

Betting on Eureka
by Geoffrey A. Landis

Geoffrey Landis spent most of last year in Pasadena, working on the science team for the Mars Exploration Rover, where he shepherded the rovers around on Mars and took pictures of rocks, soil, and sunsets. His latest work has been a proposal for flying an aircraft in the atmosphere of Venus to search for microbial life. In his spare time, Geoff designs solar cells and sometimes writes science fiction.

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Eureka.

Across the big black sky, everybody knew about the Eureka asteroid. Eureka was a legend, a dream, a paradox; it was a fabled lost treasure hidden among a billion rocks in the sky.

In the gossip of the rock-rats and fuel-stop jocks, many claimed that Eureka was a hoax. The ore sample had to be an elaborate fake, because it was well known that asteroids have no ore veins. An ore vein is deposited by water, and for four billion years, the asteroids had never been wet. But yet there it was, an angular chunk of rock the size of a suit-helmet. The sample had one flat surface, still showing the saw marks where it had been cut free of its parent rock. And embedded in that cutaway, like a rope of twisted metal, was a streak of quartz glistening with gold and copper and scandium, precious scandium, riches without price.

But the parent body, ah, the parent body, the treasure load of man's greed and desire, where was it? Only two people had ever seen it, only two had ever mapped its eccentric orbit, and only one of them had come back, dying of radiation poisoning, delirious with the last stutterings of dying neurons. He had been dying, John Jason Goya, covered in filth and vomit that he had been too weak to clean up, riding in a broken spaceship from who-knew-where, clutching a stone and gibbering that it had been cut from a fifty million-ton rock, a rock threaded through and through with the same rich veins.

But, in that last day, the one long bleak day after John Jason Goya had arrived at High Freehold in the dilapidated *Queen of Spades* and before he lapsed into the coma from which he would never recover, he refused to tell anyone where the rock had been found. A dozen prospectors searched the *Queen of Spades* from rockets to radiators and back again, tore apart the old *Queen* and searched her innards with microscopes, but all the navigation logs had been erased, the inertial navigation unit wiped, and every hint of its trajectory meticulously destroyed, lest the claim jumpers that John Jason knew were waiting might find and steal his precious rock. John Jason Goya alone had returned with the secret, and John Jason Goya had died with it.

Of his partner, Shania Montez, no trace was ever found.

Yeah, everybody knew the story. Parts of it were most likely true, parts undoubtedly exaggerated. The rock itself was on display in a museum on Earth, we heard, or it had been processed for its precious elements and the slag discarded.

The story of Eureka faded into myth, joining the many legends of the asteroid belts, the stories of ghost ships and lost lodes that had become the bait for a hundred scams. Every visitor fresh from Earth was approached by a dozen furtive con artists who, for a small price, could reveal the orbital parameters for the fabulous lode. Nobody paid attention.

The belts had plenty of stories. I'd heard that one Corwin Teron was peddling stories that he had a guaranteed-true tip on a lost lode in the outer fringe, and I paid no attention.

But now Corwin was acting rich.

2101 Adonis was an asteroid in a nearly 5:2 elliptical resonance with Earth, an orbit that took it out to brush the main belt, then inward of Venus. High-Hades was the way station built onto the asteroid. It was the port where the miners and prospectors and ore-haulers stopped to refurbish and refuel, a hub with flophouses and fixit shops and suppliers. High-Hades featured establishments for drinks and adult entertainment to service every level of asteroid mining society, from the damn-near-broke prospector looking for a stake, right up to the swank private clubs for the owners and managers of billion-SAU enterprises.

And now Corwin was drinking in the society bars.

Corwin Teron was of an intermediate age, with the grace of movement that showed he'd been in low gee for a very long time. To pay his oxy bills he hired out as skilled labor to the repair shops, but you could see he'd been a prospector; the signs of it were all over him. I knew him slightly; I'd seen him around the bars and entertainment district.

Now he was talking to financiers. And that was interesting enough for me to want to track him down.

"Corwin Teron," I said to him. He was in new clothes, with spider-silk gloves and iridescent knee-socks; not the latest new fashion, but high class enough.

"Marcos," he acknowledged, and smiled.

"Looks as if life's been good to you?" I asked.

"Pretty good," he said airily, "pretty good. How's business?"

"Not bad," I lied. Or maybe not a lie, since tottering on the edge of insolvency was pretty normal business. "Got anything you could throw my way?"

That made Corwin laugh, long and hard. "You and everyone else."

“That so?” I said. “So, what’s up?”

He gave me a look, and I could see from his eyes that he was eager for an excuse to tell his story, if I gave him a chance.

Now, in the asteroids, some people pay their oxygen by finding the ores—which is a pretty tough life, as any rock rat will tell you, yeah. And some pay theirs by selling stuff to the ones prospecting. That may not make you jackpot rich, but it’s a good sight more likely to keep you in oxygen. And then there are some, like me, who make our oxygen from information. Find out who’s coming in with a load of what, and trade your information to somebody with enough liquidity to short the commodity. Or, just as good, find out when a lode’s played out, and a crew’s not bringing in a load when they promised one—and sell the infor to somebody with a few standard accounting units so you don’t short your own oxygen bills. So I was more than a little interested in what Corwin Teron’s secret was, and why he seemed unexpectedly flush. Infor is my stock in trade.

“Come on,” I said. “I’m buying.”

“You’re on,” he told me.

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His turned out to be Irish coffee, which is pretty much the drink of capitalists and kings out in the belt, and put a notable hit into my expense fund. But it got him talking.

The Tartaros bar swung on a tether, rotating serenely a quarter of a rev per minute, giving it enough gee to serve beer in glasses instead of squeezies, but not so much that the low-gee workers would be too weak to stand. And the waitresses, yeah, the waitresses were top class.

“Eureka,” Corwin said, staring out over my head at the slowly rotating stars. “Heard of it?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Who hasn’t?”

“I know where it is.”

Eureka. I dropped a bundle of piggies on an Irish coffee, and the guy turns out to be trolling a bait only fresh-up suckers would strike at. “Yeah, I bet you do,” I said, without any enthusiasm. I stirred my drink—a beer, at a fifth the cost of Corwin’s Irish, but still by no means cheap—with my finger.

Corwin smiled, and it was a twisted smile, almost angry. “Sure,” he said. “You heard the story, sure thing, I guess everybody has. But you ever heard my side of the story?”

I looked up. “Your side of the story?” Of course I knew the story—everybody did—and he wasn’t part of it. “You don’t have a side of the

story.”

“The hell I don’t.”

Well. I’d already laid out the piggies for the Irish. I’d let him tell his goddamned story.

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“You know we were partners?” Corwin said. “The three of us, Johnny, Montez, and me. We each owned a one-third share in the Bitch Queen—the *Queen of Spades*, sure, that’s what we called her, the Bitch Queen, because she was the bitch who ruled our lives. We were looking for the big strike, sure thing we were, us and half a hundred other hungry prospectors working the fringe, and we weren’t finding it. A couple of little strikes, enough to pay a little toward the mortgage, but we weren’t breaking even, and every trip we were getting a little more in the hole.

“But we had some good times together, you know how it is? Let me tell you, we were buddies, nothing more than that, can you believe it? Two guys, one gal, and we were the best friends in the world, sure, prospecting partners, one for all and all for one, all that, friends and partners and nothing more.

“And, damn, I had to go blow it all by falling in love. Damn, that was stupid, but how could I help it? Seeing her every day, floating with her hair in all directions like dandelion fluff; breathing in her used oxygen, all saturated with her animal scent; feeling the radiation of her body heat when we’re working the radar side by side, millimeters away from each other.

“There was just no seeing straight; I was floating inverted, but I kept my com shut, knew that if I made a move, there in that cramped bubble of the *Queen of Spades*, it would never be nothing but trouble. And me? Hell, I was in debt to the eyeballs, the only thing I owned was my share of the Bitch Queen, and that was mortgaged so heavily that I couldn’t really say I owned that, either. I couldn’t put two liquid piggies together if I had to. We were looking for that big strike, and we needed it. By damn, we needed it.

“We’d harpooned an E-six with our tether and used the momentum to swing the *Queen* around and whip us out of the ecliptic a bit, snooping around a cluster of E-five rocks that we thought just might be promising. Now, the little ant probes prospect by just scattering a handful of Doppler dummies past, and measuring the gravitational field. That’s enough to give you average composition, and see if there are any big mascon anomalies, but to seriously prospect, well, that takes a rendezvous and a drill. That’s what humans are for, that’s how we can hope to have an edge over the ants, knowing which rocks to stop for and where to drill. It’s an art, more intuition than science, and it’s a dying art, too. Used to be a thousand prospectors, out in the main belt. Maybe ten thousand. Not so many now, and we work the fringe. Won’t be too long now and the last of us will be gone, us human prospectors, and it will be nothing but robots, the ants and spiders and the

worm-bots.

“Anyway, there we were, way out on the high fringe. We’d scoped out this cluster, looked good—but hell, you know, they always look good. So we drilled the heck out of those rocks, and came up with—nothing. We would have settled for volatiles, nitrogen, a little methane; hell, we would have been happy even with nickel. We got crap: olivine, pyroxene—not a trace of hydration, nothing worth a SAU.

“We were way out of plane, and out of fuel, and we were coming back broke.

“It takes a lot of fat little piggies to recondition a ship, fuel it up and fix it up to take it out prospecting. When we got back to High-Hades, Johnny Goya and Shania Montez went out to find low-bid contractors to refurbish us, and I was supposed to find us a good deal on xenon for fuel. So, shit, I shouldn’t have done what I did.

“We keep our ears open, out there—what else is there to do, between rocks?—and I’d been listening in on some suit-to-ship chatter, prospectors running a ship named *Lucky Lady Leela*, registered out of Venezuela. From what I was hearing, sounded like the Lady had found an old cometary core, lots of nitrogen and carbon and phosphorus, and once they found it they shut up about it, which sure sounded like a sweet sweet lode to me. So, the moment we got back to High-Hades I went to the credit broker, and mortgaged what little equity I had left in the Bitch Queen on short-term demand notes. I got myself about twenty thousand standard accounting units from my share of the Bitch, and I took those twenty thousand SAUs and put those piggies into phosphorus, selling short, leveraged twenty to one. If I’d been right—ah, I could have paid my notes and bought the Bitch Queen outright; I would have gone right up to Montez and told her, you and me, we’re rich, we can cut Johnny out—you and me, babe, we can tour the asteroids together.

“But I was wrong about that other crew. They’d found what they thought was a cometary core, sure thing, and the spectrum looked good, but when they drilled, there was nothing there—they’d been fooled by a patina, and *Lucky Lady Leela* came back broke as we were. The rocks are cruel, and when the margin call came, I was broke.

“I made it worse, I reckon, by going to Shania and—without two piggies to my name, mind—telling her that I was hopelessly in love with her, oh, and by the way I’d lost all my money and sold my share of the ship. She kicked me in the stomach and threw my stuff out after me.

“She and Johnny put together enough capital to refurbish the ship, and I’ll be damned if I can figure out where they scraped up the SAUs from, but somehow they did. Although the bank now owned more than half of it, they didn’t call in the mortgage, figuring the old ship wasn’t worth what they had invested in it; the best move for them was to let the ship go out prospecting and hope they’d recoup their piggies on a big strike. Shania Montez and that son-of-a-bitch John Jason Goya,

who used to be my best friend, went out on that last voyage as a two-man crew, and that was the last time I saw either one of them.

“Last time anybody saw them, for that matter, until Johnny came back, dying, with the mother rock of gold and scandium in his hands. They’d found their big strike, and I had nothing to do with it. Motherfucker.”

Corwin shut up for a moment.

“Tough luck,” I said.

Well, that was a story worth the price of a drink, and some of the details could be checked. I linked in (I’d picked the Tartaros knowing it had a good node) and queried some key details, tapping one-handed with my pad held under the table, while Corwin was staring into his drink. First thing I did was check registration data for *Queen of Spades*. It had no current registration, but I searched backward until I found it. It had been registered out of Zimbabwe, although I very much doubted that any of the owners had ever even been to Africa. Zimbabwe had favorable laws for ship registration, most particularly favorable in that they required little in the way of inspection and nothing in the way of fees, and assessed no tax on ships that made no profit. They did keep ownership records, though, and scrolling through, I saw that Corwin Teron had indeed once been a part-owner of the *Queen of Spades*; he’d sold his share to the Second Proserpine Credit Union & Oxygen Bank, the mortgage holder on the ship, a week and a day before she went out on her last voyage.

“Shit,” I said.

Gold, copper, and scandium, I thought. Time to do some research on Eureka.

The story, when I looked into it, wasn’t so simple. A lot of the rock rats had dissected the evidence—what else did they have to do, coasting through the long dark, waiting for a lucky rock to pass by? They picked apart a thousand cryptic clues in the fragmented records of Johnny Montez’s delirious ravings. There were a hundred versions of the details, but the flow of the story that they finally put together was more or less like this.

Montez and Goya had gone out prospecting. Their outward trajectory was known, but then they took a tether-slingshot and used it to rebound off a passing rock, one too small to have a name, and from there the trajectory was only guesswork.

They were tricky pilots, Montez and Goya. Successful prospecting required being able to rendezvous rocks that nobody else was looking at. Goya knew the trick to harpoon a rock with a tether, and use it to swing the *Queen of Spades* around like a whip, vectoring into odd, eccentric orbits. It was a delicate task, and put uncomfortable stress on a ship, but when they did it, they could reach rocks on the wide fringe, eccentric rocks too costly in delta-V for the automated ant swarms to find worthwhile.

They had been out for almost a year, approximately, when they'd hit Eureka. A year's a long time to be locked up in a cabin with somebody. Before that voyage, it had always been three of them, always a third person to break the pattern of one on one in the ship. Were they sleeping together? Probably, I decided. Almost certainly they were; two of them together, it would have been hard to believe that they weren't. But after a year they were maybe getting to be mighty sick of each other.

And then the big strike.

They found the rock, that gold-laced hit they'd been dreaming of during long decades of prospecting. An asteroid embedded with a crystal of quartz, and in the quartz, the glimmer of metals, glimmers the color of an asteroid prospector's dreams. Did they celebrate? No, they did not. They were too focussed on the task. They prospected. They measured. They took a sample. And John Goya left Shania Montez behind on the asteroid.

For whatever reason, he'd decided at the end that he didn't want to share. Did he hate her by then? Or was he just greedy for the whole pot, not a half? It didn't really matter. After he fully understood what they'd found, he went back to the *Queen of Spades*, leaving her on the rock, and took off.

Now, you have to know that a prospector ship doesn't take off fast. The ion drive is a slow push, not even a centimeter per second per second. Overall, that little bit of push builds up, but prospector ships don't have any kind of jackrabbit start. From Shania Montez's point of view it just hovered there in the sky, barely moving, lazy and arrogant.

She called him, I am certain she did, on her tiny little suit radio, and he had ignored her, and sooner or later she realized it wasn't an oversight or an accident or a cruel cruel joke, and he wasn't planning on coming back for her.

Even if her radio could reach out far enough to call someone else for help, who else could she call? She had, what, maybe five hours of oxy? Even if by wild chance there had been a directional high-gain pointed her direction to hear a distress call, it would take months for any ship to get there.

She couldn't get rescue, but she could get revenge.

She knew *Queen of Spades* inside and out, Shania Montez did, and she knew its weakness. She had with her the prospecting radar that they used to make depth profiles of the rock. John Goya must have taken the chance that she wouldn't be able to turn it into a communications link in the five hours she had left, and he'd been right about that. Instead, she focussed the microwave beam on the ship. Specifically, she targeted the return loop of the radiator heat pipe.

Space is full of radiation. To keep the passengers in the ship safe, like any other ship that carried fragile humans, the *Queen of Spades* had a coil of

superconducting wire that wrapped around it and generated a large magnetic field. The magnetic field curves the path of charged particles, just enough to keep the radiation from reaching the habitat bubble.

Shania Montez knew just where to aim, and it didn't take much heating at all for her to overheat the superconductor. The moment the superconductor turned normal, the currents in it blew the coil, and the radiation protection was gone forever.

Goya should have gotten a warning telltale from the system monitor, of course, but it was long since broken, and Shania knew it. That's the problem with a spaceship mortgaged from stem to stern; the money for safety repairs is the first thing to go. There wasn't really any way to repair the damage anyway, the remains of the coil was a rapidly-expanding mist of fine molten droplets.

Queen of Spades was well out of the plane of the ecliptic—just how far, nobody knows, but it was a long trip back, over a year, with a couple of lateral delta-V maneuvers as Johnny did forced-flybys of convenient asteroids, grappling them with the ship's tether and exchanging a bit of momentum to alter his course. The radiation of space, along with the radiation from his own unshielded reactor, did its terrible slow work on John Jason Goya. By the time he realized how he'd been vulnerable, it was far, far too late. The *Queen of Spades* came back carrying a chunk of rock, a pilot dying of radiation poisoning—and a mystery.

That answered some of my questions, but the big one remained a mystery. Corwin Teron hadn't been there.

So why did he say he knew where the lode was?

When *Queen of Spades* had returned to Freehold, prospector crews had gone over that ship with a fine-toothed comb, with microscopes, with every probe you or I could think of, and a bunch more we couldn't. Nobody found a thing. It had been wiped clean.

"Sure thing they did, but nobody else knew that ship like I did," Corwin Teron said. "I lived in their pockets, I did, and they lived in mine. I knew how they thought. I knew how they operated."

"You say?" I said.

"Johnny was hinky about engine hours," he said. "Always kept a meticulous record of every second that the engine was firing. Now, he wiped it, of course. I'm sure he thought he'd erased all the traces, but I got to thinking, what about scratchpad? The way he calculated engine hours, he logged when the engine was on, when it was off, and subtracted the two and logged the difference as engine hours. That was done in flash scratchpad, I thought, and I sort of got wondering if the scratchpad memory got wiped, too, or if he'd forgotten about that. I was right, he hadn't bothered wiping flash. So I know every engine firing, when and how long."

“Shit,” I said. But then I thought about it. They’d taken that ship apart. For sure they hadn’t neglected the computer, or anything that obvious. “You’d better give me a better lie than that. They had looked at scratchpad.”

“Sure thing,” he said. “But they wouldn’t know what it meant. They didn’t live with Johnny and Shania; I did. It was just random numbers to them.”

Could you reconstruct a trajectory from just engine firing times, I wondered? “Sounds pretty sketchy, I’d say.”

He shrugged. “Doesn’t matter to me. I’m just telling you the story, believe me or don’t, doesn’t make a dirt speck of difference to me.” He was silent for a few moments, and then said, “Not just that. A lot of things, little stuff that wouldn’t make any sense to anybody else. Pencil marks Shania made. She’d check the ship position, triangulating on asteroids, and taking notes in pencil on the rim of a porthole, little fragments of calculations. I knew which asteroids she always sighted on, and I’ve seen a hundred times just how she calculated the tether stretch. Nothing significant in itself, nothing anybody else would notice, but I could feel the way they thought. I could look at that ship and I was there, I knew how they flew, I knew which asteroids they’d triangulate on and which way they’d jump.

“But the ship was in a junkyard in Freehold, and I was a down-and-outer in High-Hades, without a SAU to my name, scrambling for my day’s oxy. It took me three damn years to work my way out of debt and get a mechanic’s slot on a slow-orbit transport to Freehold. And by then the hulk had been sent out to a junkyard orbiting Mars, and it took me a few more years to track it down and find what I needed.”

Maybe it made sense, I thought. Just maybe.

“So you’re selling the asteroid,” I said. “You, and a hundred other down-and-out rock bums who are looking for a little scratch. I’ve heard that story before. Why the hell should I bite?”

“Selling?” he said, and laughed. “Selling, to the likes of you? You’re skewed. Don’t kid yourself, Marcos, you got delusions of grandeur. That’s a billion SAU rock you’re talking about here, and you don’t have the scratch. No, I don’t need nothing from you. Thanks for the drink.”

Everybody needs something, I thought. But it was a pretty elaborate story, just to cadge an expensive drink. Still, I’ve paid more and gotten less other times. I nodded. “Great story,” I said. “Thanks for the company.” I got up and looked around to settle the tab.

Corwin flagged a waitress first. She was wearing that skintight iridescent soap-bubble stuff, a recent fashion that reveals and conceals the figure in ripples of colors, and Corwin let his eyes linger. I could tell the waitress didn’t exactly appreciate his gaze, but her costume was a good part of why the place could charge

the pigs they charged, so she let him look. “You’re drinking that frontier foam, Marcos?” he said, not taking his eyes off the waitress. “You know that’s little more than colored water; tastes like recycled piss. You should try an Irish coffee, now that’s a drink worth drinking.”

“Yeah, maybe I should. Great talking with you. Call me sometime,” I said.

“Sit down, I’m buying,” Corwin said, and I sat. To the waitress, he said, “Two Irish, and don’t skimp on the cream this time.” He laid out the SAUs, along with a tip for the waitress that was substantial enough to make me (and her) look twice. She gave him a second look, smiled at what she saw, and disappeared.

To me, he said, “Me, sell Eureka? Sure thing. But not to the likes of you, no insult intended. I sold to somebody with real cash.”

“You sold,” I said. “Of course you sold.”

“Of course I sold. I sold the secret a month ago, to a consortium of investors with enough cash to put together an expedition. They’re on the way now.

“In another month, they will be back with enough ore to sink Saturn itself.

“So drinks are on me, buddy, drinks are on me. Keep your piggies to yourself, because I am about to be one filthy stinking rich rat.”

* * * *

I should have invested, I suppose. I could have liquidated everything I had and used it all to short-sell scandium, gold, and copper, maybe earned a load of cash. But I would have had to have been fast, because I wasn’t the only person he talked to, and within a week the options price dropped into the toilet, at least for the metals that had been assayed in the Eureka strike. A lot of piggies changed hands, and none of them landed into mine.

But I wasn’t investing. I trade in information, and I passed the chatter along to some friends of mine, and they passed along a couple of pigs and thanked me for the gossip.

And Corwin Teron was suddenly in the middle of it. His story was a good one, and soon enough everybody knew it.

Anderson/Newmoon, the venture that had bought his information, wasn’t the biggest mining consortium in the belt, but they were a big enough player. They were a corporation headquartered in Paraguay. Now, the Earth “headquarters” of an asteroidal mining consortium is a bit more fiction than physical presence; I doubt that the purported headquarters would be more than a mail drop and a net relay node. The façade was a convenience to give the corporation standing to engage in contracts that would hold up as legal under Earth laws, nothing more.

But, Earth headquarters notwithstanding, Anderson/Newmoon’s microgee

manufacturing operation was big enough, and they moved a lot of ore. They'd checked him out, and he scanned.

Corwin was in quite a position. He was—exactly as he'd told me—filthy stinking rich, on paper, but he didn't actually have a single SAU to spend. Seventy-five million standard accounting units had been deposited into an account in his name, but there was a Stubborn Intelligence proctor on the account that wouldn't allow one SAU to be withdrawn until the expedition had returned, and the assays verified that the deposit was real. The money was there, it was his, but he couldn't actually spend it.

Which made sense, of course. The suits at Anderson/Newmoon weren't stupid. His story checked out, as far as they could verify it, but there were a lot of weasels and liars out there, and they weren't going to let him float away with their money until they saw the glitter of scandium.

The Stubborn Intelligence that proctored his money was chartered in Algeria, and the payment was technically in dinars, but of course it was guaranteed against Standard Accounting Units at a fixed exchange rate. That's common enough; the laws of the inner belt are a hodgepodge (and the outer belt even worse), since each of the entities doing business is incorporated under the laws of whichever nation had the most favorable legal system at the time, and for the most part, that meant the ones with the least legal system. That might have resulted in a lot of trade in the inner belt going on in currencies that weren't necessarily stable, but using Standard Accounting Units instead of pesos or ringgit or baht meant nobody ever had to actually deal with the inconvenience of Earth currency.

So his money was proctored, but he had credit, a lot of it, and he used it. He played the rich miner, and High-Hades saw a lot of him, in every swank dive in the port. He'd spent fifteen years living on recycled oxygen, and now he was making up for it.

The price of scandium fell, and gold and copper with it, but it didn't really matter. The scandium that had been estimated to be in Eureka was so rich that, even when it hit the lowest price in a century, everybody who'd invested in the venture would be rich, and the gold and copper would just be dessert.

Hell, he even bought me drinks. I decided I could get to the point where I'd actually like Irish coffee, if I let myself.

It was most of the month before it occurred to me how badly he'd been swindled. Seventy-five million, and a 5 percent share of profits? That was nothing, if the lode was a tenth as rich as it had been predicted. I mean, it's a fortune, but the prospector's cut should have made him a billionaire; he should have held out for forty percent, and settled for a third of the take. They'd taken advantage of him when he was down and out. He shouldn't be buying drinks in the fanciest bars in port—he should be owning the port.

And I watched him closer, I did, and realized that he wasn't rich at all. He was acting. Underneath the smiling exterior, he had a hunted, nervous look. Corwin Teron had been taken—and he knew it.

And it all came crashing down, the moment that the Newmoon ship got to the asteroid that Corwin had sworn to them was Eureka.

The asteroid he had sold to Anderson/Newmoon for seventy-five million SAUs was inspected, scanned, drilled, radared, and x-rayed. It had gotten the full treatment; there was no way Corwin was going to be able to claim they just hadn't looked hard enough. It was an ordinary chondrite. Nothing to harvest. Not even enough nickel to pay for the voyage out.

A day before the news, and you could find Corwin at any bar in High-Hades, buying drinks and making friends. A day after the news, and Corwin was hard to find indeed. It took me three days to hunt him down, but there are only so many places you can be on an asteroid port, and no real places to hide.

Corwin had a bitter smile, and an ironic laugh.

He was dead out of credit now—the first thing that the consortium had done was tickle the Stubborn Intelligence that proctored Corwin's finder's-fee money, and there was no way he would ever pry that loose. I'd heard on the street that he'd borrowed a lot of SAUs, using the finder's-fee money as collateral, and with the finder's fee about to evaporate, he was looking at a lot of debt suddenly coming due.

That had been his game all along, I realized. He'd been nothing, a down and outer, a prospector with no prospects, nothing to his name but a single good story. So he traded that story for a month's worth of living rich, floating around with piggies in his pockets and impressing everyone with outrageous tips.

Yeah, now it had caught up with him.

His debts hadn't tracked him down yet, not quite, when I saw him. He wasn't drinking in the swank bars any more, but the rock rats all knew where he was. They were buying him drinks now, and why shouldn't they? He had a hell of a story these days, and a lot of prospectors weren't terribly sorry to see a big venture get played for fools, even if it only lasted a month. Corwin was going down in flames—it was unlikely he'd ever be able to pay his next oxygen bill—but the down-and-outers and rock rates all were cheering him as he fell.

He was smiling.

"I admire your attitude," I told him. "You're out, but you certainly did run them like a player."

"They insulted me," he said, as if he hadn't a care in the world. "Did I mention that? I gave them the secret of the greatest strike in the asteroids, and they

wouldn't even let me join in on the expedition. I've been prospecting since before any of them were born. No way they could tell me I didn't have the skill-set they needed. Idiots."

"Yeah, buddy," I said. "Indeed. But I guess they had the last laugh."

"Laugh?" he said, and I suddenly realized he was seriously snookered. He didn't need microgravity for the way he was floating. "Sure thing. I'm laughing. Say, I'm putting together an expedition. You got contacts? Want to invest?"

"Expedition? Yeah, sure. The only expedition you're putting together, if you have any sense, is a one-way trip to Earth." If he could drop down to where oxygen was free, it wouldn't kill him if he went bankrupt; down below, the planet itself keeps deadbeats alive. If he couldn't get a drop—well, his next oxygen bill was likely to be his last. You can get oxygen on credit—sometimes—but not with a record of burning through piggies like he had.

How much had he gone through, anyway? I was curious, and he was just drunk enough he might answer.

"So how much did you borrow, anyway?"

"Bout ninety."

"Ninety thousand?" I whistled.

"Million."

Ninety million SAUs? But that didn't make any sense. "You borrowed ninety million oinking SAUs? On seventy-five million collateral? How the hell did you do that?"

He smiled. "Well, it started at ninety. You got to keep it moving, so nobody can see how much you don't have. Borrow a little, then home it in a blind account, then use that for collateral to buy more. It's a shell game. I used the money I borrowed to borrow a little more, and then used that to borrow more. Leveraged it out to a total of more like one-eighty."

I whistled. "When's it come due?"

He looked at his watch, a tattoo on the inside of his wrist. "' Bout an hour."

No wonder he was snookered. But I had to give him credit, he was going down in a far more flamboyant style than I'd ever imagined. "What the hell did you want with a hundred and eighty million oinkers? What in the hell could you buy?"

"Well, a lot of things, I guess. I bought some drinks for my friends. I bought a little oxygen, here and there. And a bit of—private entertainment."

"For that many piggies," I said, shaking my head, "You must have bought a

hell of a lot of entertainment.”

“...but mostly,” he said, “I bought scandium.”

“Scandium?”

He smiled, a big bright smile. “Sure. It was cheap, see.”

I had that curious feeling, the one where you think you’re right-side up, and then suddenly you reorient, and everything in the universe turns over and you suddenly realize you’re hanging upside down and falling. “How much scandium did you buy?”

“How much? Well, how much is there? It’s a pretty rare item, you know. Useful, the stuff is, but hard to find. And it was such a bargain, dropping so fast. Of course, I encouraged that a little, I guess.”

“Encouraged, it? Yeah, I’d say you did. How much?”

“Well—all of it.”

“All of it.”

“Yep. I think I cornered the market. Anybody who went short on scandium—well, they’re going to cover their position.

“They’re going to have to buy it from me.”

* * * *

For a brief period, Corwin was theoretically worth a billion SAUs. When everybody else had been selling scandium futures, waiting for the Eureka strike to flood the market, he had been buying them up.

That was electrons, though, and never real oinkers. In the real world, the game was hold ‘em, and he couldn’t hold onto his corner on the market long enough to stare the other players down. He was in too much of a time bind: he had to liquidate his own position to cover his own debts. When all the options cleared, and he’d paid off on all his debts, he had only cleared a little more than a hundred million standard accounting units, spendable on any rock in the solar system.

Only a hundred million. That was a pretty enough prize, for telling a nice story about a rock that wasn’t even there.

Corwin disappeared from High-Hades. There were a lot of people who didn’t care to see him around. Not the law—like I said, business in orbit mostly goes by the laws of the nations that had the fewest, and he’d done his trading in markets headquartered—at least in name—in Paraguay and Malaysia. But still, on a small port it’s nice to have friends, and there were too many people in High-Hades who weren’t. He left an ion trail behind him before they could get organized and do something. The story you hear was that he went—on a first class ticket—off to

Freehold, and from there to spend his days in a private luxury asteroid habitat that the likes of you and me would never even see from a passing transport.

That may be true, but sometimes I heard another story, one that he headed in a different direction entirely, toward the salvage yards around Mars. I heard a hint that maybe he bought an old scrap ship, the *Queen of Spades*, and he's been spending his piggies for a new engine, new life-support, new everything. Fitting her out for flight. Even renamed the ship, he did.

Renamed her *Shania*.

And now I got a message from Corwin, just an hour ago. Didn't say where he was, but he said he's getting an expedition up, a little prospecting, and if I knew any investors looking for a score, I could set them up.

He's heading for Eureka.

Or so he says. So he says.

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