

Wolf Mari

An Empty Bottle



Mari Wolf

An Empty Bottle

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Hugh McCann took the last of the photographic plates out of the developer and laid them on the table beside the others. Then he picked up the old star charts – Volume 1, Number 1 – maps of space from various planetary systems within a hundred light years of Sol. He looked around the observation room at the others.

"We might as well start checking."

The men and women around the table nodded. None of them said anything. Even the muffled conversation from the corridor beyond the observation room ceased as the people stopped to listen.

McCann set the charts down and opened them at the first sheet – the composite map of the stars as seen from Earth. "Don't be too disappointed if we're wrong," he said.

Amos Carhill's fists clenched. He leaned across the table. "You still don't believe we're near Sol, do you? You're getting senile, Hugh! You know the mathematics of our position as well as anybody."

"I know the math," Hugh said quietly. "But remember, a lot of our basics have already proved themselves false this trip. We can't be sure of anything. Besides, I think I'd remember this planet we're on if we'd ever been here before. We visited every planetary system within a hundred light years of Sol the first year."

Carhill laughed. "What's there to remember about this hunk of rock? Tiny, airless, mountainless – the most monotonous piece of matter we've landed on in years."

Hugh shrugged and turned to the next chart. The others clustered around him, checking, comparing the chart with the photographic plates of their position, finding nothing familiar in the star pattern.

"I still think we would have remembered this planet," Hugh said. "Just because it *is* so monotonous. After all, what have we been looking for, all these years? Life. Other worlds with living forms, other types of evolution, types adapted to different environments. This particular planet is less capable of supporting life than our own Moon."

Martha Carhill looked up from the charts. Her face was as tense and strained as her husband's, and the lines about her mouth deeply etched. "We've got to be near Earth. We've just got to. We've got to find people again." Her voice broke. "We've been looking for so long –"

Hugh McCann sighed. The worry that had been growing in him ever since they first left the rim of the galaxy and turned homeward deepened into a nagging fear. He didn't know why he was afraid. He too hoped that they were near Earth. He almost believed that they would soon be home. But the others, their reactions – He shook his head.

They no longer merely hoped. With them, especially with the older, ones, it was faith, a blind, unreasoning, fanatic faith that their journey was almost over and they would be on Earth again and pick up the lives they had left behind fifty-three years before.

"Look," Amos Carhill said. "Here are our reference points. Here's Andromeda Galaxy, and the dark nebula, and the arch of our own Milky Way." He pointed to the places he had named on the plates. "Now we can check some of these high magnitude reference stars with the charts."

Hugh let him take the charts and go through them, checking, rejecting. Carhill was probably right. He'd find Sol soon enough.

It had been too long for one shipful of people to follow a quest, especially a hopeless one. For fifty-three years they had scouted the galaxy, looking for other worlds with life forms. A check on diverging evolutions, they had called it – uncounted thousands of suns without planets, bypassed.

Thousands of planetary systems, explored, or merely looked at and rejected. Heavy, cold worlds with methane atmospheres and lifeless rocks without atmospheres and even earth-sized, earth-type planets, with oceans and oxygen and warmth. But no life. No life anywhere.

That was one of the basics they had lost, years ago – their belief that life would arise on any planet capable of supporting it.

"We could take a spectrographic analysis of some of those high magnitude stars," Carhill said. Then abruptly he straightened, eyes alight, his hand on the last chart. "We don't need it after all. Look! There's Sirius, and here it is on the plates. That means Alpha Centauri must be – "

He paused. He frowned and ran his hand over the plate to where the first magnitude star was photographed. "It must be. Alpha Centauri. It has to be!"

"Except that it's over five degrees out of position." Hugh looked at the plate, and then at the chart, and then back at the plate again. And then he knew what it was that he had feared subconsciously all along.

"You're right, Amos," he said slowly. "There's Alpha Centauri – about twenty light years away. And there's Sirius, and Arcturus and Betelgeuse and all the others." He pointed them out, one by one, in their unfamiliar locations on the plates. "But they're all out of position, in reference to each other."

He stopped. The others stared back at him, not saying anything. Little by little the faith began to drain out of their eyes.

"What does it mean?" Martha Carhill's voice was only a whisper.

"It means that we discarded one basic too many," Hugh McCann said. "Relativity. The theory that our subjective time, here on the ship, would differ from objective time outside."

"No," Amos Carhill said slowly. "No, it's a mistake. That's all. We haven't gone into the future. We can't have. It isn't possible that more time has elapsed outside the ship than – "

"Why not?" Hugh said softly. "Why not millions of years? We've exceeded the speed of light, many times."

"Which disproves that space-time theory in itself!" Carhill shouted.

"Does it?" Hugh said. "Or does it just mean we never really understood space-time at all?" He didn't wait for them to answer. He pointed at the small, far from brilliant, star that lay beyond Alpha Centauri on the plates. "That's probably Sol. If it is, we can find out the truth soon enough."

He looked at their faces and wondered what their reactions would be, if the truth was what he feared.

The ship throbbed softly, pulsating in the typical vibrations of low speed drive. In the forward viewscreens the star grew larger. The people didn't look at it very often. They moved about the corridors of the ship, much as they usually moved, but quietly. They seemed to be trying to ignore the star.

"You can't be sure, Hugh." Nora McCann laid her hand on her husband's arm.

"No, of course I can't be sure."

The door from their quarters into the corridor was open. Several more people came in – young people who had been born on the ship. They were talking and laughing.

"Would it be so hard on the young ones, Hugh? They've never seen the Earth. They're used to finding nothing but lifeless worlds everywhere."

One of the young boys in the hall looked up at the corridor viewscreen and pointed at the star and then shrugged. The others turned away, not saying anything, and after a minute they left and the boy followed them.

"There's your answer," Hugh McCann said dully. "Earth's a symbol to them. It's home. It's the place where there are millions more like us. Sometimes I think it's the only thing that has kept us sane all these years – the knowledge that there is a world full of people, somewhere, that we're not alone."

Her hand found his and he gripped it, almost absently, and then he looked up at their own small viewscreen. The star was much bigger now. It was already a definite circle of yellow light.

A yellow G-type sun, like a thousand others they had approached and orbited around and left behind them. A yellow sun that could have been anywhere in the galaxy.

"Hugh," she said after a moment, "do you really believe that thousands of years have gone by, outside?"

"I don't know what to believe. I only know what the plates show."

"That may not even be Sol, up ahead," she said doubtfully. "We may be in some other part of space altogether, and that's why the charts are different."

"Perhaps. But either way we're lost. Lost in space or in time or in both. What does it matter?"

"If we're just lost in space it's not so – so irrevocable. We could still find our way back to Earth, maybe."

He didn't answer. He looked up at the screen and the circle of light and his lips tightened. Whatever the truth was, they didn't have long to wait. They'd be within gravitational range in less than an hour.

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