

Hunting the Snark

by

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BELIEVE ME, the last thing we ever expected to find was a Snark.

And I'm just as sure we were the last thing he ever expected to meet.

I wish I could tell you we responded to the situation half as well as he did. But maybe I should start at the beginning. Trust me: I'll get to the Snark soon enough.

My name's Karamojo Bell. (Well, actually it's Daniel Mathias Bellman. I've never been within five thousand light years of the Karamojo district back on Earth. But when I found out I was a distant descendant of the legendary hunter, I decided to appropriate his name, since I'm in the same business and I thought it might impress the clients. Turned out I was wrong; in my entire career, I met three people who had heard of him, and none of them went on safari with me. But I kept it anyway. There are a lot of Daniels walking around; at least I'm the only Karamojo.)

At that time I worked for Silinger & Mahr, the oldest and best-known firm in the safari business. True, Silinger died 63 years ago and Mahr followed him six years later and now it's run by a faceless corporation back on Deluros VIII, but they had better luck with their name than I had with mine, so they never changed it.

We were the most expensive company in the business, but we were worth it. Hundreds of worlds have been hunted out over the millennia, but people with money will always pay to have first crack at territory no one else has set foot on or even seen. A couple of years ago the company purchased a ten-planet hunting concession in the newly-opened Albion Cluster, and so many of our clients wanted to be the first to hunt virgin worlds that we actually held drawings to see who'd get the privilege. Silinger & Mahr agreed to supply one professional hunter per world and allow a maximum of four clients per party, and the fee was (get ready for it!) twenty million credits. Or eight million Maria Theresa dollars, if you don't have much faith in the credit -- and out here on the Frontier, not a lot of people do.

We pros wanted to hunt new worlds every bit as much as the clients did. They were parceled out by seniority, and as seventh in line, I was assigned Dodgson IV, named after the woman who'd first charted it a dozen years ago. Nine of us had full parties. The tenth had a party of one -- an incredibly wealthy man who wasn't into sharing.

Now, understand: I didn't take out the safari on my own. I was in charge, of course, but I had a crew of twelve blue-skinned humanoid Dabihs from Kakkab Kastu IV. Four were gunbearers for the clients. (I didn't have one myself; I never trusted anyone else with my weapons.) To continue: one was the cook, three were skimmers (and it takes a lot more skill than you think to skin an alien animal you've never seen before without spoiling the pelt), and three were camp attendants. The twelfth was my regular tracker, whose name -- Chajinka -- always sounded like a sneeze.

We didn't really need a pilot -- after all, the ship's navigational computer could start from half a galaxy away and land on top of a New Kenya shilling -- but our clients were paying for luxury, and Silinger & Mahr made sure they got it. So in addition to the Dabihs, we also had our own personal pilot, Captain Kosha Mbele, who'd spent two decades flying one-man fighter ships in the war against the Sett.

The hunting party itself consisted of four business associates, all wealthy beyond my wildest dreams if not their own. There was Willard Marx, a real estate magnate who'd developed the entire Roosevelt planetary system; Jaxon Pollard, who owned a matching chains of cut-rate supermarkets and upscale bakeries that did business on more than a thousand worlds; Philemon Desmond, the CEO of Far London's largest bank -- with branches in maybe 200 systems -- and his wife, Ramona, a justice on that planet's Supreme Court.

I don't know how the four of them met, but evidently they'd all come from the same home world and had

known each other for a long time. They began pooling their money in business ventures early on, and just kept going from one success to the next. Their most recent killing had come on Silverstrike, a distant mining world. Marx was an avid hunter who had brought trophies back from half a dozen worlds, the Desmonds had always wanted to go on safari, and Pollard, who would have preferred a few weeks on Calliope or one of the other pleasure planets, finally agreed to come along so that the four of them could celebrate their latest billion together.

I took an instant dislike to Marx, who was too macho by half. Still, that wasn't a problem; I wasn't being paid to enjoy his company, just to find him a couple of prize trophies that would look good on his wall, and he seemed competent enough.

The Desmonds were an interesting pair. She was a pretty woman who went out of her way to look plain, even severe; a well-read woman who insisted on quoting everything she'd read, which made you wonder which she enjoyed more, reading in private or quoting in public. Philemon, her husband, was a mousy little man who drank too much, drugged too much, smoked too much, seemed in awe of his wife, and actually wore a tiny medal he'd won in a school track meet some thirty years earlier -- probably a futile attempt to impress Mrs. Desmond, who remained singularly unimpressed.

Pollard was just a quiet, unassuming guy who'd lucked into money and didn't pretend to be any more sophisticated than he was -- which, in my book, made him considerably more sophisticated than his partners. He seemed constantly amazed that they had actually talked him into coming along. He'd packed remedies for sunburn, diahorea, insect bites, and half a hundred other things that could befall him, and jokingly worried about losing what he called his prison pallor.

We met on Braxton II, our regional headquarters, then took off on the six-day trip to Dodgson IV. All four of them elected to undergo DeepSleep, so Captain Mbele and I put them in their pods as soon as we hit light speeds, and woke them about two hours before we landed.

They were starving -- I know the feeling; DeepSleep slows the metabolism to a crawl, but of course it doesn't stop it or you'd be dead, and the first thing you want to do when you wake up is eat -- so Mbele shagged the Dabihs out of the galley, where they spent most of their time, and had it prepare a meal geared to human tastes. As soon as they finished eating, they began asking questions about Dodgson IV.

"We've been in orbit for the past hour, while the ship's computer has been compiling a detailed topographical map of the planet," I explained. "We'll land as soon as I find the best location for the base camp."

"So what's this world like?" asked Desmond, who had obviously failed to read all the data we'd sent to him.

"I've never set foot on it," I replied. "No one has." I smiled. "That's why you're paying so much."

"How do we know there's any game to be found there, then?" asked Marx pugnaciously.

"There's game, all right," I assured him. "The Pioneer who charted it claims her sensors pinpointed four species of carnivore and lots of herbivores, including one that goes about four tons."

"But she never landed?" he persisted.

"She had no reason to," I said. "There was no sign of sentient life, and there are millions of worlds out there still to be charted."

"She'd damned well better have been right about the animals," grumbled Marx. "I'm not paying this much to look at a bunch of trees and flowers."

"I've hunted three other oxygen worlds that Karen Dodgson charted," I said, "and they've always delivered what she promised."

"Do people actually hunt on chlorine and ammonia worlds?" asked Pollard.

"A few. It's a highly specialized endeavor. If you want to know more about it after the safari is over, I'll put you in touch with the right person back at headquarters."

"I've hunted a couple of chlorine worlds," interjected Marx.

"_ Sure you have,_" I thought.

"Great sport," he added.

When you have to live with your client for a few weeks or months, you don't call him a braggart and a liar to his face, but you do file the information away for future reference.

"This Karen Dodgson -- she's the one the planet's named for?" asked Ramona Desmond.

"It's a prerogative of the Pioneer Corps," I answered. "The one who charts a world gets to name it anything he or she wants." I paused and smiled. "They're not known for their modesty. Usually they name it after themselves."

"Dodgson," she said again. "Perhaps we'll find a Jabberwock, or a Cheshire Cat, or even a Snark."

"I beg your pardon?" I said.

"That's was Lewis Carroll's real name: Charles Dodgson."

"I've never heard of him," I replied.

"He wrote Jabberwocky and The Hunting of the Snark, along with the Alice books." She stared at me. "Surely you're read them."

"I'm afraid not."

"No matter," she said with a shrug. "It was just a joke. Not a very funny one."

In retrospect, I wish we'd found a Jabberwock.

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"Just the place for a Snark!" the Bellman cried,"

"As he landed his crew with care;"

"Supporting each man on the top of the tide"

"By a finger entwined in his hair."

* * * *

Dodgson IV was lush and green, with huge rolling savannahs, thick forests with trees growing hundreds of feet high, lots of large inland lakes, a trio of freshwater oceans, an atmosphere slightly richer than Galactic Standard, and a gravity that was actually a shade lighter than Standard.

While the Dabihs were setting up camp and erecting the self-contained safari Bubbles near the ship, I sent Chajinka off to collect possible foodstuffs, then took them to the ship's lab for analysis. It was even better than I'd hoped.

"I've got good news," I announced when I clambered back out of the ship. "There are at least seventeen edible plant species. The bark of those trees with the golden blossoms is also edible. The water's not totally safe, but it's close enough so that if we irradiate it it'll be just fine."

"I didn't come here to eat fruits and berries or whatever the hell Blue Boy found out there," said Marx gruffly. "Let's go hunting."

"I think it would be better for you and your friends to stay in camp for a day while Chajinka and I scout out the territory and see what's out there. Just unwind from the trip and get used to the atmosphere and the gravity."

"Why?" asked Desmond. "What's the difference if we go out today or tomorrow?"

"Once I see what we're up against, I'll be able to tell you which weapons to take. And while we know there are carnivores, we have no idea whether they're diurnal or nocturnal or both. No sense spending all day looking for a trophy that only comes out at night."

"I hadn't thought of that." Desmond shrugged. "You're the boss."

I took Captain Mbele aside and suggested he do what he could to keep them amused -- tell them stories of past safaris, make them drinks, do whatever he could to entertain them while Chajinka and I did a little reconnoitering and learned what we'd be up against.

"It looks pretty normal to me," said Mbele. "A typical primitive world."

"The sensors say there's a huge biomass about two miles west of here," I replied. "With that much meat on the hoof, there should be a lot of predators. I want to see what they can do before I take four novices into the bush."

"Marx brags about all the safaris he's been on," complained Mbele. "Why not take the Great White Hunter with you?"

"Nice try," I said. "But I make the decisions once we're on the ground. You're stuck with him."

"Thanks a lot."

"Maybe he's been on other safaris, but he's a novice on Dodgson IV, and as far as I'm concerned that's all that counts."

"Well, if it comes to that, so are you."

"I'm getting paid to risk my life. He's paying for me to make sure he gets his trophies and doesn't risk his." I looked around. "Where the hell did Chajinka sneak off to?"

"I think he's helping the cook."

"He's got his own food," I said irritably. "He doesn't need ours." I turned in the direction of the cooking Bubble and shouted: "Chajinka, get your blue ass over here!"

The Dabih looked up at the sound of my voice, smiled, and pointed to his ears.

"Then get your goddamned t-pack!" I said. "We've got work to do."

He smiled again, wandered off, and returned a moment later with his spear and his t-pack, the translating mechanism that allowed Man and Dabih (actually, Man and just about anything, with the proper programming) to converse with one another in Terran.

"Ugly little creature," remarked Mbele, indicating Chajinka.

"I didn't pick him for his looks."

"Is he really that good?"

"The little bastard could track a billiard ball down a crowded highway," I replied. "And he's got more guts than most Men I know."

"You don't say," said Mbele in tones that indicated he still considered Dabihs one step up -- if that -- from the animals we had come to hunt.

* * * *

"His form is ungainly -- his intellect small -- "

_(So the Bellman would often remark) -- _

"But his courage is perfect! And that, after all,"

_"Is the thing that one needs with a Snark." _

* * * *

I'm not much for foot-slogging when transportation is available, but it was going to take the Dabihs at least a day to assemble the safari vehicle and there was no sense hanging around camp waiting for it. So off we went, Chajinka and me, heading due west toward a water hole the computer had mapped. We weren't out to shoot anything, just to see what there was and what kind of weaponry our clients would need when we went out hunting the next morning.

It took us a little more than an hour to reach the water hole, and once there we hid behind some heavy bush about fifty yards away from it. There was a small herd of brown-and-white herbivores slaking their thirst, and as they left, a pair of huge red animals, four or five tons apiece, came down to drink. Then there were four or five more small herds of various types of grass-eaters. I had just managed to get comfortable when I heard a slight scrabbling noise. I turned and saw Chajinka pick up a slimy five-inch green worm, study its writhing body for a moment, then pop it into his mouth and swallow it. He appeared thoughtful for a moment, as if savoring the taste, then nodded his head in approval, and began looking for more.

Once upon a time that would have disgusted me, but I'd been with Chajinka for more than a decade and I was used to his eating habits. I kept looking for predators, and finally asked if he'd spotted any.

He waited for the t-pack to translate, then shook his head. "Night eaters, maybe," he whispered back.

"I never saw a world where all the carnivores were nocturnal," I answered. "There have to be some diurnal hunters, and this is the spot they should be concentrating on."

"Then where are they?"

"You're the tracker," I said. "You tell me."

He sighed deeply -- a frightening sound if you're not used to Dabihs. A few of the animals at the water hole spooked and ran off thirty or forty yards, raising an enormous cloud of reddish dust. When they couldn't spot where the noise had come from, they warily returned to finish drinking.

"You wait here," he whispered. "I will find the predators."

I nodded my agreement. I'd watched Chajinka stalk animals on a hundred worlds, and I knew that I'd just be a hindrance. He could travel as silently as any predator, and he could find cover where I would swear none existed. If he had to freeze, he could stand or squat motionless for up to fifteen minutes. If an insect was crawling across his face, he wouldn't even shut an eye if it was in the insect's path. So maybe he regarded worms and insects as delicacies, and maybe he had only the vaguest notion of personal hygiene, but in his element -- and we were in it now -- there was no one of any species better suited for the job.

I sat down, adjusted my contact lenses to Telescopic, and scanned the horizon for the better part of ten minutes, going through a couple of smokeless cigarettes in the process. Lots of animals, all herbivores, came by to drink. Almost too many, I decided, because at this rate the water hole would be nothing but a bed of mud in a few days.

I was just about to start on a third cigarette when Chajinka was beside me again, tapping me on the shoulder.

"Come with me," he said.

"You found something?"

He didn't answer, but straightened up and walked out into the open, making no attempt to hide his presence. The animals at the water hole began bleating and bellowing in panic and raced off, some low to the ground, some zig-zagging with every stride, and some with enormous leaps. Soon all of them vanished in the thick cloud of dust they had raised.

I followed him for about half a mile, and then we came to it: a dead catlike animal, obviously a predator. It had a tan pelt, and I estimated its weight at 300 pounds. It had the teeth of a killer, and its front and back claws were clearly made for rending the flesh of its prey. Its broad tail was covered with bony spikes. It was too muscular to be built for sustained speed, but its powerful shoulders and haunches looked deadly efficient for short charges of up to one hundred yards.

"Dead maybe seven hours," said Chajinka. "Maybe eight."

I didn't mind that it was dead. I minded that its skull and body were crushed. And I especially minded that there'd been no attempt to eat it.

"Read the signs," I said. "Tell me what happened."

"Brown cat," said Chajinka, indicating the dead animal, "made a kill this morning. His stomach is still full. He was looking for a place to lie up, out of the sun. Something killed him."

"_What_ killed him?"

He pointed to some oblong tracks, not much larger than a human's. "This one is the killer."

"Where did he go after he killed the brown cat?"

He examined the ground once more, then pointed to the northeast. "That way."

"Can we find him before dark?"

Chajinka shook his head. "He left a long time ago. Four, five, six hours."

"Let's go back to the water hole," I said. "I want you to see if he left any tracks there."

Our presence frightened yet another herd of herbivores away, and Chajinka examined the ground.

Finally he straightened up. "Too many animals have come and gone."

"Make a big circle around the water hole," I said. "Maybe a quarter mile. See if there are any tracks there."

He did as I ordered, and I fell into step behind him. We'd walked perhaps half the circumference when he stopped.

"Interesting," he said.

"What is?"

"There were brown cats here early this morning," he said, pointing to the ground. "Then the killer of the brown cat came along -- you see, here, his print overlays that of a cat -- and they fled." He paused. "An entire family of brown cats -- at least four, perhaps five -- fled from a single animal that hunts alone."

"You're sure he's a solitary hunter?"

He studied the ground again. "Yes. He walks alone. Very interesting."

It was more than interesting.

There was a lone animal out there that was higher on the food chain than the 300-pound brown cats. It had frightened away an entire pod of large predators, and -- this was the part I didn't like -- it didn't kill just for food.

Hunters read signs, and they listen to their trackers, but mostly they tend to trust their instincts. We'd been on Dodgson IV less than five hours, and I was already getting a bad feeling.

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"I kind of expected you'd be bringing back a little something exotic for dinner," remarked Jaxon Pollard when we returned to camp.

"Or perhaps a trophy," chimed in Ramona Desmond.

"I've got enough trophies, and you'll want to shoot your own."

"You don't sound like a very enthusiastic hunter," she said.

"You're paying to do the hunting," I replied. "My job is to back you up and step in if things get out of hand. As far as I'm concerned, the ideal safari is one on which I don't fire a single shot."

"Sounds good to me," said Marx. "What are we going after tomorrow?"

"I'm not sure."

"You're not sure?" he repeated. "What the hell were you doing all afternoon?"

"Scouting the area."

"This is like pulling teeth," complained Marx. "What did you find?"

"I think we may have found signs of Mrs. Desmond's Snark, for lack of a better name."

Suddenly everyone was interested.

"A Snark?" said Ramona Desmond delightedly. "What did it look like?"

"I don't know," I replied. "It's bipedal, but I've no idea how many limbs it has -- probably four. More than that is pretty rare in large animals anywhere in the galaxy. Based on the depth of the tracks, Chajinka thinks it may go anywhere from 250 to 400 pounds."

"That's not so much," said Marx. "I've hunted bigger."

"I'm not through," I said. "In a land filled with game, it seems to have scared the other predators out of the area." I paused. "Well, actually, that could be a misstatement."

"You mean it hasn't scared them off?" asked Ramona, now thoroughly confused.

"No, they're gone. But I called them other predators, and I don't know for a fact that our Snark is a predator. He killed a huge, catlike creature, but he didn't eat it."

"What does that imply?" asked Ramona.

I shrugged. "I'm not sure. It could be that he was defending his territory. Or ..." I let the sentence hang while I considered its implications.

"Or what?"

"Or he could simply enjoy killing things."

"That makes two of us," said Marx with a smile. "We'll go out and kill ourselves a Snark tomorrow morning."

"Not tomorrow," I said firmly.

"Why the hell not?" he asked pugnaciously.

"I make it a rule never to go after dangerous game until I know more about it than it knows about me," I answered. "Tomorrow we'll go out shooting meat for the pot and see if we can learn a little more about the Snark."

"I'm not paying millions of credits to shoot a bunch of cud-chewing alien cattle!" snapped Marx. "You've found something that practically screams 'Superb Hunting!' I vote that we go after it in the morning."

"I admire your enthusiasm and your courage, Mr. Marx," I said. "But this isn't a democracy. I've got the only vote that counts, and since it's my job to return you all safe and sound at the end of this safari, we're not going after the Snark until we know more about it."

He didn't say another word, but I could tell that at that moment he'd have been just as happy to shoot

me as the Snark.

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Before we set out the next morning, I inspected the party's weapons.

"Nice laser rifle," I said, examining Desmond's brand new pride and joy.

"It ought to be," he said. "It cost fourteen thousand credits. It's got night sights, a vision enhancer, an anti-shake stock ... "

"Bring out your projectile rifle and your shotgun, too," I said. "We have to test all the weapons."

"But I'm only going to use this rifle," he insisted.

I almost hated to break the news to him.

"In my professional opinion, Dodgson IV has a B3 biosystem," I said. "I already registered my findings via subspace transmission from the ship last night." He looked confused. "For sport hunting purposes, that means you have to use a non- explosive-projectile weapon with a maximum of a .450 grain bullet until the classification is changed."

"But -- "

"Look," I interrupted. "We have fusion grenades that can literally blow this planet apart. We have intelligent bullets that will find an animal at a distance of ten miles, respond to evasive maneuvering, and not contact the target until an instant kill is guaranteed. We've got molecular imploders that can turn an enemy brigade into jelly. Given the game we're after, none of them would qualify as sport hunting. I know, we're only talking about a laser rifle in your case, but you don't want to start off the safari by breaking the law, and I'm sure as a sportsman you want to give the animal an even break."

He looked dubious, especially about the even break part, but finally he went back to his Bubble and brought out the rest of his arsenal.

I gathered the four of them around me.

"Your weapons have been packed away for a week," I said. "Their settings may have been affected by the ship's acceleration, and this world's gravity is different, however minimally, from your own. So before we start, I want to give everyone a chance to adjust their sights." _And_, I added to myself, _let's see if any of you can hit a non-threatening target at 40 yards, just so I'll know what I'm up against.

"I'll set up targets in the hollow down by the river," I continued, "and I'll ask you to come down one at a time." No sense letting the poorer shots get humiliated in front of the better ones -- always assuming there _are_ any better ones.

I took a set of the most basic targets out of the cargo hold. Once I reached the hollow, I placed four of them where I wanted them, activated the anti-grav devices, and when they were gently bobbing and weaving about six feet above the ground, I called for Marx, who showed up a moment later.

"Okay, Mr. Marx," I said. "Have you adjusted your sights?"

"I _always_ take care of my weapons," he said as if the question had been an insult.

"Then let's see what you can do."

He smiled confidently, raised his rifle, looked along the sights, pulled the trigger, and blew two targets to pieces, then repeated the procedure with his shotgun.

"Nice shooting," I said.

"Thanks," he replied with a look that said: _of course_ I'm a crack shot. I told you so, didn't I?

Desmond was next. He raised his rifle to his shoulder, took careful aim, and missed, then missed three more times.

I took the rifle, lined up the sights, and fired. The bullet went high and to the right, burying itself in a tree trunk. I adjusted the sights and took another shot. This time I hit a target dead center.

"Okay, try it now," I said, handing the rifle back to Desmond.

He missed four more times. He missed sitting. He missed prone. He missed using a rest for the barrel. Then he tried the shotgun, and missed twice more before he finally nailed a target. Then, for good measure, he totally misused his laser rifle, trying to pinpoint the beam rather than sweep the area, and missed yet again. We were both relieved when his session ended.

His wife was a little better; she hit the target on her third try with the rifle and her second with the shotgun. She swept the area with her laser rifle, wiping out all the remaining targets.

Pollard should have been next, but he didn't show up, and I went back to camp to get him. He was sitting down with the others, sipping a cup of coffee.

"You're next, Mr. Pollard," I said.

"I'm just going to take holos," he replied, holding up his camera.

"You're sure, Jaxon?" asked Desmond.

"I don't think I'd enjoy killing things," he replied.

"Then what the hell are you doing here?" demanded Marx.

Pollard smiled. "I'm here because you nagged incessantly, Willard. Besides, I've never been on a safari before, and I enjoy taking holographs."

"All right," I said. "But I don't want you wandering more than twenty yards from me at any time."

"No problem," said Pollard. "I don't want them killing me any more than I want to kill them."

I told his gunbearer to stay behind and help with the camp and the cooking. You'd have thought I'd slapped him in the face, but he agreed to do as he was ordered.

We clambered into the vehicle and got to the water hole in about half an hour. Within five minutes Marx had coolly and efficiently brought down a pair of spiral-horned tan-and-brown herbivores with one bullet each. Then, exercising his right to name any species that he was the first to shoot, he dubbed them Marx's Gazelles.

"What now?" asked Desmond. "We certainly don't need any more meat for the next few days."

"I'll send the vehicle back to camp for the skinners. They'll bring back the heads and pelts as well as the best cuts of meat, and I'll have them tie the rest of the carcasses to some nearby trees."

"Why?"

"Bait," said Marx.

"Mr. Marx is right. Something will come along to feed on them. The smell of blood might bring the catlike predators back. Or, if we're lucky, maybe the Snark will come back and we'll be able to learn a little more about him."

"And what do we do in the meantime?" asked Desmond in petulant tones.

"It's up to you," I said. "We can stay here until the vehicle returns, we can march back to camp, or we can footslog to that swamp about four miles to the north and see if there's anything interesting up there."

"Like a Snark?" asked Ramona.

"Five Men and four Dabihs walking across four miles of open savannah aren't about to sneak up and surprise anything. But we're not part of the ecological system. None of the animals will be programmed to recognize us as predators, so there's always a chance -- if he's there to begin with -- that the Snark will stick around out of curiosity or just plain stupidity."

It was the answer they wanted to hear, so they decided to march to the swamp. Pollard must have taken fifty holos along the way. Desmond complained about the heat, the humidity, the terrain, and the insects. Ramona stuck a chip that read the text of a book into her ear and didn't utter a word until we reached the swamp. Marx just lowered his head and walked.

When we got there we came upon a small herd of herbivores, very impressive-looking beasts, going about 500 pounds apiece. The males possessed fabulous horns, perhaps 60 inches long, with a triple twist in them. The horns looked like they were made of crystal, and they acted as a prism, separating the sunlight into a series of tiny rainbows.

"My God, look at them!" said Pollard, taking holographs as fast as he could.

"They're magnificent!" whispered Ramona Desmond.

"I'd like one of those," said Marx, studying the herd.

"You took the gazelles," I noted. "Mr. Desmond has first shot."

"I don't want it," said Desmond nervously.

"All right," I said. "Mrs. Desmond, you have first shot."

"I'd never kill anything so beautiful," she replied.

"No," muttered Desmond so softly that she couldn't hear him. "You'd just throw them into jail."

"Then it's Mr. Marx's shot," I said. "I'd suggest you take the fellow on the far right. He doesn't have the longest horns, but he's got the best-matched set. Let's get a little closer." I turned to the others as Marx took his rifle from his gunbearer and loaded it. "You stay here."

I signaled to Chajinka to take a circuitous approach. Marx, displaying the proper crouching walk, followed him, and I brought up the rear. (A hunter learns early on never to get between a client and the game. Either that, or he keeps a prosthetic ear company in business.)

When we'd gotten to within thirty yards, I decided we were close enough and nodded to Marx. He slowly raised his rifle and took aim. I could tell he was going for a heart shot rather than take the chance of ruining the head. It was a good strategy, always assuming that the heart was where he thought it was.

Marx took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and began squeezing the trigger.

And just as he did so, a brilliantly-colored avian flew past, shrieking wildly. The horned buck jumped, startled, just as Marx's rifle exploded. The rest of the herd bolted in all directions at the sound of the shot, and before Marx could get off a second shot the buck bellowed in pain, spun around, and vanished into the nearby bush.

"Come on!" said Marx excitedly, jumping up and running after the buck. "I know I hit him! He won't get far!"

I grabbed him as he hurtled past. "You're not going anywhere, Mr. Marx!"

"What are you talking about?" he demanded.

"There's a large dangerous wounded animal in the bush," I said. "I can't let you go in after it."

"I'm as good a shot as you are!" he snapped. "It was just a fluke that that goddamned bird startled it. You know that!"

"Look," I said. "I'm not thrilled going into heavy bush after a wounded animal that's carrying a pair of five-foot swords on its head, but that's what I get paid to do. I can't look for him and keep an eye on you as well."

"But -- "

"You say you've been on safari before," I said. "That means you know the rules."

He muttered and he cursed, but he did know the rules, and he rejoined the rest of the party while Chajinka and I vanished into the bush in search of our wounded prey.

The swamp smelled of rotting vegetation. We followed the blood spoor on leaves and bushes through two hundred yards of mud that sucked at the Dabih's feet and my boots, and then, suddenly, it vanished. I saw a little hillock a few yards off to the right, where the grass was crushed flat, small branches were broken, and flowers were broken off their stems. Chajinka studied the signs for a full minute, then looked up.

"The Snark," he said.

"What are you talking about?"

"He was hiding, watching us," answered Chajinka. He pointed to the ground. "The wounded animal lay down here. You see the blood? The Snark was over there. Those are his tracks. When the animal lay down, the Snark saw it was too weak to get up again, but still dangerous. He circled behind it. See -- here is where he went. Then he leaped upon it and killed it."

"How?"

Chajinka shrugged. "I cannot tell. But he lifted it and carried it off."

"Could he lift an animal that big?"

"He did."

"He can't be more that a few hundred yards ahead of us," I said. "What do you think? Can we catch up with him?"

"You and I? Yes."

Every now and then, when my blood was up, Chajinka had to remind me that I wasn't hunting for my own pleasure. Yes, was the implication, he and I could catch up with the Snark. Marx might not be a hindrance. But there was no way we could take Pollard and the Desmonds through the swamp, keep an eye out for predators, and hope to make up any ground on the Snark -- and of course I couldn't leave them alone while we went after the Snark with Marx.

"All right," I said with a sigh. "Let's get back and tell them what happened."

Marx went ballistic. He ranted and cursed for a good three minutes, and by the end of it I felt he was ready to declare a blood feud against this trophy thief.

When he finally calmed down, I left Chajinka behind to see if he could learn anything more about the Snark while the rest of us began marching back to the water hole, where the vehicle was waiting for us.

* * * *

"We have sailed many months, we have sailed many weeks,"

(Four weeks to the month you may mark),"

"But never as yet ('tis your Captain who speaks)"

"Have we caught the least glimpse of a Snark!""

* * * *

Mbele had himself a good laugh when we got back to camp, hot and tired and hungry.

"You keep talking about the Snark as if it exists!" he said in amusement. "It's an imaginary beast in a children's poem."

"Snark is just a convenient name for it," I said. "We can call it anything you like."

"Call it absent," he said. "No one's seen it."

"Right," I said. "And I suppose when you close your eyes, the whole galaxy vanishes."

"I never thought about it," admitted Mbele. "But it probably does." He paused thoughtfully. "At least, I certainly hope so. It makes me feel necessary."

"Look!" I exploded. "There's a dead 300-pound killer cat out there, and a missing antelope that was even bigger!" I glared at him. "I didn't kill one and steal the other. Did you?"

He swallowed his next rejoinder and gave me a wide berth for the rest of the day.

* * * *

Chajinka trotted into camp the next morning and signaled to me. I walked over and joined him.

"Did you learn anything?" I asked.

"It is an interesting animal," he said.

I grimaced, for as everyone knows, the Dabihs are masters of understatement.

* * * *

"Come, listen, my men, while I tell you again

The five unmistakable marks

By which you may know, wheresoever you go,

The warranted genuine Snarks."

* * * *

I gathered the hunting party around me.

"Well," I announced, "we know a little more about the Snark now than we did yesterday." I paused to watch their reactions. Everyone except Desmond seemed interested; Desmond looked like he wished he were anywhere else.

"Chajinka has been to the tree where we tied the dead meat animals," I continued.

"And?" said Marx.

"The ropes were untied. Not cut or torn apart or bitten through; untied. So we know that the Snark either has fingers, or some damned effective appendages. And some meat was missing from the carcasses."

"All right," said Ramona. "We know he can untie knots. What else?"

"We know he's a carnivore," I said. "We weren't sure about that yesterday."

"So what?" asked Marx. "There are millions of carnivores in the galaxy. Nothing unique about that."

"It means he won't stray far from the game herds. They're his supermarket."

"Maybe he only has to eat once every few months," said Marx, unimpressed.

"No," I said. "That's the third thing we've learned: he's got to eat just about as often as we do."

"How do we know that?" asked Ramona.

"According to Chajinka, he approached the meat very cautiously, but his tracks show that he trotted away once he'd eaten his fill. The trail disappeared after a mile, but we know that he trotted that whole distance."

"Ah!" said Ramona. "I see."

"I sure as hell don't," complained her husband.

"Anything that can sustain that pace, that kind of drain on its energy, has to eat just about every day." I paused. "And we know a fourth thing."

"What is that?" she asked.

"He's not afraid of us," I said. "He had to know we were the ones who killed those meat animals. Our tracks and scent were all over the place, and of course there were the ropes. He knows that we're a party of at least nine -- five, if you discount Chajinka and the three gunbearers, and he has no reason to discount them. And yet, hours after learning all that, he hasn't left the area." I paused. "That leads to a fifth conclusion. He's not very bright; he didn't understand that Marx's gun was what wounded the animal he killed yesterday -- because if he realized we could kill from a distance, he'd be afraid of us."

"You deduce all that just from a few tracks and the signs that Chajinka saw?" asked Desmond skeptically.

"Reading signs and interpreting what they mean is what hunting's all about," I explained. "Shooting is just the final step."

"So do we go after him now?" asked Marx eagerly.

I shook my head. "I've already sent Chajinka back out to see if he can find the creature's lair. If he's like most carnivores, he'll want to lie up after he eats. If we know where to look for him, we'll save a lot of time and effort. It makes more sense to wait for Chajinka to report back, and then go after the Snark in the morning."

"It seems so odd," said Ramona. "We've never seen this creature, and yet we've already reasoned out that he's incredibly formidable."

"Of course he's formidable," I said.

"You say that as if everything is formidable," she said with a condescending smile.

"That's the first axiom on safari," I replied. "Everything bites."

"If this thing is as dangerous as you make it seem," said Desmond hesitantly, "are we permitted to use more ... well, sophisticated weapons?"

"Show a little guts, Philemon," said Marx contemptuously.

"I'm a banker, not a goddamned Alan Quatermain!" shot back Desmond.

"If you're afraid, stay in camp," said Marx. "Me, I can't wait to get him in my sights."

"You didn't answer my question, Mr. Bell," persisted Desmond.

Mbele pulled out the Statute Book and began reading aloud. "Unless, in the hunter's judgment, the weapons you are using are inadequate for killing the prey, you must use the weapons that have been approved for the world in question."

"So if he presents a serious threat, we can use pulse guns and molecular imploders and the like?"

"Have you ever seen a molecular imploder in action?" I asked. "Aim it at a 50-story building and you turn the whole thing into pudding in about three seconds."

"What about pulse guns?" he persisted.

"There's not a lot of trophy left when one of those babies hit the target," I said.

"We need something, damn it!" whined Desmond.

"We have more than enough firepower to bring down any animal on this planet," I said, getting annoyed with him. "I don't mean to be blunt, but there's a difference between an inadequate hunter and an inadequate weapon."

"You can say that again!" muttered Marx.

"That was very blunt, Mr. Bell," said Desmond, getting up and walking to his Bubble. His wife stared at him expressionlessly, then pulled out her book and began reading.

"That's what you get for being honest," said Marx, making no attempt to hide his amusement. "I just hope this Snark is half the creature you make it out to be." I'll settle for half, I thought uneasily.

* * * *

Chajinka, who was sitting on the hood of the safari vehicle, raised his spear, which was my signal to stop.

He jumped down, bent over, examined the grasses for a few seconds, then trotted off to his left, eyes

glued to the ground.

I climbed out and grabbed my rifle.

"You wait here," I said to the four humans. The Dabih gunbearers, who clung to handles and footholds on the back of the vehicle when it was moving, had released their grips and were now standing just behind it.

"Whose shot it is?" asked Marx.

"Let me think," I said. "You shot that big buck yesterday, and Mrs. Desmond killed the boar-like thing with the big tusks just before that. So Mr. Desmond has the first shot today."

"I'm not getting out of the vehicle," said Desmond.

"It's against regulations to shoot from the safety of the vehicle," I pointed out.

"Fuck your regulations and fuck you!" hollered Desmond. "I don't want the first shot! I don't want any shot! I don't even know what the hell I'm doing on this stupid safari!"

"Goddammit, Philemon!" hissed Marx fiercely.

"What is it?" asked Desmond, startled.

"If there was anything there, Mr. Desmond," I explained, trying to control my temper, "you just gave it more than ample reason to run hell for leather in the opposite direction. You never yell during a hunt."

I walked away in disgust and joined Chajinka beneath a small tree. He was standing beside a young dead herbivore whose skull had been crushed.

"Snark," he said, pointing to the skull.

"When?" I asked.

He pulled back the dead animal's lips to examine its gums, felt the inside of its ears, examined other parts for a few seconds.

"Five hours," he said. "Maybe six."

"The middle of the night."

"Yes."

* * * *

"Its habit of getting up late you'll agree"

"That it carries too far, when I say"

"That it frequently breakfasts at five-o'clock tea,"

"And dines on the following day.""

* * * *

"Can you pick up his trail?" I asked Chajinka.

He looked around, then gave the Dabih equivalent of a frown. "It vanishes," he said at last, pointing to a spot ten feet away.

"You mean some animals obliterated his tracks after he made them?"

He shrugged. "No tracks at all. Not his, not anyone's."

"Why not?"

He had no answer.

I stared at the ground for a long moment. "Okay," I said at last. "Let's get back to the vehicle."

He resumed his customary position on the hood, while I sat behind the control panel and thought.

"Well?" asked Marx. "Did it have something to do with the Snark?"

"Yeah," I said, still puzzled by the absence of any tracks. "He made a kill during the night. His prey was an animal built for what I would call evasive maneuvering. That means he's got excellent nocturnal vision and good motor skills."

"So he's a night hunter?" asked Ramona.

"No, I wouldn't say that," I replied. "He killed the crystal-horned buck at midday, so like most predators he's also an opportunist; when a meal is there for the taking, he grabs it. Anyway, if we can't find his lair, we're probably going to have to build a blind, sit motionless with our guns, hang some fresh bait every

evening, and hope it interests him."

"That's not real hunting!" scoffed Marx.

"There's no way we can go chasing after him in the dark," I responded.

"I'm not chasing anything in the dark!" said Desmond adamantly. "You want to do it, you do it without me."

"Don't be such a coward!" said Marx.

"Fuck you, Willard!" Desmond retorted.

"Bold words," said Marx. "Why don't you take some of that bravery and aim it at the animals?"

"I hate it here!" snapped Desmond. "I think we should go back to camp."

"And do what?" asked Marx sarcastically.

"And consider our options," he replied. "It's a big planet. Maybe we could take off and land on one of the other continents -- one without any Snarks on it."

"Nonsense!" said Marx. "We came here to hunt big game. Well, now we've found it."

"I don't know what we've found," said Desmond, halfway between anger and panic, "and neither do you."

"That's what makes it such good sport and so exciting," said Marx.

"Exciting is watching sports on the holo," Desmond shot back. "_This_ is _dangerous_."

"Same damned thing," muttered Marx.

* * * *

We spent the next two days searching unsuccessfully for any sign of the Snark. For a while I thought he had moved out of the area and considered moving our base camp, but then Chajinka found some relatively fresh tracks, perhaps three hours old. So we didn't move the camp after all -- but we also didn't find the creature.

Then, on the third afternoon of the search, as we were taking a break, sitting in the shade of a huge tree with purple and gold flowers, we heard a strange sound off in the distance.

"Thunder?" asked Marx.

"Doesn't seem likely," replied Pollard. "There's not a cloud in the sky."

"Well, it's _something_," continued Marx.

Ramona frowned. "And it's getting closer. Well, louder, anyway."

On a hunch, I set my lenses to Telescopic, and it was a damned lucky thing I did.

"Everybody! Up into the tree -- fast!" I shouted.

"But -- "

"No arguments! Get going!"

They weren't the most agile tree-climbers I'd ever encountered, but when they were finally able to see what I had seen, they managed to get clear of the ground in one hell of a hurry. A minute later a few thousand Marx's Gazelles thundered past.

I waited for the dust to settle, then lowered myself to the ground and scanned the horizon.

"Okay, it's safe to come down now," I announced.

"Why didn't we climb into the vehicle?" asked Ramona, getting out of the tree and checking her hands for cuts.

"It's an open vehicle, Mrs. Desmond," I pointed out. "You could have wound up with a fractured skull as they jumped over it -- or with a gazelle in your lap if one of them was a poor jumper."

"Point taken."

"What the hell would cause something like that?" asked Pollard, staring after the stampeding herd as he brushed himself off.

"I'd say a predator made a sloppy kill, or maybe blew one entirely."

"How do you figure that?"

"Because this is the first time we've seen a stampede ... so we can assume that when they're killed

quickly and efficiently, the gazelles just move out of the predator's range and then go back to grazing. It's when the predator misses his prey, or wounds it, and then races after it into the middle of the herd that they panic."

"You think it's one of the big cats?" asked Pollard.

"It's possible."

"I'd love to get some holos of those cats on a kill."

"You may get your wish, Mr. Pollard," I said. "We'll backtrack to where the stampede started and hope we get lucky."

"That suits me just fine," said Marx, patting his rifle.

* * * *

We headed southwest in the vehicle until the terrain became too rough, then left it behind and started walking as the landscape changed from hilly and tree-covered to heavily-forested. Chajinka trotted ahead of us, eyes on the ground, spotting things even I couldn't see, and finally he came to a stop.

"What it is?" I asked, catching up with him.

He pointed straight ahead into the dense foliage. "He is there."

"He?"

"The Snark," he said, pointing to a single track.

"How deep is the cover?" I asked. "How do you know he didn't run right through it?"

He pointed to the bushes, which were covered with thorns. "He cannot run through this without pain."

"You've never seen him," said Ramona, joining us. "How do you know?"

"If it did not rip his flesh, he would be a forest creature, created by God to live here," answered Chajinka, as if explaining it to a child. "But we know that he hunts plains game. A forest dweller with thick, heavy skin and bones could not move swiftly enough. So this is not his home -- it is his hiding place."

I thought there was a good chance that it was more than his hiding place, that it could very well be his fortress. It was damned near impenetrable, and the forest floor was covered with dry leaves, so no one was going to sneak up on him without giving him plenty of warning.

"What are we waiting for?" asked Marx, approaching with Desmond. He stopped long enough to take his rifle from his gunbearer.

"We're waiting until I can figure out the best way to go about it," I responded.

"We walk in and blow him away," said Marx. "What's so hard about that?"

I shook my head. "This is his terrain. He knows every inch of it. You're going to make a lot of noise walking in there, and the way the upper terraces of the trees are intertwined, I've got a feeling that it could be dark as night 600 yards into the forest."

"So we'll use infra-red scopes on our guns," said Marx.

I kept staring at the thick foliage. "I don't like it," I said. "He's got every advantage."

"But _we've_ got the weapons," persisted Marx.

"With minimal visibility and maneuverability, they won't do you much good."

"Bullshit!" spat Marx. "We're wasting time. Let's go in after him."

"The four of you are my responsibility," I replied. "I can't risk your safety by letting you go in there. Within a couple of minutes you could be out of touch with me and with each other. You'll be making noise with every step you take, and if I'm right about the light, before long you could be standing right next to him without seeing him. And we haven't explored any Dodgson forests yet -- he might not be the only danger. There could be everything from arboreal killer cats to poisonous insects to 50-foot-long snakes with an attitude."

"So what do you propose?" asked Marx.

"A blind makes the most sense," I said. "But it could take half a day to build one, and who the hell knows where he'll be by then?" I paused. "All right. The three of you with weapons will spread out. Mr. Pollard, stand well behind them. Chajinka and I will go into the bush and try to flush him out."

"I thought you said it was too dangerous," said Ramona.

"Let me amend that," I answered. "It's too dangerous for amateurs."

"If there's a chance that he can harm you, why don't we just forget about it?" she continued.

"I appreciate your concern," I began, "but -- "

"I'm not being totally altruistic. What happens to us if he kills you?"

"You'll return to base camp and tell Mbele what happened. He'll radio a subspace message to headquarters, and Silinger & Mahr will decide whether to give you a refund or take you to another planet with a new hunter."

"You make it sound so ... so businesslike," she said distastefully.

"It's my business," I replied.

"Why did you ever become a hunter?"

I shrugged. "Why did you become a judge?"

"I have a passion for order," she said.

"So do I," I replied.

"You find order in killing things?"

"I find order in Nature. Death is just a part of it." I paused. "Now, Mr. Marx," I said, turning back to him, "I want you to ... "

He wasn't there.

"Where the hell did he go?" I demanded.

No one seemed to know, not even Chajinka. Then his gunbearer approached me.

"Boss Marx went there." He pointed to the forest, then ruefully held up the back-up rifle. "He did not wait for me."

"Shit!" I muttered. "It's bad enough that I've got to go in after the Snark! Now I stand a hell of a good chance of getting blown away by that macho bastard!"

"Why would he shoot you?" asked Ramona.

"He'll hear me before he sees me," I answered. "He's running on adrenaline. He'll be sure I'm the Snark."

"Then stay out here."

"I wish I could," I said truthfully. "But it's my job to protect him whether he wants me to or not."

That particular argument became academic about five seconds later, when we heard a shot, and then a long, agonized scream.

A human scream.

"You two stand about 200 yards apart," I said to the Desmonds. "Shoot anything that comes out of there that doesn't look like me or a Dabih!" Then, to Chajinka: "Let's go!"

The Dabih led the way into the forest. Then, as it started getting thicker and darker, we lost Marx's trail. "We're more likely to find him if we split up," I whispered. "You go left, I'll go right."

I kept my gun at the ready, wishing I'd inserted my infra-red lenses into my eyes that morning. After a minute I couldn't hear Chajinka any more, which meant when I finally heard footsteps I was going to have to hold my fire until I could tell whether it was the Dabih or the Snark.

It's no secret that hunters hate going into the bush after a wounded animal. Well, let me tell you something: going into the bush after an _un_ wounded animal is even less appealing. Sweat ran down into my eyes, insects crawled inside my shoes and socks and up my shirtsleeves, and my gun seemed to have tripled in weight. I could barely see ten feet in front of me, and if Marx had yelled for help from 50 yards away, I probably would be five minutes locating him.

But Marx was past yelling for help. I was suddenly able to make out the figure of a man lying on the ground. I approached him cautiously, seeing Snarks -- whatever they looked like -- behind every tree.

Finally I reached him and knelt down to examine him. His throat had been slashed open, and his innards were pouring out of a gaping hole in his belly. He was probably dead before he hit the ground.

"Chajinka!" I hollered. There was no response.

I called his name every thirty seconds, and finally, after about five minutes, I heard a body shuffling through the thick bush, its translated, monotone voice saying, "Don't shoot! Don't shoot!"

"Get over here!" I said.

He joined me a moment later. "Snark," he said, looking at Marx's corpse.

"For sure?" I asked.

"For sure."

"All right," I said. "Help me carry his body back out of here."

Then, suddenly, we heard two rifle shots.

"Damn!" I bellowed. "He's broken out!"

"Perhaps he will be dead," said Chajinka, leading the way back out of the forest. "There were two shots."

When we finally got into the open, we found Philemon Desmond sitting on the ground, hyper-ventilating, his whole body shaking. Ramona and Pollard stood a few yards away, staring at him -- she with open contempt, he with a certain degree of sympathy.

"What happened?" I demanded.

"He burst out of the woods and came right at me!" said Desmond in a shaky voice.

"We heard two shots. Did you hit him?"

"I don't think so." He began shaking all over. "No, I definately didn't."

"How the hell could you miss?" I shouted. "He couldn't have been twenty yards away!"

"I've never killed anything before!" Desmond yelled back.

I scanned the hilly countryside. There was no sign of the Snark, and there had to be a good five hundred hiding places just within my field of vision.

"Wonderful!" I muttered. "Just wonderful!"

* * * *

The Bellman looked uffish, and wrinkled his brow.

"If only you'd spoken before!"

It's excessively awkward to mention it now,"

With the Snark, so to speak, at the door!"

* * * *

We dragged Marx's body out of the forest and loaded in into the back of the safari vehicle.

"My God!" whined Desmond. "He's dead! He was the only one of us who knew the first damned thing about hunting, and he's dead! We've got to get out of here!"

"He was also a friend," said Ramona. "You might spare a little of your self-pity for him."

"Ramona!" said Pollard harshly.

"I'm sorry," she said with a total lack of sincerity.

Pollard had been staring at Marx's body since we brought it out of the forest. "Jesus, he's a mess!" he said at last. "Did he suffer much?"

"No," I assured him. "Not with wounds like those -- he would have gone into shock immediately."

"Well, we can be thankful for that, I suppose," said Pollard. He finally tore his eyes away from the body and turned to me. "What now?"

"Now it's not a matter of sport any more," I said, morbidly wondering whether the authorities would revoke my license for losing a client, or simply suspend it. "He's killed one of us. He's got to die."

"I thought that was the whole purpose of the safari."

"The purpose was a sporting stalk, with the odds all on the game's side. Now the purpose is to kill him as quickly and efficiently as we can."

"That sounds like revenge," noted Ramona.

"Practicality," I corrected her. "Now that he knows how easy it is to kill an armed man, we don't want him to get into the habit."

"How do you stop him?"

"There are ways," I said. "I'll use every trick I know -- and I know a lifetime's worth of them -- before he has a chance to kill again." I paused. "Now, so I'll know which traps to set, I want you to tell me what he actually looks like."

"Like a huge red ape with big glaring eyes," said Pollard.

"No," said Ramona. "He looked more like a brown bear, but with longer legs."

"He was sleek," offered Pollard.

Ramona disagreed again. "No, he was shaggy."

"Wonderful," I muttered. "I trust you at least took a couple of holos, Mr. Pollard?"

He shook his head. "I was so surprised when he burst out of there that I totally forgot the camera," he admitted shamefacedly.

"Well, that's an enormous help," I said disgustedly. I turned to Desmond. "How about you?"

"I don't know," he whimpered. Suddenly he shuddered. "He looked like Death!"

"You must forgive Philmon," said Ramona, with an expression that said she wasn't about to forgive him. "He's really very good at investments and mergers and even hostile takeovers. He's just not very competent at physical things." She patted his medal. "Except running."

* * * *

Marx had a wife and three grown children back on Roosevelt III, and his friends felt sure they'd want him shipped home, so we put his body in a vacuum container and stuck it in the cargo hold.

After that was done, Chajinka and I went to work. We set seven traps, then went back to camp and waited.

Early the next morning we went out to see what we'd accomplished.

That was when I learned that the Snark had a sardonic sense of humor.

Each of the traps contained a dead animal. But lest we mistakenly think that we had anything to do with it, each one had its head staved in.

The son of a bitch was actually mocking us.

* * * *

"For the Snark's a peculiar creature, that won't

Be caught in a commonplace way.

Do all that you know, and try all that you don't.

Not a chance must be wasted today!"

* * * *

I awoke the next morning to the sound of vaguely familiar alien jabbering. It took me a minute to clear my head and identify what I was hearing. Then I raced out of my Bubble and almost bumped into Chajinka, who was running to meet me.

"What's going on?" I demanded.

He responded in his native tongue.

"Where's your t-pack?" I asked.

He jabbered at me. I couldn't understand a word of it.

Finally he pulled me over to the area where the Dabihs ate and slept, and pointed to the shapeless pile of metal and plastic and computer chips. Sometime during the night the Snark had silently entered the camp and destroyed all the t-packs.

I kept wondering: was he just lucky in his choice, or could he possibly have known how much we needed them?

Mbele, awakened by the same sounds, quickly emerged from his Bubble.

"What the hell is going on?" he asked.

"See for yourself," I said.

"Jesus!" he said. "Can any of the Dabihs speak Terran?"

I shook my head. "If they could, they wouldn't need t-packs, would they?"

"Was it the Snark?"

I grimaced. "Who else?"

"So what do you do now?"

"First, I try to figure out whether it was mischief or malice, and whether he had any idea what havoc it would cause."

"You think he might be a little smarter than your average bear in the woods?"

"I don't know. He lives like an animal, he acts like an animal, and he hunts like an animal. But in a short space of time he's killed Marx, and he's seen to it that the five remaining Men can't communicate with the twelve Dabihs." I forced a wry smile to my mouth. "That's not bad for a dumb animal, is it?"

"You'd better wake the others and let them know what's happened," said Mbele.

"I know," I said. I kicked one of the broken t-packs up against a tree. "Shit!"

I woke the Desmonds and Pollard and told them what had occurred. I thought Philemon Desmond might faint. The others were a little more useful.

"How long ago did this happen?" asked Pollard.

"Chajinka could probably give you a more accurate estimate, but I can't speak to him. My best guess is about two hours."

"So if we go after him, he's two hours ahead of us?"

"That's right."

"We'd better kill him quickly," said Ramona. "He could come back any time, now that he knows where our camp is."

"Give me a laser rifle," added Pollard. "I haven't fired a gun since I was a kid at camp, but how the hell hard can it be to sweep the area with a beam?"

"You look a little under the weather, Mr. Desmond," I said. "Perhaps you'd like to stay in camp."

Actually, he looked incredibly grateful for the out I'd given him. Then his wife ruined it all by adding that he'd just be in the way.

"I'm going," he said.

"It's really not necessary," I said.

"I paid. I'm going."

And that was that.

"There's no sense taking gunbearers," I said as the four of us walked to the safari vehicle. "We can't talk to them, and besides, the rules don't apply in this case. If we see him, we'll take him from the safety of the vehicle, and it'll give you something solid to rest your rifles on while you're sweeping the area." They climbed onto their seats. "Wait here a minute."

I went back, found Mbele, and told him that we were going after the Snark, and that he should use the Dabihs to set up some kind of defensive perimeter. Then I signaled to Chajinka to join me. A moment later he had taken his customary position on the hood of the vehicle, and we were off in pursuit of the Snark.

The trail led due northeast, past the savannah, toward rolling country and a large, lightly-forested valley. Two or three times I thought we'd spot him just over the next hill, but he was a cagy bastard, and by midafternoon we still hadn't sighted him.

As dusk fell Chajinka couldn't read the signs from the vehicle, so he jumped off and began trotting along, eyes glued to the ground. When we entered the valley, he was following the trail so slowly that Ramona and Pollard got out and walked along with him while I followed in the vehicle and Desmond stayed huddled in the back of it.

* * * *

_But the valley grew narrow and narrower still, _

_And the evening got darker and colder, _

_Till (merely from nervousness, not from good will) _

_They marched along shoulder to shoulder. _

* * * *

Night fell with no sign of the Snark. I didn't want to chance damaging the vehicle by driving over that terrain in the dark, so we slept until sunrise, and then drove back to base camp, reaching it just before noon.

Nobody was prepared for the sight that awaited us.

The eleven Dabihs we'd left behind were sprawled dead on the ground in grotesquely contorted positions, each with his throat shredded or his intestines ripped out. Dismembered arms and legs were everywhere, and the place was swimming in blood. Dead staring eyes greeted us accusingly, as if to say: "Where were you when we needed you?"

The stench was worse than the sight. Ramona gagged and began vomiting. Desmond whimpered and curled up into a fetal ball on the floor of the vehicle so he wouldn't have to look at the carnage. Pollard froze like a statue; then, after a moment, he too began vomiting.

I'd seen a lot of death in my time. So had Chajinka. But neither of us had ever seen anything remotely like this. There hadn't been much of a struggle. It doesn't take a 400-pound predator very long to wipe out a bunch of unarmed 90-pound Dabihs. My guess was that it was over in less than a minute.

"What the hell happened here?" asked Pollard, gesturing weakly toward all the blood-soaked dismembered bodies when he finally was able to speak.

* * * *

"The method employed I would gladly explain,"

"While I have it so clear in my head."

_"If I had but the time and you had but the brain -- _"

_"But much yet remains to be said." _"

* * * *

"Where's Mbele?" I asked, finally getting past the shock of what I was looking at and realizing that he wasn't among them.

Before anyone could answer, I raced to the hatch and entered the ship, rifle at the ready, half-expecting to be pounced on by the Snark at any moment.

I found what was left of Captain Mbele in the control room. His head had been torn from his body, and his stomach was ripped open. The floor, the bulkheads, even the viewscreen were all drenched with his blood.

"Is he there?" called Ramona from the ground.

"Stay out!" I yelled.

Then I searched every inch of the ship, looking for the Snark. I could feel my heart pounding as I explored each section, but there was no sign of him.

I went back to the control room and began checking it over thoroughly. The Snark didn't know what made the ship work, or even what it was, but he knew it belonged to his enemies, and he did a lot of damage. Some of it -- to the pilot's chair and the Deepsleep pods and the auxiliary screens -- didn't matter. Some of it -- to the fusion ignition and the navigational computer and the subspace radio -- mattered a lot.

I continued going through the ship, assessing the damage. He'd ripped up a couple of beds in his fury, but the most serious destruction was to the galley. I had a feeling that nothing in it would ever work again.

I went back outside and confronted the party.

"Did you find Captain Mbele?" asked Ramona.

"Yes. He's in the ship." She started walking to the hatch. I grabbed her arm. "Trust me: you don't want to see him."

"That's it!" screamed Desmond. "We were crazy to come here! I want out! Not tomorrow, not later! Now!"

"I second the motion," agreed Ramona. "Let's get the hell off this planet before it kills any more of us."

"That's not possible," I said grimly. "The Snark did some serious damage to the ship."

"How long will it take to fix it?" asked Pollard.

"If I was a skilled spacecraft mechanic with a full set of tools and all the replacement parts I needed, maybe a week," I answered. "But I'm a hunter who doesn't know how to fix a broken spaceship. I wouldn't know where to begin."

"You mean we're stranded?" asked Ramona.

"For the time being," I said.

"What do you mean, 'for the time being'?" shrieked Desmond hysterically. "We're here forever! We're dead! We're all dead!"

I grabbed him and shook him, and when he wouldn't stop screaming I slapped him, hard, on the face.

"That won't help!" I said angrily.

"We'll never get off this goddamned dirtball!" he bleated.

"Yes we will," I said. "Mbele had to check in with Silinger & Mahr every week. When they don't hear from us, they'll send a rescue party. All we have to do is stay alive until they get here."

"They'll never come!" moaned Desmond. "We're all going to die!"

"Stop your whining!" I snapped. _ This is just what I needed now, _ I thought disgustedly; _ we're surrounded by dismembered corpses, the very ground is soaked with blood, the Snark's probably still nearby, and this asshole is losing it. _ "We have work to do!" They all looked at me. "I want the three of you to start digging a mass grave for the eleven Dabihs. When that's done, I want us to burn everything -- every tree, every bush, everything -- to get rid of the smell of blood so it doesn't attract any predators. What we can't burn, we'll bury."

"And what are you going to be doing?" demanded Desmond, who had at least regained some shred of composure.

"I'm going to bring what's left of Mbele out of the ship and clean up all the blood," I said bluntly. "Unless you'd rather do it." I thought he was going to faint. "Then, if I can make myself understood to Chajinka, he and I will try to secure the area."

"How?" asked Ramona.

"We got some devices that are sensitive to movement and body heat. Maybe we can rig up some kind of alarm system. Chajinka and I can hide them around the perimeter of the camp. If we finish before you do, we'll pitch in and help with the grave. Now get busy -- the sooner we finish, the sooner we can lock ourselves in the ship and decide on our next move."

"Is there a next move?" asked Pollard.

"Always," I replied.

It took me almost four hours to clean Mbele's blood and innards from the control room. I put what was left of him into a vacuum pouch, then hefted it to my shoulder and carried it outside.

I found Chajinka helping with the grave. I called him over and showed him, with an elaborate pantomime, what I had in mind, and a few moments later we were planting the sensing devices around the perimeter of our camp. I saw no reason to stay in the Bubbles with such a dangerous enemy on the loose, so I collapsed them and moved them back into the cargo hold. The grave still wasn't done, so Chajinka and I helped finish the job. Desmond wouldn't touch any of the corpses, and Ramona looked like she was going to get sick again, so the Dabih, Pollard and I dragged the corpses and spare body parts to the grave, I added the pouch containing Mbele's remains, and after we four humans and Chajinka filled it in, I read the Bible over it.

"Now what?" asked Ramona, dirty and on the verge of physical collapse.

"Now we burn everything, bury any remaining dried blood, and then we move into the ship," I said.

"And just wait to be rescued?"

I shook my head. "It could be weeks, even a month, before a rescue party arrives. We're going to need meat, and since we've no way to refrigerate it with the galley destroyed, it means we'll probably have to go hunting every day, or at least every other day."

"I see," she said.

"And I'm going to kill the Snark," I said.

"Why don't we just wait for the rescue party and not take any chances?" suggested Ramona fearfully.

"It's killed thirteen beings who were under my protection," I said grimly. "I'm going to kill him if it's the last thing I do."

"Maybe Philemon should give you his laser rifle," Ramona suggested. "He's not very good with it anyway."

Desmond glared at her, but made no reply.

"He may need it," I said. "Besides, I'm happy with my own weapon."

"Where will you hunt for it?" asked Pollard.

"Right in this general area," I answered. "He has no reason to leave it."

"We can't just sit around like bait and wait for him!" whined Desmond. "In all the time we've been on the planet you've never even seen him -- but he's killed Marx and Mbele and our Dabihs. He comes into camp whenever he wants! He sabotages our t-packs and our ship! We'll need an army to kill him!"

"If he comes back, you'll be safe inside the ship," I said.

"Locking himself in the ship didn't help Captain Mbele," noted Ramona.

"He didn't close the hatch. As I read the signs, he saw what was happening and raced into the ship for a gun. The Snark caught him before he found it." I paused. "He knew better than to be out here without a weapon."

"So now it's his fault that this monster killed him?" shouted Desmond. "Let's not blame the hunter who fucked up! Let's blame the victim!"

That's when I lost it. "One more word out of you and there'll be another killing!" I shouted back at him.

Pollard stepped between us. "Stop it!" he snapped. "The creature's out there! Don't do his work for him!"

We both calmed down after that, and finally went into the ship. There was no food, but everyone was so physically and emotionally exhausted that it didn't matter. Half an hour later we were all sound asleep.

* * * *

Each morning Chajinka and I walked across the scorched, empty field that had so recently been covered with vegetation. We would climb into the safari vehicle and prepare to go out to bag the day's food -- and even though there was no longer any place to hide near the ship, I constantly had the uneasy feeling that he was watching us, measuring our strength, biding his time.

We never went more than four miles from camp. I didn't shoot the choicest animals, just the closest.

Then we'd cut off the strips of meat we thought we'd need and leave the carcass for the scavengers. We'd return to camp, and after breakfast we'd set out on foot to look for signs of the Snark.

I knew he was nearby, knew it as surely as I knew my own name, but we couldn't find any physical sign of him. I warned the others not to leave the ship without their weapons, preferably not to leave it at all, and under no circumstance were they to go more than thirty yards away from it unless they were in my company.

By the fifth day after the massacre everyone was getting tired of red meat, so I decided to take Chajinka down to the river, and see if we could spear a few fish.

"Can I come with you?" asked Ramona, appearing just inside the hatch. "I'm starting to feel distinctly claustrophobic."

I couldn't see any reason why not. Hell, she was safer with Chajinka and me than back at the ship.

"Bring your rifle," I said.

She disappeared inside the ship, then emerged with a laser rifle a moment later.

"I'm ready."

"Let's go," I said.

We marched through heavy bush to the river.

"All the local animals must come down here to drink," noted Ramona. "Wouldn't it be easier to do your hunting right here rather than go out in the safari vehicle each morning?"

"We'd attract too many scavengers," I explained. "And since Chajinka and I come down here twice a day to bring water back to the ship, why cause ourselves any problems?"

"I see." She paused. "Are there any carnivores in the river -- the kind that might eat a human?"

"I haven't seen any," I replied. "But I sure as hell wouldn't recommend taking a swim."

When we reached the river, Chijinka grabbed a large branch and beat the water. When he was sure it was safe, he waded out, thigh-deep, and held his spear above his head, poised to strike, while we watched him in total silence. He stayed motionless for almost two full minutes, then suddenly stabbed the water and came away with a large, wriggling fish.

He grinned and said something that I couldn't understand, then clambered onto the bank, picked up a rock, and smashed it down on the fish's head. It stopped moving, and he went back into the water.

"Two more and we'll have our dinner," I remarked.

"He's really something," she said. "Where did you find him?"

"I inherited him."

"I beg your pardon?"

"He was the tracker for the hunter I apprenticed under," I explained. "When he retired, he left me his client list -- and Chajinka."

Suddenly there was a yell of triumph from Chajinka. He held up his spear, and there was a huge fish, maybe 25 pounds, squirming at the end of it. The Dabih himself didn't weigh much more than 85 pounds, the current was strong and the footing was slippery. Suddenly he fell over backward and vanished beneath the surface of the water.

He emerged again a second later, but without the spear and the fish. I saw them floating downstream a good ten yards from him. There was no sense telling him where to look; he couldn't understand a word I said without a t-pack. So I waded into the water and went after the spear myself. It became chest-deep very quickly, and I had to fight the current, but I finally reached the spear and waded back to shore. Chajinka climbed out a moment later with an embarrassed grin on his face. He made another incomprehensible comment, then brained the fish as he had done with the first one.

"See?" I said sardonically. "Even fishing can be exciting with you're on safari."

There was no answer. I spun around. Ramona Desmond was nowhere to be seen.

* * * *

So the Snark pronounced sentence, the Judge being quite

Too nervous to utter a word.

When it rose to its feet, there was silence like night,

And the fall of a pin might be heard.

* * * *

I squatted down next to her corpse. There was no blood; he'd noiselessly broken her neck and left her where she'd fallen.

"He was watching us the whole time," I said furiously. "He waited until she was alone, then grabbed her and pulled her into the bush." A chilling thought occurred to me. "I wonder who's hunting who?"

Chajinka muttered something incomprehensible.

"All right," I said at last. "Let's take her back to camp."

I lifted Ramona's body to my shoulder and signaled him to follow me.

Desmond raced out of the ship when he saw us. He began flagellating himself and pulling tufts of his hair out, screaming nonsense words at the top of his lungs.

"What the hell is happening?" asked Pollard, clambering out through the hatch. Then he saw the body. He had to work to keep his voice under control. "Oh, Jesus! Oh, Jesus!" he kept repeating. When he'd finally calmed down, he said, "It's more than an animal! It's like some vengeful alien god come to life!"

Chajinka went into the cargo hold and emerged with a shovel.

Pollard stared at Desmond, who was still raving. "I'll help with the grave."

"Thanks," I said. "I think I'd better get Desmond to his cabin and give him a sedative."

I walked over and put a hand on his shoulder.

"It was your fault!" he screamed. "You were supposed to protect her and you let it kill her!"

I couldn't deny it, so I just kept urging him gently toward the ship.

And then, between one second and the next, he snapped. I could see it in his face. His eyes went wide, the muscles in his jaw began twitching, even the tenor of his voice changed.

"That thing is going to learn what it means to kill the wife of the most powerful man on Far London!" He looked off into the bush and hollered: "I'm Philemon Desmond, goddammit, and I'm through being terrified by some ignorant fucking beast! Do you hear me? It's over! You're dead meat!"

"Come on, Mr. Desmond," I said softly, pushing him toward the ship.

"Who the hell are you?" he demanded, and I could tell that he really didn't recognize me.

I was about to humor him with an answer when everything went black and the ground came up to meet me.

* * * *

And the Banker, inspired with a courage so new

It was a matter for general remark,

Rushed madly ahead and was lost to their view

In his zeal to discover the Snark.

* * * *

Pollard sloshed some water on my face. I gasped for breath, then sat up and put a hand to my head. It came away covered with blood.

"Are you all right?" he asked, kneeling down next to me, and I saw that Chajinka was behind him.

"What happened?"

"I'm not sure," he said. "We were just starting to dig the grave when I heard Desmond suddenly stop gibbering. Then he whacked you on the head with something, and ran off."

"I never saw it coming," I groaned, blinking my eyes furiously. "Where did he go?"

"I don't know." He pointed to the southwest. "That way, I think."

"_Shit!"_ I said. "The Snark is still in the area!"

I tried to get to my feet, but was overwhelmed by pain and dizziness, and sat back down, hard.

"Take it easy," he said. "You've probably got a hell of a concussion. Where's the first aid kit? Maybe I can at least stop the bleeding."

I told him where to find it, then concentrated on trying to focus my eyes.

When Pollard returned and began working on my head, I asked, "Did you see if he at least took his laser rifle with him?"

"If he didn't have it when he hit you, he didn't stop to get it."

"Goddammit!"

"I guess that means he doesn't have it."

"Wonderful," I muttered, wincing as he did something to the back of my head. "So he's unarmed, running through the bush, and screaming at the top of his lungs."

"All done," said Pollard, standing up. "It's not a pretty job, but at least the bleeding's stopped. How do you feel?"

"Groggy," I said. "Help me up."

Once I was on my feet, I looked around. "Where's my rifle?"

"Right here," said Pollard, picking it up and handing it to me. "But you're in no shape to go after Desmond."

"I'm not going after Desmond," I mumbled. "I'm going after him!" I signaled Chajinka to join me and set off unsteadily to the southwest. "Lock yourself in the ship."

"I'll finish burying Ramona first."

"Don't!"

"But -- "

"Unless you're prepared to fend him off with a shovel if he shows up, do what I said."

"I can't leave her body out for the scavengers," Pollard protested.

"Take her with you. Spray her with the preservatives we use for trophies and stash her in the cargo hold. We'll bury her when I get back."

"_If_ you get back," he corrected me. "You look like you can barely stand on your feet."

"I'll be back," I promised him. "I'm still a hunter, and he's still just an animal."

"Yeah -- he's just an animal. That's why there's just you, me and Chajinka left alive."

* * * *

Desmond didn't get very far -- not that I ever expected him to. We found him half a mile away, his skull crushed. I carried him back to camp and buried him next to his wife.

"That bastard's been one step ahead of us from the start," said Pollard bitterly as we sat down next to the ship and slaked our thirst with some lukewarm water. Chajinka sat a few yards away, motionless as a statue, watching and listening for any sign of the Snark.

"He's smarter than I thought," I admitted. "Or luckier."

"Nothing is that lucky," said Pollard. "He must be intelligent."

"Absolutely," I agreed.

Pollard's eyes went wide. "Wait a minute!" he said sharply. "If you knew he was intelligent, what the hell were we doing hunting him in the first place?"

"There's a difference between intelligence and sentience," I said. "We know he's intelligent. We don't

know that he's sentient."

He looked puzzled. "I thought they were the same thing."

I shook my head. "Back on Earth, chimpanzees were intelligent enough to create crude tools, and to pass that knowledge on from one generation to the next -- but no one ever claimed they were sentient. The fact that the Snark can hide his trail, spot my traps and elude us makes him intelligent. It doesn't make him sentient."

"On the other hand, it doesn't prove he's not sentient," said Pollard stubbornly.

"No, it doesn't."

"So what do we do?"

"We kill him," I answered.

"Even if he's sentient?"

"What do you do when someone murders fifteen sentient beings?" I said. "If he's a Man, you execute him. If he's an animal, you track him down and kill him. Either way, the result is the same."

"All right," said Pollard dubiously. "We kill him. How?"

"We leave the ship and go after him."

"Why?" he demanded. "We're safe in the ship!"

"Tell that to Mbele and the Desmonds and the Dabihs," I shot back. "As long as we stay here, he knows where we are and we don't know where he is. That means he's the hunter and we're the prey. If we leave camp and pick up his trail before he picks up ours, we go back to being the hunters again." I got to my feet. "In fact, the sooner we start, the better."

He wasn't happy about it, but he had no choice but to come along, since the alternative was to remain behind alone. After we loaded the vehicle I patted the hood, waited for Chajinka to jump onto it, and then we drove to the spot where we'd found Desmond's body.

The Dabih picked up the trail, and we began tracking the Snark. I wanted him so bad I could taste it. It wasn't just revenge for all the Men and Dabihs he'd killed. It wasn't even a matter of professional pride. It was because I knew this was my last hunt, that I'd never get my license back after losing fifteen sentient beings who were under my protection.

The trail led back to the camp, where the Snark had watched us bury Desmond's body. It had kept out of sight until we drove off, and then began moving in a northwesterly direction. We tracked it until late afternoon, when we found ourselves about eight miles from the ship.

"There's no sense going back for the night," I told Pollard. "We might never pick up the trail again."

"Isn't he likely to double back to the camp?"

"Not while we're out here, he isn't," I said with absolutely certainty. "This isn't a hunt any longer -- it's a war. Neither of us will quit until the other's dead."

He looked at me much the way I'd looked at Desmond earlier in the day. Finally he spoke up: "We can't track him at night."

"I know," I replied. "We'll each keep watch for three hours -- you, me and Chajinka -- and we'll start again as soon as it's light enough."

I sat the first watch, and I was so keyed up that I couldn't get to sleep, so I sat through Pollard's watch

as well before I woke Chijanka and managed a three-hour nap. As soon as it was light, we started following the trail again.

By noon we were approaching a small canyon. Then, suddenly, I saw a flicker of motion off in the distance. I stopped the vehicle and activated my Telescopic lenses.

He was more than a mile away, and he had his back to us, but I knew I'd finally gotten my first look at the Snark.

* * * *

Erect and sublime, for one moment of time,

In the next, that wild figure they saw

(As if stung by a spasm) plunge into a chasm,

While they waited and listened in awe.

* * * *

I drove to the edge of the canyon. Chajinka hopped off the hood, and Pollard and I joined him a moment later.

"You're sure you saw him?" asked Pollard.

"I'm sure," I said. "Bipedal. Rust-colored. Looks almost like a cross between a bear and a gorilla, at least from this distance."

"Yeah, that's him all right." He peered down into the canyon. "And he climbed down there?"

"That's right," I said.

"I assume we're going after him?"

"There's no reason to believe he'll come out anywhere near here," I said. "If we wait, we'll lose him."

"It's looks pretty rocky," he said. "Can we pick up his trail?"

"Chajinka will find it."

Pollard sighed deeply. "What the hell," he said with a shrug. "I'm not going to wait here alone while the two of you go after him. I figure I'll be safer with you -- providing I don't break my neck on the terrain."

I motioned for Chajinka to lead the way down, since he was far more sure-footed than any human. He walked along the edge of the precipice for perhaps fifty yards, then came to a crude path we were able to follow for the better part of an hour. Then we were on the canyon floor next to a narrow stream where we slaked our thirst, hoping the water wouldn't make us too sick, as we'd left the irradiation tablets back at the ship.

We rested briefly, then took up the hunt again. Chajinka was able to find a trail where I would have sworn none existed. By early afternoon the floor of the canyon was no longer flat, and we had to follow a winding path over and around a series of rock formations. Pollard was game, but he was out of shape. He kept falling behind, actually dropping out of sight a couple of times, which forced us to stop and wait for him to catch up.

When he dropped behind yet again, I wanted to ask him if he needed a break. I didn't dare shout and give away our position to the Snark, so I compromised by signaling Chajinka to slow his pace until Pollard caught up with us.

He didn't -- and after a few minutes we went back to see what was the matter.

I couldn't find him. It was like he had vanished off the face of the planet.

* * * *

They hunted till darkness came on, but they found

Not a button, or feather, or mark,

By which they could tell that they stood on the ground

Where the Baker had met with the Snark.

* * * *

We spent half an hour looking for Pollard. There was no trace of him, and eventually we were forced to admit that somehow the Snark had turned back on his trail and circled around us or hid and waited for us to pass by. Either way, it was obvious that he'd managed to get Pollard.

I knew it was futile to keep looking for him, so I signaled Chajinka to continue searching for the Snark. We hiked over the rocky canyon floor until at last we came to a steep wall.

"We go up, or we go back," I said, looking at the wall. "Which will it be?"

He stared at me expectantly, waiting for me to signal him which way to go.

I looked back the way we'd come, then up in the direction of the path we were following --

-- and as I looked up, I saw a large object hurtling down toward me!

I pushed Chajinka out of the way and threw myself to my left, rolling as I hit the ground. The object landed five feet away with a bone-jarring _thud!_ -- and I saw that it was Pollard's body.

I looked up, and there was the Snark standing on a ledge, glaring down at me. Our eyes met, and then he turned and began racing up the canyon wall.

"Are you all right?" I asked Chajinka, who was just getting to his feet.

He brushed himself off, then made a digging motion and looked questioningly at me.

We didn't have any shovels, and it would take hours to dig even a shallow grave in the rocky ground using our hands. If we left Pollard's body where it was, it would be eaten by scavengers -- but if we took the time to bury him, we'd lose the Snark.

* * * *

"Leave him here to his fate -- it is getting so late!"

"The Bellman exclaimed in a fright."

"We have lost half the day. Any further delay,"

"And we sha'n't catch a Snark before night."

* * * *

When we got halfway up the wall, I stopped and looked back. Alien raptors were circling high in the sky. Then the first of them landed next to Pollard and began pulling away bits of his flesh. I turned away and concentrated on the Snark.

It took an hour to reach the top, and then Chajinka spent a few minutes picking up the Snark's trail again. We followed it for another hour, and the landscape slowly changed, gradually becoming lush and green.

And then something strange happened. The trail suddenly became easy to follow.

Almost too easy.

We tracked him for another half hour. I sensed that he was near, and I was ready to fire at anything that moved. The humidity made my hands sweat so much that I didn't trust them not to slip on the stock and barrel, so I signaled Chajinka that I wanted to take a brief break.

I took a sip from my canteen. Then, as I leaned against a tree, wiping the moisture from my rifle, I saw a movement half a mile away.

It was him!

I pulled my rifle to my shoulder and took aim -- but we were too far away. I leaped to my feet and began running after him. He turned, faced me for just an instant, and vanished into the bush.

When we got to where he'd been, we found that his trail led due north, and we began following it. At one point we stopped so I could remove a stinging insect from inside my boot -- and suddenly I caught sight of him again. He roared and disappeared again into the heavy foliage as I raced after him.

It was almost as if the son of a bitch was taunting us, and I wondered: is he leading us into a trap?

And then I had a sudden flash of insight.

Rather than leading us into a trap, was he leading us away from something?

It didn't make much sense, but somewhere deep in my gut it felt right.

"Stop!" I ordered Chajinka.

He didn't know the word, but the tone of my voice brought him up short.

I pointed to the south. "This way," I said.

The Dabih frowned and pointed toward the Snark, saying something in his own tongue.

"I know he's there," I said. "But come this way anyway."

I began walking south. I had taken no more than four or five steps when Chajinka was at my side, jabbering again, and pulling my arm, trying to make me follow the Snark.

"No!" I said harshly. It certainly wasn't the word, so it must have been the tone. Whatever the reason, he shrugged, looked at me as if I was crazy, and fell into step behind me. He couldn't very well lead, since there was no trail and he didn't know where we were going. Neither did I, for that matter, but my every instinct said the Snark didn't want me going this direction, and that was reason enough to do it.

We'd walked for about fifteen minutes when I heard a hideous roar off to my left. It was the Snark,

much closer this time, appearing from a new direction. He showed himself briefly, then raced off.

"I knew it!" I whispered excitedly to Chajinka, who just looked confused when I continued to ignore the Snark.

As we kept moving south, the Snark became bolder and bolder, finally getting within a hundred yards of us, but never showing himself long enough for me to get a shot off.

I could feel Chajinka getting tenser and tenser, and finally, when the Snark roared from thirty yards away, the little Dabih raised his spear above his head and raced after him.

"No!" I cried. "He'll kill you!"

I tried to grab him, but he was much too quick for me. I followed him into the eight-foot-high grasslike vegetation. It was a damned stupid thing to do: I couldn't see Chajinka, I couldn't see the Snark, and I had no room to maneuver or even sidestep if there was a charge. But he was my friend -- probably, if I was honest, my only friend -- and I couldn't let him face the Snark alone.

Sddenly I heard the sounds of a scuffle. There was some growling, Chajinka yelled once, and then all was silent.

I went in the direction I thought the sounds had come from, pushing the heavy grasses aside. Then I was making my way through thornbush, and the thorns ripped at my arms and legs. I paid no attention, but kept looking for Chajinka.

I found him in a clearing. He'd put up the fight of his life -- his wounds attested to that -- but even with his spear he was no match for a 400-pound predator. He recognized me, tried to say something that I wouldn't have understood anyway, and died just as I reached his side.

I knew I couldn't stay in the heavy bush with the Snark still around. This was his terrain. So I made my way back to the trail and continued to the south. The Snark roared from cover, but didn't show himself.

After another quarter mile I came to a huge tree with a hollow trunk. I was about to walk around it when I heard a high-pitched whimpering coming from inside it. I approached it carefully, my rifle ready, the safety off --

-- and suddenly the Snark broke out of cover no more than fifteen yeads away and charged me with an ear-splitting roar.

He was on me so fast that I didn't have time to get off a shot. He swiped at me with a mighty paw. I ducked and turned away, but the blow caught me on the shoulder and sent me flying. I landed on my back, scrambled to my feet, and saw him standing maybe ten feet away. My rifle was on the ground right next to him.

He charged again. This time I was ready. I dove beneath his claws, rolled as I hit the ground, got my hands on my weapon, and got off a single shot as he turned to come at me again.

"Got you, you bastard!" I yelled in triumph.

At first I thought I might have hit him too high in the chest to prove fatal, but he collapsed instantly, blood spurting from the wound -- and I noticed that he had a festering wound on his side, doubtless from Marx's shot a week ago. I watched him for a moment, then decided to "pay the insurance", the minimal cost of a second bullet, to make sure he didn't get back up and do any damage before he died. I walked over to stick the muzzle of my rifle in his ear, found that I didn't have a clear shot, and reached out to nudge his head around with my toe.

I felt something like an electric surge within my head, and suddenly, though I'd never experienced anything remotely like it before, I knew I was in telepathic communication with the dying Snark.

Why did you come to my land to kill me? he asked, more puzzled than angry.

I jumped back, shocked -- and lost communication with him. Obviously it could only happen when we were in physical contact. I squatted down and took his paw in my hands, and felt his fear and pain.

Then he was dead, and I stood up and stared down at him, my entire universe turned upside down -- because during the brief moment that I had shared his thoughts, I learned what had really happened.

The Snark's race, sentient but non-technological, was never numerous, and had been wiped out by a virulent disease. Through some fluke, he alone survived it. The others had died decades ago, and he had led a life of terrifying loneliness ever since.

He knew our party was on Dodgson IV the very first day we landed. He was more than willing to share his hunting ground with us, and made no attempt to harm us or scare us off.

He had thought the killing of the crystal-horned buck was a gift of friendship; he didn't understand that he was stealing Marx's trophy because the concept of trophies was completely alien to him. He killed Marx only after Marx wounded him.

Even then he was willing to forgive us. Those dead animals we found in my traps were his notion of a peace offering.

He couldn't believe that we really wanted to kill him, so he decided he would visit the camp and try to communicate with us. When he got there, he mistook the Dabihs' t-packs for weapons and destroyed them. Then, certain that this would be seen as an act of aggression even though he hadn't harmed anyone, he left before we woke up.

He came back to try one last time to make peace with us. This time he made no attempt to enter the camp unseen. He marched right in, fully prepared to be questioned and examined by these new races. But what he wasn't prepared for was being attacked by the Dabihs. Fighting in self-defense, he made short work of them. Mbele raced into the ship, either to hide or to get a weapon. He knew first-hand what Marx's weapon had done to him at fifty yards, and he didn't dare let Mbele shoot at him from the safety of the ship, so he raced into it and killed him before he could find a weapon.

After that it was war. He didn't know why we wanted to kill him, but he no longer doubted that we did ... and while there was a time when he would have welcomed an end to his unhappy, solitary existence, he now had a reason, indeed a driving urge, to stay alive at all costs ...

... because he wasn't a he at all; he was an it. The Snark was an asexual animal that reproduced by

budding. Its final thought was one of enormous regret, not that it would die, for it understood the cycles of life and death, but that now its offspring would die as well.

I stared down at the Snark's body, my momentary feeling of triumph replaced by an overwhelming sense of guilt. What I had thought was my triumph had become nothing less than genocide in the space of a few seconds.

I heard the whimpering again, and I walked back to the hollow tree trunk and looked in. There, trembling and shrinking back from me, was a very small, very helpless version of the Snark.

I reached out to it, and it uttered a tiny, high-pitched growl as it huddled against the back of the trunk.

I spoke gently, moved very slowly, and reached out again. This time it stared at my hand for a long moment, and finally, hesitantly, reached out to touch it. The instant we made contact I was able to feel its all-encompassing terror.

Do not be afraid, little one, I said silently. _Whatever happens, I will protect you. I owe you that much._

Its fear vanished, for you cannot lie when you are telepathically linked, and a moment later it emerged from its hiding place.

I looked off into the distance. Men would be coming soon. The rescue party would touch down in the next week or two. They'd find Marx's body in the hold, and they'd exhume the Desmonds and Mbele and the eleven Dabihs. They'd read the Captain's diary and know that all this carnage was caused by an animal called a Snark.

And since they were a hunting company, they'd immediately outfit a safari to kill the Snark quickly and efficiently. No argument could possibly deter them, not after losing an entire party of Men and Dabihs.

But they would be in for a surprise, because _this_ Snark not only knew the terrain, but knew how Men thought and acted, and was armed with Man's weapons.

The infant reached out to me and uttered a single word. I tried to repeat it, laughed at how badly I mispronounced it, took the tiny creature in my arms, and went off into the bush to learn a little more about being a Father Snark while there was still time.

* * * *

In the midst of the word he was trying to say,

In the midst of his laughter and glee,

_He had softly and suddenly vanished away -- _

For the Snark was a Boojum, you see.

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