

Like Banquo's Ghost



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On a hot, lovely fall day I drove out to Stardrive Laboratories. If all went well, that was the day the Snarkhunter #3 probe would send its final message from Alpha Centauri. The Times had assigned me to cover the event.

There were coffee and donuts in the anteroom. A diverse lot milled about and introduced each other and shook hands and talked. Pretty secretaries moved briskly through the crowd. I recognized people I'd talked to when I was here two months ago, and one I knew only from his picture. Jubal

Hendricks, Senior, had managed Stardrive Labs thirty years ago, when Snarkhunter #3 was launched. He'd retired just afterward, but here he was, emaciated and tottering, to watch his project's end.

I headed for the coffee table. The man everyone called Butch saw me coming and drew me a cup. He was five feet tall, the color of mahogany, his bright blond hair cut short in a butch cut.

"How good to see you again, Mr. Lane!" He pumped my hand with enthusiasm. "You do remember me?"

"Of course, Butch, very well indeed." I didn't remember his full name, but then,

nobody did. And nobody else seemed to want to talk to him. "How have you been?"

"Very well, Mr. Lane, despite my allergies. I have been taking shots."

"They seem to help," I said. Last time I'd seen him his nose had dripped constantly. "Your accent has improved too."

He laughed self-consciously. "It is nearly eight o'clock. Shall we move into the--" His tongue stumbled, and he had to point.

"The auditorium? Yes, let's."

Two months ago we'd been here to catch the first signals from the Snarkhunter #3 probe as it entered the vicinity of Alpha Centauri. The probe had been flying since before I was born, but that had been its first message since leaving the solar system. On that occasion it had switched itself on on schedule, then given us the sizes and locations of the Centaurus planets.

The speed of light barred us from controlling the Snarkhunter from Earth. The probe had been programmed to choose the planet most likely to be earthlike, and to home on it. We had named that planet Centaura, even before we knew it existed... thirty years ago,

when it was known only that the Centauri suns had planets.

Centaura did exist; we knew that now. For the last two months the Snarkhunter should have been moving toward it.

The auditorium hadn't changed much in that time. Stardrive Labs uses the same building for all its publicity on all the probes it currently has flying; but none of those probes had done anything interesting since the Snarkhunter's last report. There were seventy chairs with ashtrays fixed to the backs, set up to face a lighted screen. The screen showed a plot of the Sharkhunter's presumed position with respect to the planet Centaura. Arrows pointed in the

directions of Earth and Alpha Centauri A. Naturally the plot was 4.3 years out of date, due to light lag. Hanging from the ceiling were eight TV screens, each presently showing a diagram of the Alpha Centauri A system. In one corner of the big room was a blank sphere eight feet across, with a clear plastic hyperbola mounted near it. That was new.

Butch pointed. "The curve is the projected course of the Snarkhunter. Mr. Hendricks, Junior, tells me they will draw continents on the sphere as the data arrives."

"Naturally," I said. We found seats. I

manfully resisted the urge to smoke, that being one of Butch's allergies.

Time stopped.

I took my coffee in gulps. I'd been up at six o'clock, for the first time in years. My eyes felt gummy; my mouth was centuries old.

Most of the seats were empty. Even under the circumstances, the lack of excitement was remarkable. On screen were a blank circle and a hyperbola and a couple of arrows, and a little rectangle showing the time remaining until perihelion. The rectangle changed every five minutes, and a new point appeared on the hyperbola, showing the new

position of the Snarkhunter instrument package.

From time to time a blurred radio voice echoed in the auditorium.

"I am amazed," Butch said fervently. "To think that it has come so far! Do you think it will fulfill its purpose?"

"As you say, it's come this far."

"I cannot understand why there is so little excitement."

He couldn't, could he? "It's partly the time lag," I said. "Who can get excited about old news?"

"I suppose so. Still, so much hinges on the success of the project."

"My cap's empty. Can I get you some coffee?"

"Oh, no. No thank you."

I went out and filled my cup, then stayed in the anteroom to smoke a cigarette. Things were happening too slowly. Thirty years the probe had been on its way, but the hours it needed to round Centaura were far too long. Maybe Butch was getting on my nerves. Not his fault, of course. He was unfailingly polite. You couldn't quarrel with his enthusiasm; it was genuine. It only seemed a mockery. And I had to stick

with him. Butch's reactions were bigger news by far than the Snarkhunter itself.

I spent ten minutes by the coffee dispenser, waiting for interviewees. It was the one sure place to find anyone you wanted to see. I caught Hendricks, Senior, and Hendricks, Junior, Markham who had launched the Snarkhunter, and Duryodhana who ran the project now, and several others.

Butch couldn't stand coffee. What had he been doing out here by the coffee dispenser?

Just what I was doing, of course. Waiting for people to speak to him. And nobody wanted to.

I was heading for my seat when the radio cleared its throat.

"We are receiving the carrier wave from Snarkhunter. Snarkhunter has located Sol and is transmitting correctly. Repeat, location successful. We are now receiving Snarkhunter."

The air was full of a two-tone musical note, the sound of the carrier wave, low and sweet.

Butch was hugging his knees in delight. "Wonderful! What is it telling them? Why doesn't he say?"

"The Snarkhunter isn't saying anything," I told him. I'd gotten that information from

my interviews. "It's just a locator wave to alert us."

"What kind of wave is the probe using?"

"A light beam, a ruby laser. Hear that musical tone? That's the laser, translated into sound and then stepped down to the audible range."

The point on the screen moved another notch. Ten minutes to perihelion.

The radio voice said, "We have received our first burst of data from Snarkhunter. Composition of Centaura's atmosphere is as follows. Oxygen sixteen percent, nitrogen eighty-three percent--" It continued detailing carbon

dioxide, noble gases, water vapor, ozone, surface pressure, and the planet's surface temperature and magnetic field. Butch hugged his knee and made sounds of pleasure.

"Marvelous!" he enthused. "Marvelous! From such a distance! How sensitive, how versatile the instruments!"

"To me it all seems anticlimactic."

"I fear that is my own fault. I am sorry."

The radio saved me from having to answer. "Decoding of Snarkhunter's transmission is now in progress. In a few minutes we should have a rough map of Centaura's surface." It added,

"Snarkhunter is about to pass behind the planet. It will reach perihelion three minutes later."

The auditorium became silent. I made a shushing motion at Butch. We heard only the musical sound of the carrier wave.

The sound cut off abruptly.

"It will not reappear," Butch said sadly.

"That's a pity. It was programmed to take another set of measurements at perihelion. They would have been a little more accurate."

The point on the screen moved a notch, to its point of closest approach to

Centaurea.

"Is that where you shot it down?"

"Yes, at perihelion," said Butch. "How were we to know it was not hostile? We would not have believed it was possible at all. An instrument package, with no external guidance, finding its way over such a distance!" He stood up. "A remarkable achievement! Remarkable! To have done so much with so little!"

"Thanks," I said. Thanks for the pat on the head. "Then you'll go ahead with the trade?"

"I will have to wait," said Butch, "to see if your map of our world is accurate.

Thus far your measurements have been excellent. Unbelievably so! If your map is as good, we have a bargain. We will trade you our faster-than-light drive for your incredible probes. Together we will explore space!"

"Fine." I had what I came for. I rose to leave.

"It has been a lonely year," said Butch. "I do not think I knew why until now. Mr. Lane, please don't be offended. Did my landing a year ago cause your people to regard their own technology as inferior?"

"Of course. Why wouldn't it? Our lousy little probe took thirty years to reach

Centaurea. Your ship took six months! And here you are, like the ghost at the banquet. Oh, damn. I'm sorry, Butch. I lost my head."

"And so you all tend to avoid me. But my own people felt the same way, when your probe reached us four point three years ago. Our faster-than-light drive was a single lucky discovery. Your probe was the combined result of centuries of single-minded, terribly expensive labor and experimentation. We are awed. We are not capable of such sustained effort. But you cannot believe that, can you?"

I couldn't. And I can't.

