. Cochenour and the girl could have seen it too, if they'd known where to look, but they might not have recognized it.

Cochenour screamed in my ear, "You and Dorrie have a fight?"

"No fight," I screamed back.

"Don't care if you did. You don't have to like each other, just do what I want you to do." He was silent a moment, resting his throat. "Jesus. What a wind."

"Zephyr," I told him. I didn't say any more, he would find out for himself. The area around the spacepad is a sort of natural calm area, by Venusian standards. Orographic lift throws the mean winds up over the pad and all we get is a sort of confused back eddy. The good part is that taking off and landing are relatively easy. The bad part is that some of the heavy metal compounds in the atmosphere settle out on the pad. What passes for air on Venus has layers of red mercuric sulfide and mercurous chloride in the lower reaches, and when you get above them to those pretty fluffy clouds you find some of them are hydrochloric and hydrofluoric acid.

But there are tricks to that, too. Navigation over Venus is 3-D. It's easy enough to proceed from point to point; your transponders will link you to the radio range and map your position continuously on to the charts. What's hard is to find the right altitude, and that's why my airbody and I were worth a million dollars to Cochenour.

We were at the airbody, and the telescoping snout from the crawler was poking out to its local Cochenour was staring out the bull's eye. "No wings!" he shouted, as though I was cheating him.

"No sails or snow chains, either," I shouted back. "Get aboard if you want to talk! It's easier in the airbody."

We climbed through the little snout, I unlocked the entrance, and we got aboard without much trouble.

We didn't even have the kind of trouble that I might have made myself. You see, an airbody is a big thing on Venus. I was damn lucky to have been able to acquire it and, well, I won't beat around the bush, you could say I loved it. Mine could have held ten people, without equipment. With what Su Vastra's purchasing department had sold us and Local 88 had certified as essential aboard, it was crowded with just the three of us. I was prepared for sarcasm, at least. But Cochenour merely looked around long enough to find the best bunk, strode over to it and declared it his. The girl was a good sport, and there I was, left with my glands all charged up for an argument and no argument.

It was a lot quieter inside the airbody. You could hear the noise of the wind right enough, but it was only annoying. I passed out earplugs, and with them in place the noise was hardly even annoying.

"Sit down and strap up," I ordered, and when they were stowed away I took off.

At twenty thousand millibars wings aren't just useless, they're poison. My airbody had all the lift needed built into the seashell-shaped hull. I fed the double fuels into the thermojets, we bounced across the reasonably flat ground around the spacepad (it was bulldozed once a week, which is how come it stayed reasonably flat) and we were zooming off into the wild yellow-green yonder, a moment later the wild brown-gray yonder, after a run of no more than fifty meters.

Cochenour had fastened his harness loosely for comfort. I enjoyed hearing him yell as he was thrown about. It didn't last. At the thousand-meter level I found Venus's semipermanent atmospheric inversion, and the turbulence dropped to where I could take off my belt and stand.

I took the plugs out of my ears and motioned to Cochenour and the girl to do the same.

He was rubbing his head where he'd bounced into an overhead chart rack, but grinning a little. "Pretty exciting," he admitted, fumbling in his pocket. Then he remembered to ask. "Is it all right if I smoke?"

"They're your lungs."

He grinned more widely. "They are now," he agreed, and lit up. "Say. Why didn't you give us those plugs while we were in the tractor?"

There is, as you might say, a tide in the affairs of guides, where you either let them flood you with questions and spend the whole time explaining what that funny little dial means or you go on to do your work and make your fortune. What it came down to was, was I going to come out of this liking Cochenour and his girlfriend or not?

If I was, I should try to be civil to them. More than civil. Living, the three of us, for three weeks in a space about as big as an apartment kitchenette meant everybody would have to work real hard at being nice to everybody else, and as I was the one who was being paid to be nice, I should be the one to set an example. On the other hand, the Cochenours of the worlds are sometimes just not likeable. If that was going to be the case, the less talk the better; I should slide questions like that off with something like "I forgot."

But he hadn't actually been unpleasant, and the girlfriend had actually tried to be friendly. I said, "Well, that's an interesting thing. You see, you hear by differences in pressure. While we were taking off the plugs filtered out part of the sound—the pressure waves—but when I yelled at you to belt up the plugs passed the overpressure of my voice, and you understood it. However, there's a limit. Pa about a hundred and twenty decibels—that's a unit of sound—"

Cochenour growled, "I know what a decibel is."

"Right. Past a hundred and twenty the eardrum just doesn't respond anymore. So in the crawler was too loud; with the plugs, you wouldn't have heard anything."

Dorotha had been listening while she repaired her eye makeup. "What was to hear?"

"Oh," I said, "nothing, really. Except, well—" Then I voted to think of them as friends, at least for the time being. "Except in the case of an accident. If we'd had a gust, you know, that crawler could have flipped right over. Or sometimes solid objects come flying over the hills and into you before you know it. Or—"

She was shaking her head. "I understand. Lovely place we're visiting, Boyce."

"Yeah. Look," he said. "Who's flying this thing?"

I got up and activated the virtual globe. "That's what I was just coming to. Right now it's on autopilot, heading in the general direction of this quadrant down here. We have to pick out a specific destination."

"That's Venus?" the girl asked. "It doesn't look like much."

"Those lines are just radio range markers; you won't see them looking out of the window. Venus doesn't have any oceans, and it isn't cut up into nations, so making a map of it isn't quite like what you'd expect on Earth. That bright spot is us. Now look." I overlaid the radio-range grid and the contour colors with mascon markings. "Those blobby circles are mascons. You know what a mascon is?"

"A concentration of mass. A lump of heavy stuff," offered the girl.

"Fine. Now look at the known Heechee digs." I phased them in as golden patterns.

"They're all in the mascons," Dorotha said at once. Cochenour gave her a look of tolerant approval.

"Not all. Look over here; this little one isn't, and this one. But damn near all. Why? I don't know. Nobody knows. The mass concentrations are mostly older, denser rock—basalt and so on—and maybe the Heechee found it easier to dig in. Or maybe they just liked it." In my correspondence with Professor Hegramet back on Earth, in the days when I didn't have a dying liver in my gut and took an interest in abstract knowledge, we had kicked around the possibility that the Heechee digging machines would only work in dense rock, or rock of a certain chemical composition. But I wasn't prepared to discuss that with them.

"See over here, where we are now"—I rotated the virtual globe slightly by turning a dial—"that's the big digging we just came out of. You can see the shape of the Spindle. It's a common shape, by the way. You can see it in some of the others if you look, and there are digs where it doesn't show on these tracings but it's there if you're on the spot. That particular mascon where the Spindle is is called Serendip; it was discovered by accident by a hesperological—"

"Hesperological?"

"—a geological team operating on Venus, which makes it a hesperological team. They were drilling out core samples and hit the Heechee digs. Now these other digs in the northern high-latitudes you see are all in one bunch of associated mascons. They connect through interventions of less dense rock, but only where absolutely necessary."

Cochenour said sharply, "They're north and we're going south. Why?"

It was interesting that he could read the navigation instruments, but I didn't say so. I only said, "They're no good. They've been probed."

"They look even bigger than the Spindle."

"Hell of a lot bigger, right. But there's nothing much in them, or anyway not much chance that anything in them is in good enough shape to bother with. Subsurface fluids filled them up a hundred thousand years ago, maybe more. A lot of good men have gone broke trying to pump and excavate them, without finding anything. Ask me. I was one of them."

“I didn’t know there was any liquid water on Venus or under it,” Cochenour objected.

~~“I didn’t say water, did I? But as a matter of fact some of it was, or anyway a sort of oozy mu~~  
Apparently water cooks out of the rocks and has a transit time to the surface of some thousands years before it seeps out, boils off, and cracks to hydrogen and oxygen and gets lost. In case you didn’t know it, there’s some under the Spindle. It’s what you were drinking, and what you were breathing.”

The girl said, “Boyce, this is all very interesting, but I’m hot and dirty. Can I change the subject for a minute?”

Cochenour barked; it wasn’t really a laugh. “Subliminal prompting, Walthers, you agree? And a little old-fashioned prudery, too, I expect. What she really wants to do is go to the bathroom.”

Given a little encouragement from the girl, I would have been mildly embarrassed for her, but she only said, “If we’re going to live in this thing for three weeks, I’d like to know what it offers.”

I said, “Certainly, Miss Keefer.”

“Dorotha. Dorrie, if you like it better.”

“Sure, Dorrie. Well, you see what we’ve got. Five bunks; they partition to sleep ten if wanted, but we don’t want. Two shower stalls. They don’t look big enough to soap yourself in, but they are if you work at it. Three chemical toilets. Kitchen over there—well. Pick the bunk you like, Dorrie. There’s a screen arrangement that comes down when you want it for changing clothes and so on, or just if you don’t want to look at the rest of us for a while.”

Cochenour said, “Go on, Dorrie, do what you want to do. I want Walthers to show me how to fly this thing anyway.”

It wasn’t a bad start. I’ve had some real traumatic times, parties that came aboard drunk and steadily got drunker, couples that fought every waking minute and got together only to hassle me. This one didn’t look bad at all, apart from the fact that it was going to save my life for me.

There’s not much to flying an airbody, at least as far as making it move the way you want it to go is concerned. In Venus’s atmosphere there’s lift to spare. You don’t worry about things like stalling out and anyway the autonomic controls do most of your thinking for you.

Cochenour learned fast. It turned out he had flown everything that moved on Earth and operated one-man submersibles as well. He understood as soon as I mentioned it to him that the hard part of pilotage was selecting the right flying level and anticipating when you’d have to change it, but he also understood that he wasn’t going to learn that in one day. Or even in three weeks. “What the hell, Walthers,” he said cheerfully enough. “At least I can make it go where I have to, in case you get caught in a tunnel or shot by a jealous husband.”

I gave him the smile his pleasantry was worth, which wasn’t much. “The other thing I can do,” I said, “is cook. Unless you’re really good at it? No, I thought not. Well, I paid too much for the stomach to fill it with hash, so I’ll make the meals. That’s a little skill Dorrie never got around to learning. Same with her grandmother. Most beautiful woman in the world, but had the idea that was all there was to it.”

I put that aside to sort out later; he was full of little unexpected things, this ninety years old young athlete. He said, “All right, now while Dorrie’s using up all the water in the shower—”

“Not to worry; it all recycles.”

“Anyway. While she’s cleaning up, finish your little lecture on where we’re going.”

“Right.” I spun the virtual globe a little. The bright spot that was us had moved a dozen degrees already. “See that cluster where our track intersects those grid marks?”

“Yeah. Five big mascons close together, and no diggings indicated. Is that where we’re going?”

“In a general sense, yes.”

“Why in a general sense?”



“Well,” I said, “there’s one little thing I didn’t tell you. I’m assuming you won’t jump salty over me because then I’ll have to get salty too and tell you you should have taken the trouble to learn more about Venus before you decided to explore it.”

He studied me appraisingly for a moment. Dorrie came quietly out of the shower in a long robe, her hair in a towel, and stood near him, watching. “It depends on what you didn’t tell me,” he said.

“There’s a no-trespassing sign on most of those mascons,” I said. I activated the pilotage chart overlay, and bright cherry-red warning lines sprang up all around the cluster.

“That’s the south polar security area,” I said. “That’s where the Defense boys keep the missile ranges and the biggest part of their weapons development areas. And we’re not allowed to enter.”

He said harshly, “But there’s only a little piece of one mascon that isn’t off-limits.”

“And that’s where we’re going,” I said.

## 6

For a man more than ninety years old, Boyce Cochenour was spry. I don’t mean just healthy looking. Full Medical will do that for you, because you just replace whatever wears out or begins to look shopworn and tatty. You cannot, however, very well replace the brain, so what you usually see in the very rich old ones is a bronzed, strong body that shakes and hesitates and drops things and stumbles. About that Cochenour had been very lucky.

He was going to be wearing company for three weeks. He’d insisted I show him how to pilot the airbody. When I decided to use a little flight time to give the cooling system a somewhat premature thousand-hour check, he helped me pull the covers, check the refrigerant levels and clean the filters. Then he decided to cook us lunch.

The girl took over as my helper while I restowed some of the supplies to get the autersonic probes out. At the steady noise level of the inside of an airbody our normal conversational voices wouldn’t carry to Cochenour, less than three meters away, and I thought of pumping her about him. I decided against it. What I didn’t know was just curiosity. I knew he was paying me the price of a new life already. I didn’t need to know what he and the girl thought about when they thought about each other.

So our conversation was along the lines of how the probes would fire charges and time the echoes and what the chances were of finding something really good (“Well, what are the chances of winning the sweepstake? Bad for any individual who buys a ticket—but there’s always one winner somewhere!”) and what had made me come to Venus in the first place. I mentioned my father’s name, but she’d never heard of him. Too young, for one thing, no doubt. And she was born and bred in Southern Ohio where Cochenour had worked as a kid and to which he’d returned as a billionaire. He’d been building a new processing center there and it had been a lot of headaches—trouble with the unions, trouble with the banks, trouble, bad trouble, with the government—so he’d decided to take a few months off and loaf. I looked over to where he was stirring up a sauce and said, “He loafs harder than anybody else I ever saw.”

“He’s a work addict. I imagine that’s how he got rich in the first place.” The airbody lurched, and I dropped everything to jump for the controls. I heard Cochenour howl behind me, but I was busy locating the right transit level. By the time I had climbed a thousand meters and reset the autopilot, I was rubbing his wrist and glowering at me.

“Sorry,” I said.

He said dourly, “I don’t mind your scalding the skin off my arm, I can always buy more skin, but you nearly made me spill the gravy.”



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- <http://rodrigocaporal.com/library/Between-Shades-of-Gray.pdf>