

Big Far Now

by Bruce Holland Rogers

This story copyright 1991 by Bruce Holland Rogers. This copy was created for Jean Hardy's personal use. All other rights are reserved. Thank you for honoring the copyright.

Published by Seattle Book Company, www.seattlebook.com.

* * *

Veloz was a quirky world, and its strangeness should have put all of us on edge, made us think in different ways. There was so much about the place that we hadn't been able to explain. For instance, the planet's sun was an F5 star, nearly double the mass of Sol and more than five times as bright. The planet spun in a fast, tight orbit, and because of the planet's proximity to its sun and the sun's luminosity, the surface radiation should have been sizzling.

It was Earth-like.

We didn't know why. We had theories about atmospheric screening, but none of our speculations ever matched our data.

There was more. The planet was small, but incredibly dense. The surface gravity was close to that on Earth, and the planet had retained a moist, nitrogen/oxygen atmosphere. It supported abundant life, though not quite what colonists had encountered on other living planets. The planet's life was distributed uniformly over its surface, where the temperature was also virtually uniform, even at the poles, and rain fell predictably every morning from skies that were never completely clear. There was one type of ecological community. One. Land on any part of Veloz, and you'd see the same dense forest and frenetic animals you'd see anywhere else on the planet. Always, the same huge towertrees and domewood. Always, the same fast, small predators and prey that looked vaguely like mammals. Lightning dogs and Shies.

There was more about the place that was strange, that should have set us to thinking: the canisters I had discovered, for instance, or Joanna's observations about how different some populations of Shies were from others. And then there was the composition of one particular mountain. It was all odd enough that we should have slowed down there, on that planet named for speed, and thought things out more deliberately.

I say *we*, but I really mean *I*.

Joanna says I shouldn't blame myself for what happened, even though she recently called me a coward. She says there was a kind of momentum that got started with the way the expedition was funded, and that I couldn't have made a real difference by taking a stand with her, getting my own legs shot out from under me. But I do blame myself. The faces of 138 men and women slip past me every night, right after the sleeping pill. And how many Shies died? And how far away did someone feel their agony as they suffocated and burned?

As I say, we should have thought things through, but we didn't. Veloz was our chance to make new lives for ourselves, to turn a profit for our charter sponsors and earn ourselves the right to stay on the planet, breathing clean air and living with a little elbow room. After the Kepler touched down and we stood for the first time on our new world, Governor Meeker never stopped reminding us of what would happen if we failed. None of us wanted to go back to Earth. We cleared an area in the forest around the Kepler, built shelters from local materials, and then got right to work trying to find a new way to turn a profit. We worked all out, fullthrot.

There were two main development teams: my team of physicists and planetary geologists, checking into the composition of the planet, and Susan Suhl's group, investigating the planet's biology. I was looking for minerals; she was looking for pharmaceuticals. Susan was our main hope. As it turned out, I

had more luck than she did, but now I'm getting ahead of myself.

Not everyone followed such obvious paths to profitability. We were all free to investigate whatever we wanted to, since a good business idea could come from anywhere. So Joanna Carpaccio, one of our psychologists, went into the forest to study the Shies.

Now, Joanna and I were friends. A little more than friends, in fact. We had shared quarters during the yearlong hyperspace jump from home, taking from one another the sort of consolation that only such sleeping arrangements can make possible. It was sort of a custom of deep-space travel. And then on landing, according to custom, we dissolved the arrangement. Actually, we could have broken with customs and stayed together, some couples did. But Joanna thought that we weren't quite right for each other.

"You're so hard-nosed, David," she told me. "I think in softer edges, more expansively, more speculatively. We just don't see things in the same way. You're a little like Meeker."

That last remark would have sounded like a compliment to me if I hadn't known what Joanna thought of our governor. Meeker was a can-do man, my type of guy. In her own words, Joanna thought Meeker was "shallow and manipulative."

We'd been good traveling companions, she said, but the colony was for the rest of our lives, and we didn't click in that way. So, to save face, I agreed in a hard-nosed, mature-sounding way, and we parted company.

Then I didn't sleep well for weeks. I paired, from time to time, with Susan Suhl or Ofra Shiohita, but I kept thinking of Joanna, of her hair that was black as the space between the stars, and was so very cool and soft between my fingers. When I was with Susan or Ofra or one of the others, part of me was someplace else, someplace with Joanna.

So, as I said, Joanna went into the forest to study the Shies, though I suspected she went more because she liked the Shies than because she imagined that we could make profitable use of them.

At any rate, I considered the Shies to be pretty useless, and almost everyone shared my view. Once or twice, someone or other had thought about catching a Shy as a pet. On the surface of it, it wasn't a bad idea. Shies are cute, big-eyed, roundheaded little things. Looking at one once, I thought of an illustration of puppies and kittens and human babies in my college psychology microtext. We tend to think of roundheaded things, like baby animals, as adorable. It's an innate response. A shaggy little Shy triggers that same reflex, and Shies were also appealing because of their habit of mimicking speech. Call to one a few times, and it would call back to you, like a parrot. They might indeed make good pets. But try and catch one. Our stun-dart drugs either didn't work at all or else killed them, and you sure couldn't get close enough to one to catch it by hand.

Lightning dogs, on the other hand, didn't have much trouble at all with catching Shies. Hunting in tree-climbing packs, the "dogs" were adept at cornering their agile prey and closing on them in a circle of powerful jaws. Shies put up quite a racket when they were surrounded, chattering and howling, but it never did them any good from what I had seen.

The lightning dogs worried us when we first saw them hunting. Like Shies, they often moved faster than the eye could follow, and almost all of us had bad memories of real dog packs in the crumbling cities of Earth. But the lightning dogs seemed hardly to notice us. We decided that in such a uniform environment, they already knew what prey looked like. We didn't fit the menu, so they ignored us.

So Joanna took to the forest to study the Shies, and I didn't see her much. I was busy sampling and setting up my remote mineral survey. From time to time, though, she would come back to camp with stories about how she had the Shies eating towerfruit out of her hands, and I'd invite her to my tent and ask her questions about the Shies without really listening to her answers, but thinking instead of new questions, anything to keep her talking to me. I think I convinced her that I thought the Shies *were* fascinating.

And then, for a little while, they were fascinating. Joanna came back with audio samples of Shies talking. *Talking*.

It created a bit of a stir for all of us. The most intelligent animals encountered so far in human space travel were merely what we had imagined Shies were, namely, about as smart as dogs. But the Shies in

the tapes were definitely talking.

"Mowza want fruit?" asked Joanna's voice on a typical tape.

"Mowza want, yes. Give Mowza, give Mowza," answered the scratchy, childish voice of one of Joanna's subjects.

For about a week, everyone was delighted. A life-form smart enough for speech! But our excitement died down sooner than you'd expect. From Joanna's own reports, we gathered that the Shies didn't really have a language of their own, that they had learned to speak chiefly as a way to earn the fruit she had gathered. They had generally poor memories and could learn only a small vocabulary. They didn't really have a culture, not in any sense we could recognize. It looked as though we hadn't yet discovered a new consciousness with which to compare our own, at least not one that we could converse with freely. Since most of us still had a lot of work to do just trying to determine how we could earn the right to stay on this planet, the talking Shies were soon no big deal to anyone but Joanna, who stayed in the field with them more and more and left me more and more alone.

My own crew created another stir for a time when we found two hemispheres like the halves of some spherical canister buried four feet below the surface in a survey field. The things were corroded iron and very brittle. We thought at first that they must be artifacts. Then we found more, and they were so uniformly featureless -- no hinges or clasps or anything to show that they were ever attached to one another -- and there was so much other iron evident in that area, that we started to ask ourselves whether they could be naturally occurring, and the stir about our "archaeological" find soon died down.

About this time I started a part of my own work that could basically run itself. My crew and I had taken some surface mineral samples to calibrate my survey satellite, and now all we had to do was turn the thing on for a while and let the computers on board the Kepler record and analyze the data that came in as the satellite made repeated passes over all of Veloz. In other words, we had time on our hands, and I started to look for something to do. So I climbed domewoods.

I haven't said much about the trees on Veloz, but they were tremendous. From the enormous towertrees to spindlelegs and walking arches, the forest was a maze of trunks. But the most spectacular tree was one without a trunk. Or maybe you could say the domewood was nothing *but* trunk.

Domewoods were rare, probably because they had a hard time starting on the low light of the forest floor. They began as little red knobs springing up through the black soil. If they happened to start in a spot with enough light, they would begin to spread out in all directions like a stain, except that they grew in thickness as well. They grew slowly, but irresistibly, and at their edges they knocked over other trees. Once they got going, they could grow to enormous proportions. Not far from our camp, there was one that was over a kilometer across. Its outer edges ran up like red wooden cliffs from the forest floor.

We had used the translucent inner bark of the domewood for construction. It dried into tough, glassy plates. The red outer bark was photosynthetic.

On my third day with little to do, I had one of my metallurgists make me some long steel spikes, and I took a heavy bag of them into the forest with me. I hammered in foot-and handholds and climbed, adding new holds as I needed them, until I could walk upright on the gradually decreasing slope.

It was wonderful, as I walked up toward the summit of the trees, to see the forest canopy spreading out beneath me. It was the first such view I had had of Veloz. After all, even though Mount Meeker rose from the forest floor near our camp, it was covered with trees. As far as I knew, I was the only person who had thought of climbing a domewood to get a look around. I was busy congratulating myself, when someone appeared over the horizon of the tree. Her back was to me as she stood looking out over the green expanse. It was Joanna.

Suddenly I could feel the weight of my boots crushing the domewood bark, and I felt my throat pulsing, could almost hear my heartbeat. When I was a little closer, I said, "Hi, Jo."

She started and turned. "David!" she said. She sounded like she really was happy to see me.

I motioned toward the canopy below us and at the domewood under our feet. "I thought I was the first."

She laughed. "I've been coming up here since the first time I came out chasing Shies."

"How do you get up?"

"There's a sloping section on the other side. I can walk up." She smiled. "I suppose you have a more technical approach."

I took out one of the spikes and showed it to her. She laughed.

"So how are your little shaggy friends?"

"Good," she said. "I'm getting more and more impressed with them."

"Oh?"

"There's more to them than I thought," she said. "They have something like a religion."

I nodded, but I wasn't really hearing what she was saying. I was trying to think of what I could say that would bring her back to me. Everything I thought of sounded trite and abrupt.

"Or maybe not exactly a religion," she went on. "It's nothing systematic, nothing very abstract. But they have a sense of the sacred. It's fascinating."

I nodded.

"And there seem to be two distinct groups of Shies in the area where I'm camped. There are some surprising differences between them. For example, my Shies, the ones I talk to, don't have any trouble with lightning dogs. The dogs ignore them, just like they ignore us. The other day I saw a lightning dog jump over one of the Shies I talk to in order to chase a Shy from the other group."

"Interesting," I said. We all wore the same blue work togs on Veloz, colonial issue. They weren't exactly carefully tailored, but Joanna made hers look pretty good.

"And the other Shies won't talk. They won't get close to me. I can't help feeling sometimes that I'm seeing two different species. Ferals and talkers. Animals in one group, and in the other... In the other, people. I get the strangest feeling when I talk to some of my Shies, that they have submerged intelligence, powers of thought that are something like ours, only sleeping. And sometimes they say the strangest things to me, like they're trying to tell me something very elaborate with the small vocabulary they've learned."

"Interesting," I said again. And that was all I said. A hundred days ago, on the ship, we had been intimate, day after ship's day, and now my tongue was tied.

"How are you, David? How's your own investigation coming?"

"Oh," I said, thinking. You're blowing this, David. "It's fine. Nothing spectacular. Nothing unexpected."

"Something I like about the Shies," she said, "is that a lot of what I encounter is unexpected. I'm really having a lot of fun."

"Learning anything useful?" Right after I said it, I realized how it sounded.

She turned away, and her shoulders tensed. "Not everything of value turns a profit."

"That's not what I meant," I said, but now that I had started this, it was like something that I couldn't stop. "I've just been thinking a lot lately in terms of whether the colony is going to succeed or not. My surveys haven't shown any special mineral wealth. I'm worried. It's been on my mind."

"Yes," she said. "It would be. We're in this strange and beautiful place, and all you think about is turning a profit."

"That's not all I think about," I said. "I'm here, right? You think I climbed up here to find a way to make money?"

She turned toward me, and her face lost some of its tension, but what she said was, "I don't know."

"Jo, I'm here to make a new start, to find a new way to live." I stepped closer and put an arm on her shoulder. "I want to make enough money to earn the right to stay here. And then I want to leave all of that behind. I want life here to be different."

She turned around, and I stood behind her, looking over the tops of the trees. Her hair smelled like rain. Finally she said, "Be getting dark soon." And she walked away toward the far end of the domewood without looking back.

That was the last I saw of her until after my crew made the strike in rare metals.

It all happened so quickly. We had been getting computer reports day after day with numbing monotony. There was nothing exciting, nothing hopeful in the mineral profile of the planet's surface. We were a little glum, because the word was out from Susan Suhl's group that the biota of Veloz wasn't

going to make us rich anytime soon, and so it was more important than ever that we find an exploitable mineral deposit. But we couldn't just will a promising deposit into existence, and the survey was almost complete.

Then one afternoon, while my chief assistant, Fom Mah, and I played chess and only half-listened to the computer's voice, the machine started to sing out the mineral profile for the region under Mount Meeker:

"...Gallium, point-oh-five...."

Had the computer said Gallium? I got up to check the screen.

"....Mercury, point-oh-seven...."

Mercury on Veloz? In that high a concentration?

"...Chromium, two-point-six...."

Chromium! Now there was something we could use!

"...Platinum, point-oh-nine...."

The sensors were malfunctioning. That had to be it. As more unlikely metal concentrations kept coming from the computer's voice, we started to order a new test for another nearby region, one that we were sure of, to recalibrate the satellite. We transmitted a signal that reset the satellite orbit so that it would pass over Mount Meeker again.

We played chess and waited nearly three hours for the next satellite pass. It had to be a calibration slip, I thought, but I also thought that maybe, just maybe the readings were accurate. Then we heard the computer's bell-like voice again: "Sector Aleph Aleph, two by forty-seven, second reading.... Gallium, point-oh-five.... Mercury, point-oh-seven.... Chromium, two-point-six...." One metal after another, on and on.

I looked at Fom. He looked at me. It didn't make a lot of geochemical sense, but there it was. We started to laugh. The colony was rich!

News spread fast. Technically, we were supposed to hold a meeting of all colonists to determine what course of economic development the colony would take once all of us had finished our research, but the minerals report made it seem like only one choice was possible, even before we had heard from Suhl or the others.

Suddenly we were refitting equipment for mining and building a road to Mount Meeker. It just started happening, and everyone seemed relieved.

Everyone, that is, except Joanna.

She burst into my hut out of the rain one morning, soaked and mad. "What the hell do you people think you're doing?" she demanded.

I managed to say something impressive like, "Huh?"

She was so angry, it took her a moment to find her words. "I come back from the Shies to get resupplied," she said at last, "and on my way, I hear particle cutters shrieking."

Shrieking was a good word for it. The cutters used sound to maintain a vacuum around the particle beam. We had all been wincing at that high-pitched peal since the road clearing had begun just outside the camp. Even at a distance, the sound was grating.

"So just outside of camp, I run into a road-clearing operation. I ask around, and I find out the colony's going to mine Mount Meeker." She shook her head, raining droplets of water. "Mount Meeker!" She glowered at me. "The road crew said it was on your recommendation!"

"Joanna, slow down a little," I said.

"You want me to slow down? Slow down your damn road crew, then. They're felling trees with particle cutters like there's some kind of race to get to the mountain. We have five *years* to make a profit, David. Five years!"

"Would you please tell me why this is such a big deal?" I said.

"I'd have told everyone, if you had given me a chance. Why didn't someone come get me for the governance meeting?"

I put up my hands. "Because there hasn't been any governance meeting, Jo."

It was like I had pulled the plug on her. Her eyes went blank, and she said, "No meeting?"

"No."

"So it's not decided?"

I shrugged. "Everyone got a little excited. I guess we forgot about the formality."

"Formality!" Her eyes flushed again. "You wait here, David Balas. I'm going to want a word with you."

"Where are you going?" I said.

"To Meeker. He's going to call that meeting for tomorrow if he knows what's good for him. Don't even breathe until I get back, David. Don't even breathe."

If I did breathe, it was to offer thanks that I had never seen her quite so furious before.

* * *

When Joanna came back to my hut, she was still agitated, but not as angry. I offered her a drink.

"Thanks," she said. She held it up to the light. "What is it?"

"Rum," I said.

She sniffed it. "Ethyl alcohol?"

I nodded.

She arched her brow. "I would never have suspected you of drug addiction."

"I'm not addicted," I said. "I just have a little now and then, at special moments."

"Still," she said, "you took a big risk bringing a controlled substance on a colonial voyage."

"It's not a death-penalty drug. I'd spend a few nights in the brig if they caught me with it." I took a sip. It warmed my belly. I had been drinking since shortly after Joanna had stormed out, so my belly was pretty nicely warmed. I laughed at the thought.

"What?" Joanna said.

"Nothing." I patted the bottle. "Before we shipped out, I thought I might need this."

"So you are addicted."

"No. I don't mean it that way. I mean, I thought we might have been going someplace as bad as Earth, or worse. In that case I'd want to get good and drunk."

"What could be worse than Earth?" Joanna took a sip. "It does taste good."

"I think so."

"So are you drinking because Veloz disappoints you?"

I shook my head. "I love it here," I said. "I don't want to go back."

"So why are you drinking?"

"I've been sitting here thinking about your tirade of an hour ago." I took a swallow of rum. "I figure you've got something to say about Mount Meeker, something you know that means it isn't what we think it is, or that means we can't mine it."

"Not can't," she said. "Mustn't."

"Whatever," I said, tossing back the rest of the rum. "From what I've heard from Suhl and her people, mining is our best hope for making this colony pay off its charter."

"Best," said Joanna, "but not only."

"You've got a better idea?" I said.

She shook her head.

"So break the news to me, Joanna. Why can't we mine Mount Meeker?"

"I can't," she said. "It would take time and convincing, and I have to go back into the forest to try to do a different kind of convincing tonight."

"What are you talking about?"

"You'll see tomorrow. But before then, I have a favor to ask you. Something more than a favor, really."

I gestured expansively. "I'm all yours," I said. I felt the heat of the alcohol in my face. "What do you want me to do?"

"When we met on top of the domewood, you said you wanted life to be different."

I nodded.

"I do, too. I don't want us to make the kinds of mistakes here that people made on Earth."

I nodded again. My head felt a little loose on my neck.

"We were about to make a big mistake," Joanna said.

"Right. Tell me."

"Tomorrow. But right now I want to know how serious you were about making things different here."

"Dead serious. One hundred percent. Fullthrot." I'd have told her whatever I thought she wanted to hear. Oh Jojojojo, take me back, I thought. Take me into your arms again.

"Then tomorrow help me out," she said.

I nodded.

"I'm going to make a presentation. I'm going to try to get the colony to approve a delay in the mining, a delay of two years, say, to investigate other possibilities."

"Two years." I must have been glassy-eyed, but I guess if you've never seen someone drunk before, you don't notice the symptoms much. Anyway, Joanna didn't say anything if she did notice.

"David, I don't know if I'm going to be convincing, but I'm going to need your support. If you back me up, any way you can, it will mean a lot. You're the geology expert. If you can express some doubt about the project and support me a little, it's bound to throw votes my way. Please." Her mouth was red and wet.

I nodded. "Sure."

"Even if you find my argument unconvincing. Please, David. I'm dealing with something that's part gut feeling here. That's not going to be enough to convince the colony."

"You got it, Jo. Whatever you want. Fullthrot. Your eyes are pretty, you know?"

She gave me a sisterly hug. It was worse than no hug at all. "Thanks, David," she said. "See you tomorrow."

Then it was just me and the bottle.

* * *

The meeting was in the Glass House, Meeker's administrative headquarters and the one building big enough to hold everyone. We had built the frame out of black towertree lumber, and paneled most of the exterior walls with the translucent inner bark of domewood.

My head was pounding. I wished we had built the Glass House out of something opaque. The light felt like knife blades at the back of my eyes.

I sat there listening to people talk as they filed in. A few people were a little put off about having the meeting. After all, what was there to decide? But most of them didn't seem to mind.

The governor came in with the three co-governors. Meeker was wearing his colonial uniform, which he rarely did. The others hadn't bothered, and wore the same blue togs as the rest of us. Meeker's sidearm, an old projectile weapon, looked strangely out of place in its holster, a ceremonial relic of another century.

I noted that even Captain Rhamal had come for this. He and his crew seldom left the Kepler, as though they liked living in that tin can all the time.

Suddenly the buzz of conversation stopped. Everyone was turning toward the door. I turned.

There in the doorway stood Joanna. Beside her, reaching its furry hand to hers, was a Shy. The animal was shaking and grinning like a madman. Joanna said a few soft words to it, and the Shy walked into the room with her.

Nobody said anything as Joanna helped the Shy to climb into a seat near the front of the room. It looked around the room at us, from face to face, grinning so hard I thought its lips would split. Someone -- Susan Suhl, I think -- had told me that Shies grinned when they were anxious.

Joanna looked at me as if to say, *You still with me on this?* My tongue felt like it was pasted to the roof of my mouth. I avoided her gaze.

"Well," Meeker said. He waited for us to look at him. "Well. I don't mind telling you that this meeting is

largely a formality." He looked at Joanna. "But we are technically required to assemble and vote on an economic plan for the colony, so here we are."

The Shy beside Joanna yawned and scratched and went right on grinning. The morning rain started to patter on the roof.

"As far as I know," the governor continued, "there is only one verified source for paying off our charter debt. If we fail to pay it off, I don't have to tell you what it will mean."

It meant Earth. It meant being dirty and hungry and crowded all the time. It meant eating synthmeals when you could get them, breathing through catalyzers, and not going outside without a UV screen. It meant living every day with the violence that an overcrowded, dying planet bred. Worst of all, for most of us, it meant boredom.

"What about the planet's biota?" Joanna said. "This is an unusually rich planet, isn't it?"

Meeker said, "Dr. Suhl?"

Susan Suhl stood up. "Veloz is unusual, but hardly rich," she said. I wished the rain weren't so loud on the roof. "The life-forms are chemically dissimilar from us. Bizarre, actually, compared to other planets. Though the plants and animals here are made of elements in roughly the same proportion as life on Earth, many of the basic chemical structures are not analogous. We may eventually isolate some useful compounds, but on Veloz we will first have to relearn our basic biochemistry. It's going to take time, and we may come up empty, especially since we don't have many species to work with. So far, it appears there are only about five hundred different species on the planet. That may sound like a lot, but it includes insect analogues and microorganisms."

Joanna's Shy started to sway from side to side now, and it was eyeing the door. Joanna put her hand on its head. It clutched her fingers and stopped swaying.

"How long do you think it might take," she said, "to find something valuable?"

Suhl shook her head. "No way of knowing."

"No way of knowing. But you aren't up to the challenge, are you, Dr. Suhl?"

Suhl blinked. "Pardon?"

Joanna looked around the room. "Our first estimates were that this colony could pay its way through biological discoveries. Now things look tough, and the chief biologist wants to bail out."

Meeker said, "Carpaccio, you're out of line!"

The Shy jumped at the sound of the man's voice. Joanna stroked the fuzzy head. "Sorry," she said. She looked at Suhl. "I do apologize. I'm just trying to establish that the biological avenue of research hasn't been exhausted yet. Has it, Susan?"

Suhl shook her head. "Not by any means."

"Thank you," Joanna said. "And I do apologize. I was out of line."

Suhl smiled a little warily and sat down.

"Well," said Meeker, "the point is that the biological approach is uncertain, whereas we have a proven source of profit in the research Dr. Balas has done. Balas?"

My tongue was thick. I wasn't sure I could move it.

"Balas," said Meeker impatiently, "report."

"I think," I said, feeling the words fall like marbles from my mouth, "I think everyone knows what I found."

"Yes," said Meeker, "but we haven't had it officially yet, have we? Report, mister!"

What an officious ass, I thought.

"All right." I cleared my throat, but it still felt like it was stuffed with cotton. "Based on my satellite survey, Veloz is mostly unpromising for mining. The remote scan showed that for a depth of two kilometers, the range of my sensors, the planet is composed chiefly of silicates and aluminum ores. There's a iron-nickel layer underneath that is in evidence at some point on or near the surface. Under that, who knows what makes this little ball so massive?" I looked at Meeker. "Could someone get me some water?"

"Just finish," Meeker said.

I cleared my throat again. "The point is that the elements that are rare in our home system are present

in traces too small to be worth the expense of export. So overall, this is a poor planet for mining." I looked at Joanna. "Except for Mount Meeker." The Shy was watching me with its dark, round eyes. How much did it understand of what was going on?

"Sky Mountain," Joanna said.

"Pardon?"

"Sky Mountain. The proper name, the Shy name, is Sky Mountain."

A couple of people chuckled.

"O.K.," I said. "Sky Mountain. Anyway, it's an anomaly. Under a layer of unremarkable silicates, my subsurface survey revealed a tremendous collection of metals there: gallium, mercury, chromium...."

It really is an anomaly, I thought. What's all this stuff doing lumped together like that? I rubbed my temples.

"Dr. Balas?"

I looked up at Meeker.

I rifled through my notes. My hand was shaking ever so slightly. Rum was illegal for good reasons.

"Gold," I read from the sheet I was looking for, "and silver, tin, zinc, thallium, manganese, germanium, cobalt, titanium. A few others in smaller concentrations. They're not all rare back home, but some of them are. And we have them in sufficient quantities to turn a very large profit very quickly."

"I like that phrase," Meeker said: "large profit very quickly."

About half the people in the room laughed.

"How certain are you," Joanna said, "that the metals are there?"

"Absolutely certain. We double-checked our readings, and we repeated them again two days ago to be absolutely sure. The goods are down there. We just have to get them out."

"And how long would we have to work, probably, to get the metals out, refine them, and start them on their way home?"

"A year," I said. There was a happy murmur in the room. "Maybe a year and a half."

"Then let's wait," Joanna said.

The murmur stopped.

"Wait?" said Meeker.

Joanna nodded. "Let's give Dr. Suhl and the others a chance to find an alternative resource."

The murmur picked up again. "But what on earth for?" Meeker said above the voices.

The Shy swayed under Joanna's hand. "For the sake of the Shies," Joanna said.

"I don't get it," I said.

Joanna shot me a glance that said, *You're supposed to be on my side.*

"I'd like Mowza to help me explain," Joanna said.

Then a small, scratchy voice said, "Pacho, Mowza talk now?"

And all fell silent. We had heard Shies speak, but on Joanna's audio chips, never live and in person like this.

"Everyone," Joanna said, "this is Mowza. I hope you'll all appreciate what an act of will it has been for him to come into an open place like this, to be around so many Bigs, as he calls us." Chuckles. "But he has an important message to share, and he knows it.

"O.K.," she said to the creature. "Mowza talk now with Carpaccio."

The creature grinned at us.

"Who these?" Joanna said, indicating us.

"Big. Far far, Pacho."

"Yes. Big people from far away."

"Far far. Longtime."

"Yes, it took us a long time to get here. Mowza, tell us about Sky Mountain."

The Shy sniffed the air. "Sky," he said. "Mountain." He spread his fuzzy arms. "All."

"Sky Mountain is important?"

"Sky. Mountain. All."

"Mowza, why is Sky Mountain important?"

"Sky Mountain not, Mowza not. Sky Mountain not, light dog not. Sky Mountain not, tree not, fruit not."

"Everything depends on Sky Mountain?"

The Shy scratched itself. "All."

"O.K.," Joanna said. "Thank you, Mowza."

The Shy tugged at her hand. It was like the gesture of an impatient child, and people laughed again. Mowza grinned at the sound and hunched his shoulders. Then he said, "Mowza talk now."

"Yes, you did," Joanna said, looking around at us to see what we had made of the presentation.

"Mowza talk now!" Mowza tugged hard at her hand.

"Talk more?" Joanna said.

"Talk now!" The face looked as serious as it could with those round, liquid eyes.

"O.K.," Joanna said. "What else?"

"Sky Mountain not," the Shy said. "Mowza go far far." The Shy curled up at her feet. "Far far," it said from the floor of the Glass House. Then Mowza stood up. "Pacho close now, close now." He frowned. He looked at the rest of us like he knew he was having trouble getting his message across. "Big, close now, close now." Then he put his paws on his chest. "Mowza close now, far now. Mowza close now, big far now." What was it like, I wondered, inside that fuzzy body? How did things look to him, seeing through those big, round eyes?

Joanna frowned, and Mowza took her hand again. "Mowza go," he said, and he closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he looked like a man waking from a nightmare to find the ghosts of his dream, still standing in his bedroom. He looked at us, then blinked, and I don't think that what I saw in his face was anything less than terror. Suddenly he was already half-way to the door. He paused for half a heartbeat in the doorway to look back at Joanna, and then he was gone. The Shy's usual speed seemed all the more astonishing after we had seen it sitting in the room with us, slowed down to something like our own pace. It must have indeed been an act of will for the animal to sit so still.

I remember what Joanna had said on the domewood about the two kinds of Shies, the ferals and the talkers. Now I knew what she was talking about, but I had just seen it in one creature. When he had been talking, mowza had been like a person. And then, as though someone had thrown a switch, he turned into a wild animal that was horrified to find itself in an enclosed area with so many strange creatures. I looked at the people sitting around me. I knew exactly how he felt.

Meeker shifted in his seat. "Interesting little show, Dr. *Pacho*."

Laughter.

For once, Meeker did seem manipulative to me. He was belittling her before we even knew what this was about. Joanna rolled with it nicely, though, giving Meeker a curt stage bow.

"And now for the exegesis," Joanna said.

"The what?"

Joanna smiled. "We've just heard a religious promulgation from my friend. Now for the explanation." She looked around at us. No one was laughing. We all wanted to hear this.

Meeker said, "I thought you had been telling everyone that the Shies hadn't developed to the level of culture, of social organization."

"They haven't. Not to any degree that we'd recognize as such. Actually, I'm not talking about religion; I'm talking about protoreligion, about a primitive sense of the sacred." Joanne folded her arms. "Sky Mountain is sacred to the Shies."

Murmurs around the room.

Meeker rapped on the table with his knuckles. I could see he regretted not having a gavel.

"Hold on," he said when he had our attention. "Dr. Carpaccio, I don't believe I heard a word of religion in your little animal's speech."

"I don't think 'animal' is quite the right term to apply to a Shy," Joanna said. "And you heard the whole of Shy cosmology just now. 'Sky Mountain all,' Mowza told us. Sky Mountain is everything, a totemic god. He told us that if Sky Mountain ceases to exist, then so will he and the lightning dogs and everything else alive. If the Mountain is gone, he'll curl up and go far far. That's how the Shies talk about death."

"What was all that business about Mowza close now, far now?" I asked.

"I don't know," Joanna said. "He's been telling me all of that for several weeks, but I can't make sense of it. It seems like he's saying that the other bigs and I are close all the time, but that he is close sometimes and far away sometimes, or that he is close and far away at the same time. I know it doesn't make sense. I've been spending a lot of time trying to figure it out. Mowza keeps telling me about it over and over. It's as though he understands a concept that's more elaborate than he knows how to express."

"How about that bit about, 'Mowza close now, big far now'?" I said. "We're in the same room with him, but he says that he's close and we're far?"

Joanna shrugged. "Maybe it has nothing to do with distance. Mowza makes analogies. He can't remember the word for 'fist,' so he says 'fruit' instead, I guess because they're the same size and shape. So he might not mean 'near' or 'far' at all. I wish he could learn a more elaborate vocabulary, but Shies top out at about a hundred words."

"These little guys are smarter than you first thought," I said.

"Yes," Joanna said. "Mowza may have a limited vocabulary, but I think that he managed to express the thought that Sky Mountain is at the heart of Shy belief. Mining the mountain would be like digging for gold under a cathedral."

Murmurs again, and Meeker rapped once more on the table. "Dr. Carpaccio," he said, "are you seriously asking us to jeopardize the success of this colony for the sake of a little monkey prophet?"

Laughter again. Joanna took it well.

"Not jeopardize. Delay." She gestured like a lawyer with her hands. "Look," she said, "we all left Earth because the place is a mess. It's a mess because we didn't respect it, and we didn't respect those who did respect it. If we had thought of the planet as something sacred, we might have taken better care of it."

Meeker nodded, "Yes," he said, "we've learned that lesson. All of the colonies have environmental protocols to follow."

"For the protection of the biota," Joanna said. "Not for the good of any intelligent species we happen to encounter. There isn't a protocol for that."

"What's this about?" Meeker said. "You want to protect the religious beliefs of some talking animals?"

Not everyone laughed at that one. I didn't.

"I want to try," Joanna said. "I want us to delay mining the mountain until we've exhausted our other options. Or for just two years, say, out of respect to our Shy neighbors."

Now everybody was talking. "Two years?" someone near me was saying. "But if we mine now, we can be free and clear in a year."

"I don't know," I heard from someone else. "It sounds reasonable to me."

Meeker was rapping on the table again, and then he pounded with his fist. "Attention!" he demanded. He stood up. "Attention!"

The conversation petered out.

"People," he said, "I don't know about you, but I don't want to go home. Some nights I can't sleep because I'm worried, worried about the future of this colony."

There were murmurs of agreement.

"Now, we know we have a chance to end our anxieties. We can dig for gold and gallium in Mount Meeker. But frankly, I won't start sleeping well until the first shipment of metal is receipted for and on its way home. It's all very good to say we can wait two years, but while the stuff is still in the ground, I'm going to have nightmares thinking that we'll wait until the last minute, dig into the mountain, and find out Dr. Balas and his team were wrong."

"Balas," said someone in the crowd behind me, "how sure are you that the stuff is down there?"

I had forgotten my headache. Now it pounded back into my temples. "It's down there."

I looked at Meeker, my can-do man. Bastard. All Joanna wanted was a little delay.

"The readings are right. My team has triple-checked them." I turned around. "I recommend delay. It can't hurt. I looked at Susan. "Dr. Suhl?"

"Damn it, I'm chairing this meeting," Meeker said.

Suhl ignored him. "I'm willing to give it a try," she said. "One discovery of the right kind could be tremendously profitable. Who knows?"

"Could be. Might be. Maybe. Who knows?" said Meeker. He was losing. If the vote had come right then, Joanna would have had her delay.

"Listen," Meeker said. He lowered his voice so we had to strain to hear him. "I was a wealthy man on Earth. I had a big job with ColAdmin." He dropped his voice even lower, as though he were choking on emotion. "Let me tell you about my apartment. It was top floor, with a window. True, the only view I had was of the brick wall across the alley. But a window!"

Meeker took a deep breath. Rain pattered above us. "My place was big. I could almost stand up in it, and it had two rooms, a four mat and a six mat. I had a cooker that I owned, and once a month I had frozen meat. As I said, I was a rich man."

I could feel the mood shifting around me.

"You look outside for a moment at what we have here," Meeker said. "Eventually we'll be growing food here. Growing it. And you can walk across a whole world now, walk outdoors without shielding, without breathing through a catalyzer. You think for a moment about what you used to have. I know none of you had it as soft as I did. You think about delay, about digging into that mountain at the last minute and finding that Balas is wrong."

"I'm not wrong!" My voice sounded too loud, too defensive.

"Let's take that vote," Meeker almost whispered.

Susan and Joanna and I voted for delay, along with a handful of others. But Meeker had known our worst fears. He had known what buttons to push. We were going to open up Mount Meeker to see for ourselves what was in there. The Shies would have to find a new totem. Meeker was smiling as he unloaded the audio chip of the meeting. He gave it to Captain Rhamal, who went back and logged it aboard the Kepler.

I went to Joanna to console her. "I'm not going to let it happen," she said.

"We voted," I said. "It's over."

"Like hell. Don't you see how important this is?"

"Joanna, maybe you can explain to the Shies, help them see that this is inevitable."

She shook her head and started out of the Glass House. I thought of following her, but I didn't.

* * *

I should have. Fifteen minutes later we heard a high-pitched sound coming from the forest. A particle cutter.

Meeker looked around the room. "Carpaccio!" he said, and we all knew what he was thinking. The next thing I knew, I was at the head of the whole colony, running toward the end of the road we had started to build.

She had turned the cutter on our vehicles. The tread roller had a slice right down the middle of it, and she had cut the manipulator arm from one of the utility crawlers so that it lay in the mud like an amputated claw.

"Jo!" I said.

She turned the cutter my way. The barrel leaked blue-light interference, and the accelerator hummed on her back.

"Jo," I said more quietly.

"Not another step, David. I'm going to finish this."

Other people were standing behind me now.

"Joanna," I said. "This isn't the way."

Behind me I heard Meeker join the group. "Bring me," he said, puffing. "Bring me one of the other cutters."

Joanna turned, and the cutter shrieked. She started to slice across the crawler's motor section like she was splitting a synthpotato.

"She cut 'em," I heard someone shout to the governor over the scream of the cutter.

"What?"

"The other cutters. She sliced them right down the middle. Must have been the first thing she destroyed."

"Damn."

"What about your gun, Governor? Do you know how to use it?"

Then Meeker was shouldering his way past me, the antique projectile weapon in his hand.

"No!" I shouted. "Let me talk to her!"

But the gun had already gone off, blasting the air with a sound even louder than the cutter.

I don't know if it was luck or expertise, but Meeker hit her. And I don't know if it was mercy or bad aim, but he hit her in the leg and not somewhere more vital. The beam of the cutter flashed across the trees as she fell, and then the beam switched off as she released the safety trigger.

It was quiet except for the ringing in my ears. Nobody moved. Joanna lay in the mud, still gripping the cutter nozzle. Somewhere in the trees close by, a Shy chattered.

"Somebody go retrieve that cutter," Meeker said.

Nobody moved.

I took a step forward. "Jo?"

She looked up at me, dazed. "Bastard shot me," she said.

I nodded and stepped closer. I bent and pulled the accelerator out of its frame and took the nozzle from her hand.

Very quietly, she said, "Shoot him, David."

I looked at Meeker. He still had the gun in his hand.

"Shoot him, David. They'll listen if you shoot him."

I thought about it. She might be right. After all of this, if somebody blasted Meeker, it might slow things down again. Everyone might rethink what this colony should be about. We were making a bad start of things. Joanna was right about that.

Then again, maybe nothing would change.

Either way, I'd be a murderer. I didn't like Meeker so much anymore, but kill him?

"No," I said.

Joanna's voice was cold. She said, "Coward."

* * *

I visited Joanna every day in the brig aboard the Kepler. She didn't talk a lot, but I think she looked forward to my visits. Every day, like a condemned prisoner asking about the approach of her execution, she asked me how the mining was coming along.

The answer was always the same: slow, but as expected. We had salvaged parts from the four cutters she had damaged, and had patched together a second unit. But with three cutters gone and two vehicles out of commission, it took us quite a while to get to the mountain, much less start to dig in it. I'm ashamed to say that I didn't think about the Shies and their problems very much. Once we got under way, I started thinking like a miner. I wanted to get to the core of the mountain to see what we had, and that's all I thought about. I guess some of the doubts Meeker had planted in the other colonists had taken root in me, too.

So we dug, and we dug, and we dug.

One afternoon while I was down in the shaft, we broke through the outer layer and started hitting metal. It was mostly iron and nickel at first. I figured we had a ways to go yet, but nobody wanted to knock off at our usual quitting time. We kept working through the night.

When we hit a thick vein of titanium, I went to the surface to eat. The sun was coming up. I was tired and not thinking too clearly, but that's when I really should have slowed down. I should have wondered about how titanium could occur naturally like that, in a big elemental deposit. But I was too tired and too excited to think.

When I went back down the hole, we were close enough to the core that my hand-held sensor could give me a very precise reading on what was ahead. We were about to hit the mother lode.

We kept digging. And then I started getting strange readings.

The metals we were after started to recede from us, according to my sensor. The more titanium we sliced away, the farther my sensor told me we had to go. I figured I had a faulty power supply, but when I went up topside and tested the thing, it checked out.

The men working with the cutters were giving me dirty looks when I went back down. They were even more tired than I was. Earlier I had told them we had twenty meters to go. They had just cut through fifteen, and now I looked at my sensor and said they had twenty-five meters to go.

Fom Mah came down the shaft then and told me Joanna wanted to see me.

"Tell her we're about to break through to the good stuff," I said. "I can't go now."

We cut through the twenty-five meters in an hour. Now, at least, the sensor said we had only five meters to go.

Fom was back at the end of the hour with a note from Joanna. It said:

Vital that I see you now! If I ever meant anything to you, this is the time to show it. Talk to me before you get to the mountain's core.

Bleary-eyed for lack of sleep, I checked the sensor again. It said we had twelve meters to go. And behind the twelve new meters of titanium? I shook the sensor like it was a broken radio. Where was our gold, our gallium, our germanium? The sensor said we were digging our way to a big deposit of... hydrogen.

All right, damn it. I'd go see Joanna. I was grateful for the chance to turn this over to someone else for a while.

"Take over," I told Fom.

"Hey," he called as I left.

I turned.

"Leave me the sensor."

I shook my head. "It's broken," I told him, and took it with me.

* * *

Joanna was sitting by the viewscreen in her cell, watching the towertrees at the edge of the compound sway gently in the breeze. Her leg was in a cast with little pink lights that flashed on and off as microcurrents of electricity worked to speed up her recovery.

She looked up and saw me gazing at the cast.

"Thinking it's an extravagance for a criminal like me?"

"Not at all."

"Have a seat." I sat on the other cushioned chair beside the viewscreen. The brig was pretty comfortable, considering.

"Thanks for coming," Joanna said. She smiled a tired smile. "You gave it a good shot at the governance meeting. I never thanked you."

"I'm sorry, Jo."

"Seen any Shies around the work site?"

I shook my head.

"I'm not surprised," she said. "They're probably terrified."

"I think you were right, Joanna," I told her. "I don't agree with everything you did, but you were right. We should have waited."

I considered her face. So pretty. She was going to go home alone, though. Back to Earth. To prison. Not that prison on Earth was a lot different than being free there. I sighed and looked at the viewscreen.

"David, I've had a lot of time to think," she said. "I think more may be at stake than the Shies. I have a theory. The mountain may be more than a sacred site. A lot more. So far, it's pure speculation, but I think that before you resume digging...."

"Resume!" I said. "We're still digging right now. I left Fom in charge. Didn't he tell you that we were almost through to the core?"

"I told you to see me before you broke through!" Joanna said.

"I didn't know you meant to stop digging. What's wrong?"

Joanna stood up, wincing. "Radio Fom!" she said. "Stop him!"

The viewscreen behind her flared white -- on the blink, I thought, but Joanna turned toward the light and stared. Then, very quietly, she said, "No."

An alarm sounded so loudly that I sprang to my feet by reflex. The ship clanged with the sound of metal doors slamming.

"What is it?" I said. "Joanna, what's happening?"

She stared at the screen.

I stuck my head out of the cell door. One of the Kepler's crew members shoved me back into the room as he ran by. "Stay here," he said.

"What's up?" I said, sticking my head out again.

"Radiation surge," he called over his shoulder. "Stay put!"

I thought, The ship is leaking radiation, and he wants me to stay put?

But the radiation, as it turned out, was outside the ship. Behind me, Joanna said, "Look, David."

She was pointing to the screen. I looked at the picture, but I wasn't sure what I was seeing. Wind like I had never known on Veloz was tearing through the towertrees, tearing off their limbs. The trees at the edge of the compound started falling over, more and more of them, as though the wind was increasing in force. The light was strangely blue.

"What is it?" I said. "What's happening?"

Joanna shook her head and said, "How could we have been so stupid?"

The alarm stopped sounding, and I could hear the sound of the wind outside the Kepler. It sounded like it had when we had broken the atmosphere months ago to land.

I went to the door again.

"Where are you going?" Joanna said.

"The bridge."

When I arrived, I found everything strangely calm, except that the same picture of chaos appeared on the main viewscreen. In fact, it was exactly the same view that the screen in Joanna's cell had, which was a bit disorienting. Most of the trees were down now. The light kept flaring up, and the screen kept adjusting to compensate. Rhamal sat at his post while crew members read off numbers to him.

"Ambient pressure is point-four atmospheres and dropping," said a man on his right.

"Temperature is three-sixty absolute and climbing," said a woman.

"What the hell is going on?" I asked Rhamal.

He swiveled in his chair. "Identify yourself."

"David Balas, chief physicist. What's happening?"

Rhamal turned away from me. "As a physicist, Balas, you must have appreciated how strange the radiation levels were here on Veloz."

"Yes," I said.

"Well, you don't have to worry about that anomaly any longer," the captain said. "Everything is returning to normal."

"What?"

"Check for yourself." He indicated that bank of instruments that his crew members were reading to him.

I checked. He was right. Veloz was returning very quickly to normal.

Normal. The star Veloz revolved around was a class F5, over five times as bright as the sun. But Veloz was a lot closer to its primary than the Earth is to Sol. Twice as close. So the radiation was twenty times as intense. The planet was frying, the atmosphere expanding explosively in the sudden heat.

"Gravity down another ten," someone reported.

"Increased mooring," said Rhamal.

Gravity down? Ten? On what scale? I thought. Gravity down? But then I thought of something else.

"There are people out there!" I said.

"Were," said Rhamal.

"Working on the mine.... I just came from there!"

"Think of the UV radiation," Rhamal said. "It's too late. They're gone."

"But in the mine....," I said. "They'd be shielded."

"Three sixty-five absolute," said a voice.

"It's almost hot enough to boil sea-level water," Rhamal said. "But the pressure is way down as well. They're gone, Mr. Balas."

Gone. He said it so calmly. One hundred and thirty-eight men and women. Gone.

I looked at the viewscreen as Rhamal changed the angle of the picture. There was nothing left of our compound. Not a board. It had all blown away.

One hundred and thirty-eight men and women.

And my next thought was: I should have cut Meeker to ribbons.

* * *

We're on our way home now. We've had some long talks with Captain Rhamal, Joanna and I have. We've been cooking up a theory. Rhamal's a smart man. What Joanna hadn't already figured out, he helped us to piece together.

Before we left, we made a pass over Sky Mountain. We couldn't really see into the shaft, but at the mouth of the mine along with what was left of the equipment and a few bodies, we could see two yellowish chunks of glittering... stuff. I'm not sure whether to call it metal. It gave a different reading to the ship's sensors every time we tried to check it out, just as it had confused my hand-held sensor. But it was solid and stable enough that Fom and the others had carried some samples up before the thing that it was part of broke down. We had hit the mother lode. We had destroyed whatever lay under Sky Mountain.

Somebody had built the mountain. Clearly, it was someone a lot more advanced than the Shies.

Sky Mountain artificially increased the planet's gravity to help it hold an atmosphere. No, I don't know how. It managed the radiation on the surface in some way we can't even guess at so that the weather everywhere was predictable and mild. And the mountain protected certain Shies from predators, did everything necessary to keep them safe and happy. But the mountain's builders hadn't counted on us, and the mountain didn't know how to keep us from digging it open.

The Shies themselves, and the lightning dogs, and the planet's entire biota had been imported, and the whole planet was maintained to suit the needs of that single exological community. I had found the shipping containers, perhaps, in the iron hemisphere my crew and I dug up.

Mowza had understood something about how Sky Mountain worked. I remembered that he had sniffed after he said Sky, and Joanna said that, come to think of it, he had always done that. Sky Mountain. Atmosphere Mountain.

And all that stuff he said about *Mowza close now, far now?* That thing about, *Mowza close now, big far now?*

This is Joanna's idea. I think it's a good one. She thinks Mowza was trying to tell us what he was.

Mowza was a puppet.

Well, not a puppet, exactly. More like a hotel.

What I mean is that Mowza, the Shy, was a little preverbal animal on the order, like Meeker had said, of a monkey. And somewhere there was a being, a member of the race that had come and built Sky Mountain, that was inhabiting his body. Somewhere a being heard what Mowza heard, saw what Mowza saw, and at least partly controlled what Mowza did. That means simultaneous communication over a great distance. It breaks universal law as we understand it. Well, so what? If we ever find out what made Sky Mountain work, I bet we'll have to repeal some other universal laws.

Mowza was trying to tell us about this, but the being that partly controlled him had to communicate through something like a monkey brain. All he could say was *Mowza close now, big far now*. What you

call Mowza is close now, but there is also a part of Mowza that is a big, like you, and it's far away.

Hadn't we sensed it, Joanna and I? There were two kinds of Shies, the ferals and the talkers. And I had noticed that Mowza was sometimes like a person, sometimes like an animal.

So why would a superior race make such an arrangement? Joanna has an answer to that, too.

"Have you ever wanted to be a cat?" she asked me. "To feel what it's like to be inside a cat's skin? To see through a cat's eyes?"

Even on an impoverished Earth, people kept cats, partly, Joanna thinks, because we like to imagine being animals ourselves. People once even kept dogs as pets, thought they must have been very different from the packs that hunt in Earth cities now.

So somewhere an intelligent race looked at their pets and thought, What would it be like to be inside that furry body? Unlike us, they had the means to find out, and they liked the experience so much that they engineered an entire planet as an ideal Shy environment. The feral Shies were like spare parts, with lightning dogs to keep their population in check. And these intelligent beings projected themselves into the Shies as a respite from ordinary existence. As a vacation. And that's why Shies said that to die was to "go far far." When the animal died, the other part went home. I'm afraid that with our mining blunder, we sent a lot of vacationers packing.

I said Rhamaal is a smart man. He's more than that. After talking with us, he has somehow lost the audio chip that Meeker used to prefer charges against Joanna. Also, he announced to his crew that Joanna was on board at the time of the disaster as his personal guest.

"Anyone who remembers otherwise," he said, "had better check with me to have his or her status reviewed. I don't want to overpay any crew member with a faulty memory. It would be very bad for business."

He's going to recommend that we ship out with him on the next colonial voyage he makes. In fact, he's going to insist upon it.

And Joanna and me? I haven't given up hope. A couple ship-days ago, she said to me, "David, you're still pretty hard-nosed."

"I'm practical, if that's what you mean."

"That's exactly what I mean." She laughed. "But you know what?"

"What?"

"I think you're coming around," Joanna said. "And even though you aren't as cute as a Shy, you do have your points."

Published by [Alexandria Digital Literature](http://www.alexlit.com/). (http://www.alexlit.com/)

Return to .