

## BE FRUITFUL AND MULTIPLY

by Supercake Studio (<https://www.patreon.com/supercakestudio>)

-I-

The flitter went down about fifty kilos from the ship, darting below the treeline like a silvery hawk that had just spotted an especially plump mouse – and then misjudged its dive and plowed beak-first into the soil. Both occupants survived almost without injury. They had been terribly lucky – but they didn't feel terribly lucky.

“When you think about it,” the taller of the two, one Miss Grant, mused as she paced around the impromptu clearing, “we were really terribly lucky.”

“I don't feel terribly lucky!” wailed the smaller and spikier Miss Marris, drawing her miraculously-unshattered kneecaps up to her chin.

Phyllis Marris (or Captain Marris) was a pale beauty, her black hair a saucy bob which still glistened even after being—along with the rest of her—slightly scorched and flung into the mud. She could have been a model if she hadn't topped out in height at age twelve. It had been her idea to come to Venus, her idea to take the flitter out for a spin, and she had been the one piloting when it went down. In the privacy of her mind, she fiercely blamed Miss Grant for their predicament, but outwardly she nobly limited herself to undirected pouting.

Ambrosia Grant (or First Mate Grant, or Chief Engineer Grant, or Head of Carrying Luggage Grant) was tall and athletic, build like a statue, with thick chestnut curls she normally kept tied up in a bun, but which had seen their chance in the confusion of the crash and escaped. She could have been an athlete, if she hadn't been so thoroughly occupied with the demands of being friends with Miss Marris.

“We're alive, and with hardly a scratch on us,” Ambrosia said. “I call that *lucky*. Just imagine if the flitter had come through like we did, and *that* had happened to us!”

She pointed at the flitter. What remained of it was belching foul-smelling smoke, and the wings were torn and twisted. Perhaps the wings could have been repaired; but Ambrosia could tell from the stench that important parts of the innards had been melted. There would be no flying back to the ship.

“It's ruined!” moaned Phyllis. “We'll have to radio for help and be rescued like – like a couple of children who got lost in the woods. Galaxies! I could just die of humiliation.”

Ambrosia peered up at the sky. “Well—good news, then,” she said, scratching her head. “We *can't* radio. Not from the surface of Venus—not through those clouds.”

“The—do you mean to tell me we can't reach *anyone*?” Phyllis goggled.

Venus was—although it was a silly rule, in Phyllis' opinion—in a strictly technical sense, not exactly legal to land on. That was what made it so lovely and pristine, just a perfect spot to snap a few pictures without a lot of other people cluttering it up (the young Miss Marris was an avid photographer) and perhaps to discover of a new species of Venusian butterfly, or things of that nature. Yes—the perfect shot of some insect behemoth, some glorious emerald-winged monstrosity that would go down in history as *Lepidopterus Marrisii*. It could have been a feather in her cap.

Now the only thing in her cap was the branch that had neatly plucked it from her head, and the fact that she and Miss Grant were in all likelihood the only two humans on the planet was much less exciting. Oh, for some of that human clutter right about now!

“It's not as bad as all that,” Ambrosia explained. “I know which direction the ship is—er—more or less, at any rate. And fifty kilometers isn't so far to walk.”

“But—through the jungle?” Phyllis shuddered. Scientists had discovered no animal life on Venus larger than a lemur, but still—one never knew what might be hiding under those thick canopies.

“We could use the exercise after being cooped up in that tin can!” Ambrosia laughed, a rich, hearty, tenor sound. “And I'm sure you'll find lots of interesting things to snap.”

Phyllis brightened a little at this. It was true, wasn't it? Hadn't she come to this place expecting it to be a shutterbug's paradise? All a fifty-kilometer walk in the woods meant was that she was practically *sure* to make at least one discovery along the way.

Besides, after doing nothing but sit in a cramped little cabin for the two-day ride to Venus, she felt like something of a slug, soft and doughy. Some brisk exercise would do her a world of good.

She looked up at Ambrosia. Good old Ambrosia always knew how to cheer her up. That strong-jawed, freckled face split by an encouraging grin—the way the dim sunlight of the cloudy planet suffused her locks with a halo of gold—

*Don't fall into a trance*, now, she warned herself sternly. If she hadn't been so distracted by that smile—that hair—by the way Ambrosia's tunic clung so enticing in one place and another...

*No!* She came just short of slapping herself. *Look at you, getting all hot and bothered over a standard-issue spacer's uniform! Are you a grown woman or a schoolgirl?*

It was Ambrosia's spicy Lunar blood, she told herself. You'd have to be a cold fish not to notice a Lunarian girl—practically a Plutonian ice-flounder! It certainly didn't mean she was getting mushy over her best friend.

And the distraction definitely wasn't why she'd crashed the flitter.

"I suppose you're right, at that," she said, laughing as she allowed Ambrosia to help her to her feet. "We may as well get—"

"Shh!" Ambrosia said, suddenly crushing the smaller girl to her chest with one strong hand as she drew her pistol with the other. "Careful, Phyl. There's something—ah!"

And, louder,

"You may as well come out—I can see you in there!"

Phyllis turned her head. A patch of jungle shifted, and stepped forward.

And there, in the clearing, stood a Venusian.

## -II-

The Venusian was tall—taller than Ambrosia by a head or more, and lanky. It had only two arms and two legs, but they were long and rigid-looking. Its torso was draped with rags and vines, the same purplish color as the vegetation, and as the tufts of fuzzy growth on its head; it had been well-camouflaged.

Looking at it, as it stepped deliberately into the clearing, Phyllis thought it looked like nothing so much as a stick insect, seen through a high-magnification lens. Ambrosia thought it looked like an overgrown marionette. Neither girl knew quite what to make of its face, which sported a dozen or so beady orbs scattered at random like the eyes of a potato.

It seemed unbothered by the gun. Quite likely, Ambrosia realized, it had no idea what it was. She let the arm drop to her side, but did not holster the weapon.

"Who...who are you?" the Venusian said in astonishment. It goggled at them with its assortment of eyes, sounding as flabbergasted as they were. It was hard to feel like it was much of a threat.

Phyllis peeled herself off of Ambrosia. Now that she was no longer startled, she felt the creeping blush of embarrassment. She must take control of the situation, she decided, and quick.

"We great goddesses, come from sky," she intoned, solemnly pointing up. "Crash-um magic chariot. Need-um travel to metal palace to return to sky kingdom."

"Phyl," Ambrosia began. "I don't think—"

"You've got to know how to talk to these native types," Phyllis said. "Trust me."

Turning back to the Venusian, she spoke again, loudly and slowly.

"We give-um heap big pile of gold and jewels to he who summon-um local taxi service, capische?"

"I—" the Venusian said, and stopped. "Am I to understand that you come from a world in the clouds above? And you need my help to return? It's only that I'm having a bit of trouble understanding

you little one. Is it very young?"

"*Little one?*" Phyllis squeaked, bristling with indignation. "Listen, you over-extended mantis—"

Ambrosia tactfully stepped in front of her before she could demolish interplanetary relations. "We're both adults of our species, and yes, we do come from above—not in the clouds, but beyond them. From a world called 'Earth.'"

"Earth," the Venusian said in wonder. "A world beyond the clouds! I always suspected—but listen, you're not *hostile*, are you? In our stories—"

"We're not hostile," Ambrosia hastened to say, hoping Phyllis didn't prove her wrong. "We just want to get back to our ship. Can you help us? Do your people have... ships? Vehicles?"

"Oh, yes," the Venusian said. "But—I don't."

"You mean..."

"I'm quite far from home, you see. On a sort of a—pilgrimage. I haven't brought along so much as a single pair of steam-stilts. But perhaps I could point you in the right direction, at the very least. Where, may I ask, is your ship?"

The coordinates meant nothing to the Venusian, but it brightened when Ambrosia described the large plateau where they'd landed. "Yes, I know the place!" it said. "I passed that way less than a day ago, but I'm afraid I saw no ship."

"We only made Venusfall this morning," Ambrosia explained.

"And to get here so quickly!" The Venusian eyed the ruins of the flutter. "This must have been an impressive device. Well... you'll find no roads, but if you head in *that* direction, more or less, you'll have the easiest time of it."

They gathered up what supplies they had—which weren't very many—and Phyllis used nearly a whole roll of film on the Venusian. Then, shouldering their packs, the two women stepped from the wreckage-strewn clearing onto what looked like the easiest path.

With a rustle, the trees moved to block their way.

Phyllis blinked, eyeing the branches in front of her where a moment earlier there had been empty space. The leaves were purplish and thick, and the branch was laden with fruit that looked like a spill of rubbery rubies, but other than that, it could have been any ordinary tree branch. And yet it had moved.

She took a step to the left, where the path was now clear, and stepped forward—and the branches swung again to block her.

Growling, she tried to push through the branches, and screeched out something unprintable as her hands closed around well-disguised thorns.

"It's a pity I left the machete back at the ship," Ambrosia said. "I wonder why—"

"Excuse me," the Venusian said from behind them. "Could it be that the two of you are mammals?"

Phyllis's head snapped up, and she let go of her injured hand. She straightened up to her full unimpressive height and threw her shoulders back. Her pride had just suffered a wound far more grievous than anything the thorns could have done.

"Well," she said icily, "I should have thought *that* was *self-evident*."

She inhaled deeply to make the point. The display was meaningless to the Martian, but Ambrosia found it rather enjoyable.

"Ah, my apologies. I hadn't realized," the Venusian explained. "You see, here on Venus, mammals are much smaller, and feed primarily on the fruit of these trees. And the trees compete to see which mammals will eat their fruit. It's their way of scattering seeds—you see, the mammals have the oddest means of consumption you ever saw, pushing food into their front ends, and, well, some time later—"

It stammered a bit as it realized the ridiculous process it was describing was, most likely, the same one employed by its esteemed and advanced visitors.

"—ah, out come the seeds, ready to grow and thrive someplace completely new. It's a partnership of sorts. And the trees—sensing mammals in their presence, and unusually large ones, at that—are

going to make sure their partners hold up their end of the bargain.”

“So, the trees will let us through...” Phyllis began.

“...if we eat some fruit?” Ambrosia finished.

They looked at the rubbery red blobs hanging from the branches. They weren’t unappetizing, exactly, but they looked like no fruit on Earth.

“They could be poisonous!” Phyllis observed, but she had her chemical analyzer with her, and a quick swipe told her that the fruit were safe to eat. She pulled one off the branch and gave it a cautious nibble, which didn’t accomplish much. She bit down harder, breaking the skin, and a burst of oozy innards exploded in her mouth. Her eyes opened wide.

“Is it... all right?” Ambrosia asked.

“It’s fantastic!” Phyllis breathed. She pulled the open end of the fruit in her mouth and squeezed out the rest of the gooey pulp, flooding her mouth with a tart, citric sweetness. Even the empty skin proved tasty, something like fresh fruit leather. She slurped it down and reached for another.

Ambrosia eagerly joined in. Neither girl had had much for breakfast and it was past lunchtime now. The pulp was thick and satisfying, dotted with tiny seeds which only made the texture more appealing. They each gobbled several fruits before the branches swung back and the way opened to them.

“Well!” Phyllis said, wiping her sticky mouth. “Now that was hospitality.”

“It’s going to make the hike easier,” Ambrosia agreed. “I feel fantastic. That stuff must be practically pure energy!”

They almost bounced along the path, for about five feet. Then the next pair of trees swung their branches down, blocking their path.

“Hey!” Phyllis exclaimed. “What goes on here? Out of the way, vegetable! We’ve paid our coin to the ferryman!”

“Ah, well, you ate of the fruit of *those* trees,” the Venusian pointed out. “But you haven’t eaten a bite from *that* tree.”

“You don’t mean to say—” Phyllis said. “We’re going to be expected to eat from *every* tree?”

She looked down at the laden branch in front of her. It still looked awfully appealing, but she could put two and two and two and two and two together. It wouldn’t look so good an hour from now, let alone...

She thought of fifty kilometers worth of trees and felt suddenly nauseous.

“I *really* ought to have brought the machete,” Ambrosia sighed.

-III-

It was slow and frustrating going. Phyllis tried to rush at first, and was stuffed sick in half an hour; after that she agreed with Ambrosia that she ought to try to pace herself, and the Earth-women fell into a pattern of eating, creeping forward, resting, and eating again. There was, at least, a variety of fruit on offer. There were big, doughy lumps, like crosses between plantains and loaves of bread. There were greenish balls that grew in a bunch like grapes but crunched under their teeth like apples. There was something a bit like an lemon-orange, which grew in long, peapod-like structures. They were, every single one of them, delicious, and there was a certain pleasure to the women in having all limits removed and being *required* to glut themselves on an endless, mouth-watering cornucopia.

But by late afternoon this pleasure had faded, and the whole business became an exhausting, piggish grind, an exercise in packing themselves like trash compactors. By dusk, they were gorged, the entire lengths of their digestive systems distended like balloons. They lounged like basking seals on a grassy hillside, blissfully out of reach of the trees.

“We ate...a lot... of seeds...today,” Ambrosia managed.

“We ate a lot of everything today,” Phyllis groaned. “Please don’t talk about food!”

“It’s just that these were alien fruits. We don’t know what the seeds do. What if they...what if they sprout inside us? What if they start growing?”

Phyllis sighed, or tried to—it came out as more of a belch. “Seeds can’t grow in your stomach, especially if you haven’t eaten any dirt. Goodness, Ambi, you’re a child, sometimes.”

“*Earth* seeds can’t,” Ambrosia said. “These could do anything.”

“Nonsense,” Phyllis said, but when Ambrosia wasn’t looking she pulled out her portable germination detector and ran it over the ripe bulge of her stomach—just to be certain.

Ambrosia turned over on her side, trying to get comfortable.

“The worst part is, I have so much energy,” she said. “I think I could run to the ship and back right now—if I weren’t so full, and if the trees would let me.”

“That’s because that stuff was about two-thirds sugar,” Phyllis grouched. “No wonder we feel energetic. We’re absolutely *irrigated* with calories right now.”

“And with nowhere for them to go.”

“Oh, believe you me,” Phyllis said darkly. “They’ll *find* somewhere to go. They always do.”

The nearby undergrowth rustled, and the Venusian stepped out. “I think I’ve found a promising route,” it said. “I need to do a bit more mapping, but we may be able to bypass more trees than I thought.”

The Venusian had surprised them both by agreeing to act as a guide, even though their journey was back the way it had come, and even though it had to wait for the snail-slow progress of the Earth-women. It was quite infuriating to see it darting between trees with no trouble, but it kept discovering shortcuts, little spots—much rarer than they would have liked—where there was enough space between fruit trees that they could slip ahead ten or twenty meters without being forced to pay for it with their stomachs. Once it found them a stretch of nearly a hundred and fifteen meters without a piece of fruit in sight, and the short stretch of freedom was glorious. It felt more like flying than walking.

“It’s very kind of you, this putting your pilgrimage on hold for us,” Ambrosia told the Venusian. “I know we’re using up days and days of your time. If there’s any way we can repay you—”

“It is no bother, and I need no repayment. I merely wish to see you sent safely back to your distant homeland.” It cocked its head. “When you reach your vessel—how long is the journey through the clouds?”

“Just a couple of days,” Ambrosia said. A thought occurred to her. “I don’t suppose... would you like to come with us? Back to Earth?”

“You’d be our *honored* guest,” put in Phyllis. A thought occurred to her, too, along the lines of SEE THE VENUSIAN - \$5.

The Venusian made a sound that might have been a chuckle. “Oh, no,” it said. “I couldn’t leave Venus. My roots are here. But... but I do honor your kindness, and relish the thought that there are worlds beyond the clouds. Perhaps one day, my children will see them.”

“You have children?” Ambrosia asked. “You’re a mama, then. Or...or a papa?”

It transpired that the Venusian didn’t know either of those words, and neither girl was able to explain them to its satisfaction. Eventually it left again, off to look for more trails before darkness fell.

“Listen—we’d better keep an eye on that one,” Phyllis murmured to Ambrosia. “You can’t trust someone who offers something for nothing. All that means is that you don’t know what they’re *really* after.”

“It’s just nice,” Ambrosia said.

“If it’s so nice, why is it out here in the wilderness alone?”

“It’s on a pilgrimage!”

“So it *says*. Maybe it’s an exile. Maybe it’s an escaped convict. We know what it wants us to know, and nothing else.” Phyllis yawned. “And there’s another thing. What does our new friend eat, hmm? We did nothing *but* eat today, and it didn’t take a single bite.”

“So it doesn’t like fruit.”

“It doesn’t like leaves, either, or at least it didn’t eat any in front of me. I didn’t see it catching fish or mice or anything else. Sure, maybe it eats at night. The question is—*what* does it eat?”

Ambrosia followed Phyllis’ yawn with a yawn of her own. “Then, you want to set a watch?”

“I think it would be only prudent.”

“Well—it couldn’t hurt, at any rate. Let’s do it.”

Five minutes later the combination of fatigue, a sugar crash, and very full stomachs had put them both out. They slept like rocks. If the Venusian did anything suspicious that night, they didn’t see it.

-IV-

They passed the next several days grazing their way through the jungle, making no more than a few kilometers a day. The land tilted gently downward, and grew marshier. There were a number of interesting insects, which Phyllis photographed eagerly. One hot noon, they came upon something like a weeping willow with a swollen trunk, its branches laden with bulbous melons sloshing with juice. The stems, when popped off, made a convenient drinking-hole.

“I’ve got to get a shot of this,” Phyllis said, kneeling down in the mud (their once-pristine white slacks were, by now, beyond worrying about) and lining up the camera.

Ambrosia took a gulp of juicy melon pulp, and made a face. “Bleecch! I don’t much care for this one. It’s sweet, but there’s almost...almost a sort of mediciney-ness.” She set the melon down. “Listen, how about we go stand by the tree, and have the Venusian take some pictures of us?”

Phyllis grimaced. “I’m in no fit state to be photographed. Just look at me!”

“Oh, really, Phyl,” Ambrosia said. “You’re fine. So we’re both getting a little chubby—”

“I meant my *hair*,” Phyllis snapped. “But since you brought it up, *you’re* looking a little puffy, at that.”

“Just a bit,” Ambrosia agreed. “I only meant that having us in the picture would give it a good sense of scale.”

Phyllis blanched at the word *scale*, her mind filling with thoughts of spinning numbers. It was all right for Ambi, who was putting it on in all the right places. *Look at her—she’s—she’s voluptuous! That’s the word for it. Not chubby—voluptuous. And here I stand with a good head start on a beer gut!*

She took a long, thirsty guzzle from her own melon rind. It was shaping up to be a hot, humid day.

They walked on, the Venusian guiding them to dry ground. The willows were the only fruit trees which grew in the wetlands, and being large, they were also far enough apart that the Earth-women could get at least a little decent walking in before having to stop and eat. They meandered through the swamp, slurping juice and leaving the empty rinds behind them, and feeling unaccountably pleasant.

Presently Phyllis stumbled over her own feet, and she nearly went sprawling into the mud before Ambrosia caught her. The whole thing struck her as suddenly funny, and she laughed, and coughed, violet juice dribbling from her nose.

“Are you all right, Phyl?” Ambrosia asked, pushing her friend upright again.

“Never better,” Phyllis said. “Listen, I’ve got myself a little bit of a theory ‘bout these trees.”

She leaned over conspiratorially and beckoned Ambrosia to lean in.

“I think these *par-ti-cu-lar* fruits,” she stage-whispered, struggling to pronounce ‘particular’, “may be just slightly...fermented.”

Ambrosia blinked. “Fermented? As in... alcoholic?”

“It’s only a working theory, but—”

She stumbled again.

“—but I’m beginning to think I’m on to something,” she said from the ground.

“Why, Miss Marris,” Ambrosia exclaimed. “I do believe you’re *drunk*.”

“*We’re* drunk,” Phyllis corrected. “I’m not sure exactly how strong this stuff is but we must be more than a bottle’a wine in at this point.”

“But you’re drunker’n I am,” Ambrosia said, taking a long pull from her melon. “I’m bigger. Heavier. S’not hitting me as hard.”

She hiccuped.

“Oh, help me up! We’ll both be plastered in no time at this rate.” Phyllis started laughing. “Poor Veeny! It’s gonna have to carry us out of here.”

Ambrosia hauled Phyllis to her feet. “I’m gonna have to relieve you.”

“I’m gonna have to relieve *myself*,” Phyllis said, still giggling. “All that liquid, you know.”

“I meant, you’re not fit for command right now.”

“Who is?” Phyllis said, flinging her arms out dramatically. “*You* wanna be in charge, I suppose? On what grounds? You’re as sloshed as I am, Missy. Maybe even sloshed-er!”

She punctuated her remark with another long pull from her melon, getting about half of it into her mouth.

“On the grounds that you were wrong about seeds not growing in your belly,” Ambrosia said. She grinned wickedly, and grabbed Phyllis around the middle. “Looks to me like you’ve got the beginnings of a watermelon here!”

Phyllis shrieked and dissolved into helpless hiccup-giggle, slithering out of Ambrosia’s arms and to the ground. “Stop it! Stop it! Assault on a s’perior officer. I could have you marsh-courtled!”

The Venusian picked its way over the muddy ground to the two chortling Earth-women. “Is... is everything all right back here?”

They looked at the Venusian. It was quite untouched by the mud, its long legs working like stilts, but it did appear to be a bit bigger around the middle than it had been. Somehow, it had grown, just as they were growing—though they couldn’t see how, when it wasn’t eating anything. The same image popped into both their heads—a plump, spherical creature, teetering on top of a ridiculously tall, thin pair of legs. They looked at each other, and dissolved in laughter.

“We’re quite all right,” Phyllis said. “Quite all right. Dandy. Don’t concern yourself!”

When it had gone, she turned to Ambrosia and stage-whispered, “Better not spill the beans to Veeny. There’s a teetotaler if I’ve ever seen one!”

“Would *not* appreciate a good tie-on,” Ambrosia agreed. “A tie-one on, I mean. A tying-one-on?”

“Taiwan!” Phyllis shouted. “And you’d better clean yourself up, First Mate Grant, before it catches on. You’re *visual-ably* drunk.”

“At least my rear’s not in the mud.”

“I can take it out,” Phyllis said, faux-primly, pulling herself back to her feet with the help of a tree. “Look at you! You’re spilling more juice than you’re drinking. Look at *this!*”

She grabbed Ambrosia’s arm and held it up. “Pulp all over. You’re dripping with it. What an absolute disgrace. Unfit-unfit for duty, you ask me. Oughtta clean it up.”

“With what?” Ambrosia asked. Phyllis looked around, confused. They were ought of cleaning cloths, and the water was far too dirty to clean with.

“Well,” she said, “improvise!”

And she brought Ambrosia’s hand to her face and licked off a dribble of juice. “How’s about that?”

“It’s not as if you’re any better,” Ambrosia scolded, grabbing Phyllis’s arm and running her tongue over one finger. “Little hypocrite.”

“Well, you’ve got a seed on your ear!” Phyllis countered, staggering forward and lunging for Ambrosia’s left lobe.

Ambrosia lurched out of the way, grabbed Phyllis, and pushed her up against the tree.

“You’ve got a seed on your lips, Phyl,” she said quietly.

Phyllis looked up, meeting the other woman’s hazel eyes, her heart pounding, her nose full of the scent of Ambrosia. “And...and what are you going to do about that?”

A moment later the two of them toppled over into the moss. They made no more progress that day.

They didn't recall their time in the marshlands very clearly, but afterwards, when the land began to slope up again, they had a hard time looking at each other without blushing, and tried to find other things to talk about.

"We've got to be nearly there," Ambrosia said. "We should see the plateau just up ahead soon, shouldn't we?"

"Just up ahead," the Venusian agreed, tottering along. "No more than a day."

It had gotten much bigger while the women had been sunk in their haze of intoxication, and really was beginning to resemble a sphere on stilts—though it was difficult to tell much of what it really looked like under that tunic of vegetable matter.

*Of course, it's hardly the only one getting bigger!*, Ambrosia thought ruefully. It felt as if their sloppy march through the swamp had only taken a day, but she knew it had been longer, if only because they'd both put on so much weight.

"We're turning into a couple of overripe fruits ourselves," Phyllis moaned as they knelt by a stream to slake their thirst. "Look at me! I look like a big white marshmallow in this uniform."

"Not at all," Ambrosia said. "Our uniforms are hardly white anymore."

"My tunic doesn't even come down over my belly!" Phyllis wailed. "Look at me, Ambi! I've got a double chin!"

"Only when you're looking down—or forward. Really, Phyl, it's not that bad."

"Easy for you to say, you—you big, bosomy Amazon! There's nowhere for it to go on me! I'm turning into a layer cake!"

"We're almost there. Just a few more kilos."

"My clothes are bursting at the seams. A few more kilos, and I'll be naked!"

"Kilometers, I meant. We've got to be nearly to the ship."

"How sure are you of that?" Phyllis said, narrowing her eyes and lowering her voice. "We're putting an awful lot of trust in that stilt-legged Sacagawea to be taking us the right way, aren't we? How do we know it's not leading us into these trees on purpose? Fattening us up for the slaughter?"

"Oh, Phyl," Ambrosia sighed, but her own heart fluttered. Really, how *could* they be sure?

"Then we'll push through today," she resolved. "Come on, Phyl. We won't close our eyes again until we lay them on our good old ship! And if it does try anything, I'll be ready."

She patted the blaster, still holstered at the hip, those the gun belt was beginning to be a bit of a squeeze.

And so the Venusian led, and the Earth-women followed, eating their way up to the slope, and to the foot of the plateau at last, and finally making a long and steep climb on very full stomachs. Several times during the ascent they were forced to press their backs to the wall, and creep along on narrow ledges—and it was at these times they were reminded, frighteningly, just how much further they stuck out in front now.

At last, at last, they reached the top of the plateau, and there it stood in front of them, silvery and beautiful—the ship. Their glorious ship.

"Oh, you beautiful old girl, I could kiss you!" Phyllis said, staggering forward to touch the ship's left fin. They were both utterly exhausted. The Venusian, despite looking large and ungainly, had picked its way easily up the cliff face, but it would have been an ordeal even for humans in excellent shape—let alone for a pair of newly full-figured Earth-women.

The cockpit seemed even smaller than it had on the original journey. The co-pilot's chair was too narrow for Ambrosia's hips, and Phyllis discovered to her embarrassment that her stomach touched the steering wheel. Nevertheless, the cabin was cool, and the material was so soft and clean, and both girls were sweaty and tired and full. Their eyelid grew heavy, too heavy to even think about launching now, and they soon began to sink into sleep. As Ambrosia turned to reposition her fuzzy head on the



headrest, the last thing she saw was the dark shape of the Venusian silhouetted against the entry hatch as it climbed into the ship...

-VI-

They awoke some hours later to find themselves still in their chairs and considerably refreshed. Phyllis wiped a bit of fruit-flavored saliva from her chin and looked around. It was black outside the window—night had fallen, and the clouds blocked out the stars—but both they and the ship seemed to be in working order.

“I supposed we’d better get ready for takeoff,” she said. “Assuming the ship will even lift us with all this extra freight we’re packing!”

“Don’t worry about it,” Ambrosia said, giving Phyllis a peck on the forehead. “It makes you look distinguished.”

She heard a sound behind her, and turned in her seat. The Venusian stood in the small storage area, looking considerably slimmer, even more so than it had been when they first encountered it.

Her eyes began to adjust to the darkness, and she saw that the hold was full of fruit, though it wasn’t any kind they’d seen before. The baseball-sized fruits were fleshy, fuzzy-skinned, and purple, and they smelled irresistibly tantalizing. It had been piled up in every contained they had, and where there were no contained, it had simply been piled.

“A... a gift?” she wondered allowed.

“Oh, more than that,” the Venusian explained. “I believe I’ve done you a service, and I ask a service in return—though I hope the task will be one you’ll enjoy. On the ride home, you must eat your fill. Eat all you possibly can. What you can’t, you must share with others on Earth. And when the time comes, you must promise me to pass the results from your body somewhere in the woods. Somewhere nice and shady, perfect for newborn Venusians to grow.”

It gestured to the heaps of fruit with one long and spindly arm, and Ambrosia realized for the first time—however had she not noticed before?—how very like a branch it looked, that arm.

“As I said,” the Venusian said, “my roots are here. But my children will one day see the stars.”