

ALPHA CENTAURI

A Short Story by Peter C. Venable

Alpha Centauri

An elderly female NASA scientist in uniform stands at a podium facing cameras. A blown-up image of the Alpha Centauri star system is projected against the background. She is flanked on both sides by other NASA staff and politicians. A roomful of reporters and journalists click on recorders as the press conference begins. She reads a prepared announcement.

“Good afternoon. I am Jessica Marshall, a NASA scientist privileged to make public a discovery we have kept private until today. This is going to be quite a day in earth’s history. If you focus on the Hubble II pictures behind me, this fantastic announcement shall commence.

“You are well aware of NASA’s twenty year study of the triple star system, Alpha Centauri A, Alpha Centauri B, and their distant cousin star, Proxima Centauri. Alpha Centauri is a close star in proximity to our Solar System, and is the brightest star in the southern constellation of Centaurus, the Centaur.

“We have sent a series of space probes over the past thirty years and, as you know, both Alpha Centauri A and B are solar systems and they have planets. What we are making public for the very first time is that Alpha Centauri B has a planet roughly the size of Mars, a planet we named Centauri Terra! This planet dwells in what we call a habitable zone, that is, in an atmosphere conducive to life as we know it. Incredible as this is to your ears, Centauri Terra has oxygen, thinner than at the tip of Everest, but oxygen nevertheless. The summer temperature peaks at about 60° and drops at night to a relatively mild 5°. We plan to land at a plateau several miles from an extraordinary huge shining object. It is so bright that it is detectable from Centauri Terra’s outer atmosphere. There is nothing like it on Centauri Terra or any other planet in the system.”

A commotion of gasps and chatter cause a din until she thumps her microphone.

“How do we get there? Briefly, the problems for light-speed travel have always been identifying an energy source capable of producing the required acceleration, maintaining the speed, and limiting stresses on humans and equipment throughout rapid acceleration and deceleration. Light speeds at 5,878,630,000,000 miles a year—nearly a

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trillion miles. At the speed of light, it would take over 4 years to reach the Alpha Centauri B solar system.

“You recall, since this has also been in the news the past year, that in 1994 a Mexican physicist, Miguel Alcubierre, proposed a method of stretching space in a wave, which would cause the fabric of space ahead of a spacecraft, to contract, and the space behind it, to expand. Or, in other words, the starship expands space-time behind it and simultaneously shrinks space-time in front. The ship would ride this wave inside a region known as a warp bubble in outer space. Imagine being in one of those body-sized plastic spheres with someone running inside it while streaming down a river—that suddenly increases speed a great deal faster than the flow of water. The river would appear in slow motion. This gives you an idea but obviously the physics is incredibly more complicated. To summarize, due to the contraction of space in front and expansion behind, the ship could reach its destination faster than a light beam traveling outside the warp bubble. In a race with light, the ship would zoom past it!”

She pauses, holds up a Champaign glass and gestures a toast, and sips.

“Yes, this is a celebration! Accordingly, we have used this technology in a series of unmanned space probes to explore this star system, but now we can replicate this in a manned spaceship! In cooperation with the European Space Agency, we created a prototype vessel, a starship if you will, the Alcubierre. We shall visit Centauri Terra!”

Another uproar deafens and again she thumps the microphone.

“We have calculated the flight will take 6 months. We anticipate the exploration of Centauri Terra to occupy about 2 months. So—to the crew!”

She motions to an entrance to open the doors. Seven crew members approach and stand near her.

“The commander and chief pilot is Matthew McQuaid. The medical officer and nutritionist is Allison Moyer. Pamela Fairchild is the computer programmer and technician. The space physicist is Eduardo Vasquez. Ming Chen is our astrobiologist. The geophysicist is Thomas Everhart. Lastly, the aerospace engineer is Maria Quiterio.”

They received deafening applause and cheers.

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“Thank you, and good afternoon. The reception will be held in the South wing, in the conference room.”

Six months later, as scheduled, the Alcubierre and seven astronauts lifted off, exited earth and accelerated. In a mere two weeks, they arrived in Jupiter’s moon system, the appointed location for warp bubble departure.

Fairchild, the computer programmer and technician, provided much comic relief and typical of her humor, dubbed the ship computer as “Hal.” Her irony was not unnoticed. Especially later.

They viewed Europa through a port window.

“As you know,” Quiterio, the aerospace engineer, remarked, “beneath Europa’s icy crust, amid those red and brown stains and criss-crossed lines, decades ago our robotic landed near the Equator. It was able to melt through a thin section of ice, only a mile thick. What a find—microorganisms lived near underwater volcanic vents, like in our oceans.”

Soon they reached Io.

“Io is the closest of the four largest moons of Jupiter. It has hundreds of erupting volcanoes and is the most volcanic rock in the solar system. Loki Patera is a crater 124 miles wide, spewing molten sulphur into a lava lake.

“Commander, do we have asbestos umbrellas?” Vasquez joked.

“Sure, Vasquez, you can take a shuttle and a raft, and drift about until we return.”

“We have powdered lemonade but you may have a problem with ice cubes,” Fairchild cracked.

“Crew, buckle up,” McQuaid ordered. “In thirty minutes we shall initiate warp bubble.”

They prepared for warp bubble acceleration. Engaged, they lurched like a stretched rubber band suddenly snapped. In a window they saw Uranus speeding by, and then stars vanished except for speeding blips of light zooming by.

Two months passed. The crew performs their duties as expected. One morning after sleep time, as the crew were carried out their duties, Fairchild, the computer guru,

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noticed a computer warning on a screen. It indicated that a potential malfunction in the oxygen-control system could occur.

“Commander, look at your monitor.”

The crew huddled around, adrenaline pumping.

“I completed a number of computer checks and Hal cannot determine if this is a potential system problem or a computer malfunction. How eerie can this be?”

The emotional climate became grim. They discussed and debated options, and finally decided to proceed in hopes it was a computer error, not a system problem.

In another week they decelerated and passed Alpha Centauri B, an orange star. They approached the third planet, Centauri Terra. Fairchild remained on board as the Alcubierre orbited, acting as a communication switchboard. The six astronauts entered the shuttle, and Vasquez launched it into the atmosphere. It descended and landed on a desert region adjacent to large, plant-like structures resembling sea anemones—all colored red, and the size of redwoods. The sky was a pale orange hue and colored everything in a carrot tint.

They exited the shuttle, armed with laser weapons and cameras, and headed toward the plant-structures. Due to the mild climate, they wore nasal prongs emitting oxygen but as a precaution attached their helmets to their backpacks. It was a tolerable 45°. While walking on a field of sand, some large, unseen underground creatures burrowed just under the surface towards them, causing a series of sandy wakes. They circled for a few minutes just under the sand, and then vanished in the distance.

“The power those things have, to be able to tunnel themselves in dense sand. I suppose their some kind of worms, like in Dune,” Everhart, the geophysicist commented.

“We’re damn lucky they weren’t predators,” Chen, the astrobiologist exclaimed. “I don’t think we would have fared as well as Jonah in their bellies.”

A blast of wind almost blew them over and they strained to grip each other as a sandstorm briefly enveloped and rocked them. It quickly ceased and calm returned.

“How did that happen so fast? There was no breeze, and wham! An instant sandstorm slammed us.” Moyer, the medical officer, said.

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“We’d be in bad shape if a major storm struck us,” Chen said. “Our probes noticed monstrous storms on Centauri Terra. One was the size of Utah.”

They arrived in the sparse forest of those soaring, red plant-structures. No other plants or other forms resembling vegetation were visible. After some thirty minutes, they saw some thirty crudely-built, circular dwellings. Astonished, they slowly advanced, lasers armed.

“These don’t look natural,” Everhart observed.

From one of the abodes, seven biped, reptilian creatures exited, walked toward them and stopped some twenty feet away. They were hominoids, and had large chests to breathe the scarce oxygen. They were covered with small, reddish, feather-like hides. They had thumbs and three fingers with small, worn claws. One stood at an angle, and a small tail was attached—oscillating rapidly. Another carried a clutch of eggs. They uttered an incomprehensible language and the two groups remained apart, gesturing. Finally, one reptile pointed in the direction of the shining object. They returned to their dwellings and closed the doors.

“I’m about to faint,” Chen said.

“Me too,” Commander McQuaid said with a parched mouth. “How could cold-blooded beings live in this cool climate? Perhaps they are warm blooded. Anyway, we got them on video. NASA better fasten their seat belts when we load it up for viewing on the wall screen.”

“They appeared quite primitive—reptiles on earth could have evolved in our place had conditions been slightly different,” Chen said.

“Well, that shining light in the distance is our destination, so let’s get on with it.”

The astronauts continue trekking onward. They glimpsed a group of small lights erupt from a large crystal boulder in the distance, and disappear toward the shining object.

“What the hell was that?” Everhart, the geophysicist, said.

Soon they reached the crystal boulder, about the size of house.

“Can you believe this?”

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Continuing on towards the shimmering shape in the distance, from one of the towering plant-structures, from the distant top a huge creature rapidly plunged, snatched Everhart and swiftly ascended.

“Shoot the bastard! Fry it!” McQuaid screamed.

Firing white-hot beams, they struck the tethered creature with sizzling sounds, and it and Everhart crashed to the ground, motionless.

“It looks something like a huge ambush bug—its beak pierced Everhart through his chest; its beak is about four-feet long. What’s this? It has front legs adapted like a mantis—look at those spikes on the upper tibia that mesh with the lower femur. But it’s not quite an insect,” Chen said. “It has four legs, like an arachnid.”

“Never mind that damned thing—Everhart’s dead,” Moyer said, checking for vitals. “Probably instantly. Well, we didn’t let the bastard suck out his body fluids. God, what else is hiding for a meal?”

“It descended so fast I barely could follow it. It was connected like a bungee tether.” Bending over and inspecting it, “It looks something like silk,” Quiterio said.

“Don’t touch it,” Chen warned.

McQuaid told them to place a locator on the body, and position Everhart away from any plants. As they walked, they kept safe distance.

A football field length away, from the top of the tallest plant-structure, a creature lifted off and flew towards the carrot horizon. Chen viewed it through his computerized binoculars.

“It looks something like belonging to the order Odonata.”

“Plain English,” McQuaid said.

“A dragon fly—it has two sets of wings and flies like an insect—but it’s covered with what looks like an animal hide. It seems more like a four-winged Pterosaur than an insect.”

“Pterosaur?”

“Winged lizard. Flying reptile. But it also looked like something from the order of Chiroptera—a bat.”

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“Odd how life evolves,” Moyer concluded.

After a few hours, in an open area they approached an enormous, crystal object at least 300 feet high and 100 feet in breadth.

“Are you kidding me?” Quiterio said. “This thing looks like a colossal chair.”

“Or, a throne?” Chen said. “Does something or someone actually sit on it?”

“I don’t see any footprints.”

“Lucky for us.”

It was a solid, seamless object without any visible doorways, opaque and emitted a pale purple light in contrast to the orange hue of Centauri Terra. Reaching the building’s walls, they touched it and it gave way, almost like fluid.

“It yields like water’s surface tension,” Chen remarked. “Jelly like.”

Despite numerous futile attempts, they could not pierce its soft surface. Following videotaping, they decided to turn back. As they left, behind them three human-sized light forms emerged from the throne and floated behind, soundlessly. After some time passed, they noticed a lavender hue in front of them and they turned around. Three floating, purplish figures hovered several feet away and about as high. They communicated with each other in visible light shafts, beaming back and forth. The crew was speechless and alarmed.

“What have we here?” McQuaid spouted.

Suddenly they shot beams at the astronauts’ faces, temporarily blinding them. A few blasted their lasers, which harmlessly passed through the glowing creatures. One laser beam struck the throne in the far distance but was harmlessly absorbed. Another laser beam struck Vasquez’s glove and cauterized first joint of his little finger.

“Jesus!” His scream could be heard for miles. Soon they regained their sight while the three beings continued hovering several feet above the ground. Moyer anesthetized and sterilized Vasquez’s finger.

“Don’t blast them; I think they tried to communicate with us,” Chen advised.

Then the middle being discharged a thin beam at Moyer’s forehead.

“It doesn’t hurt,” she exclaimed. “I sense it penetrating my brain.”

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“Better not move—let’s see what’s going on.”

“My God, it’s communicating telepathically! It’s saying a gigantic whirlwind will soon form with 500 mile-an-hour winds, and we must leave the planet within twenty-four hours.”

The beam stopped, and the three creatures rose and darted to the throne miles away.

“Crew, let’s get the hell out of here, grab Everhart and board the shuttle.”

They returned to Everhart’s body, but the dead creature was gone.

“I bet that flying thing is a scavenger and scooped it up. It probably didn’t know Everhart was edible.”

Quiterio and Moyer carried Everhart. As they walked, they noticed the plant-structures gradually retract towards the ground.

“I bet they do this when the massive storms occur.”

They traveled pass the reptilian dwellings with sealed entrances.

“Ready for the storm, no doubt.”

After traversing the desert terrain, large shadows flitted by.

“Look up!” Moyer cried.

Countless flying creatures sped overhead. Vasquez focused his binoculars.

“They’re aiming toward an enormous cavern at the base of plateau, a good hundred miles away.”

Suddenly one of the plant-things leaned, clamped on to one unlucky creature, and reeled it in with its tentacles.

“So that’s how they feed—like a colossal sundew plant.”

A few moments later, with the Alcubierre in sight, Moyer glanced back.

“Commander, we got company.”

They spun around, and a reptile followed behind. It stopped and gestured. It was about five feet tall.

“Let take it on board,” McQuaid joked. “It’ll be our mascot homeward.”

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“Not a good idea,” Moyer said. “It might harbor some lethal microorganisms, immune to it but fatal to us. We don’t want a ‘War of the Worlds’ scenario.”

“You’re right.”

To their utter amazement, the reptile squatted, laid an egg, carried and handed it to Quiterio. It never blinked; in fact, it did not appear to have eyelids, like an insect. Then it turned and ran in the direction of their dwellings, faster than a sprinter.

“Look at it fly!”

Quiterio massaged the egg. “It’s characteristic of a reptile egg—leathery, not hard.”

By now, most of the plant things disappeared underground. Wind pummeled them in gusts. They climbed the ladder and shut the hatch.

“Fairchild, did you get all of his on video?” McQuaid inquired.

“All of it. Those lenses on your caps recorded everything. Everything.”

“We’ll be at the shuttle in about fifteen minutes; prepare for ignition. We must be out of here ASAP.”

“Will do, Commander.”

Wind howled. A burst of wind shook the shuttle violently. Ignition accomplished, it rose and they saw shining throne soon swathed in sand and dust, and docked safely inside the Alcubierre. They prepared to re-enter warp bubble, then engaged acceleration and velocity quickened. They sped faster than light towards our solar system.

Nearly two months passed. They talked almost constantly about their experiences, and viewed footage countless times.

“Can you imagine the revenue if we had sole rights to this?”

“Better than winning a lottery.”

Finally, they were seven days from approaching rendezvous at Jupiter—the only distance to safely shut off warp bubble, and orbit around earth. Suddenly, red warning light began flashing on all computer screens.

“Not good, not good” Vasquez babbled.

After infinite minutes passed, Fairchild said,

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“This is about as bad as it gets. I have checked and re-checked all systems, and I’m convinced there has been an oxygen leak. Hal calculates oxygen will deplete by the time we decelerate at Jupiter. While it would take only two weeks to reach earth, and even if we use our suits, all O₂ will be gone in seven days and the suits only have three hours stored—at the most. It’s over.”

They discuss options, of which there are none. They know they will all die.

They decelerate next to Jupiter, now visible in a port window. They contacted earth about their situation. Among their sightings and experiences—the sand animals, flying creatures, plant-formations, ambush bugs, reptilian hominoids, and glowing organisms—they described the reptilian egg, safe in an incubator. Weeping, they cried final goodbyes to NASA and their loved ones. Abruptly, their communication shorted out and became mute.

“So it goes,” Fairchild said. “Thankfully, we said what we needed.”

On their last day they readied the ship on autopilot to speed to earth. A spaceship would intersect, astronauts would board and guide the Alcubierre into an orbit around earth and retrieve their bodies. All preparations were finally completed.

McQuaid returned from the infirmity, and handed them each a pill.

“As you know, these pills have painless, fast-acting poison. Dying by suffocation is miserable. You decide whether you will take them.”

“Bottoms up, for me” Quiterio said.

In a caustic tone Fairchild said “Guys, we enter the realm of philosophy and religion. So much for Naturalism and the God Science. What happens when we die?”

“That’s it, sports fans. Game over. Stadium lights off,” Vasquez said.

“An atheist to the end, huh?” McQuaid said.

“Agnostic—can’t prove the God hypothesis.”

“What you live by, you die by. Well, Eduardo, I won’t debate it—you have your mind made up.”

“Commander,” Chen said, “you claim to be a Christian. I suppose you believe heaven is your destiny.” Chen pointed to each one as he said, “Is there room for a

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medical officer, computer programmer, physicist, astrobiologist, aerospace engineer and geophysicist?”

McQuaid was silent for a time, and then looked up.

“Christ is for every living human being. I know this may rub you the wrong way, but face it: we are all going to be dead in an hour. Either by suffocation or poison. Chen, you are truly a genius. But you will be as dead as that reptile egg is destined to be. So, simple philosophy and theology: either there is nothing—or some form of afterlife. Speculate away, if you wish. I know my future.”

“I’ve always leaned to Eastern religious philosophy—I will merge with Ultimate Reality.” Quiterio pensively reflected.

“How do you know that? What is your evidence? Your proof? Your authority?”

“Commander, what’s yours? Don’t tell me it your stupid Bible!” Vasquez said.

Unexpectedly, Fairchild remarked “Maybe it’s not so ‘stupid,’ Eduardo. All religions point to some type of afterlife, whether in Eastern beliefs, recycling on earth and hopes for mystical union with their Supreme Being, or in Western tradition, heaven or hell. I’ve pondered this all my life.”

“Pamela? I had no idea you thought about this,” Moyer said.

“All the time, and in less than sixty minutes, all will be revealed. What’s your take, Allison?”

“It’s entirely up to Allah. I don’t know about me. Not even Mohammad was sure of his fate, according to the Quran.”

“That’s where we differ,” McQuaid interjected. “This is where Christianity is unique. There is no salvation by enlightenment or mystical union as in Eastern or pagan beliefs, or salvation by works in some other faiths. Balancing out more good deeds vs. bad deeds is irrelevant. I hope this won’t offend anyone in our last hour, but a verse I memorized as a child speaks to all of this.

Moyer interrupted “You’re too simplistic—Moslems and Jews balance faith and deed, too.”

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“No other faith has grace as its central foundation.” He paused. “You still sometimes see someone holding this up at ball games, ‘John 3:16,’ which he displayed on paper he just wrote.

“Oh, that,” Vasquez jeered.

“Martin Luther, not King, called it the gospel in miniature. ‘Perish’ in this verse does not mean death by annihilation, like a candle being snuffed out. Sorry, no Nirvana, members of bliss seekers unanimous. Our immortal souls shall live eternally with God or forever ‘perish’ separated from Him. I am convinced that everlasting life with God is assured, because I believe—actually, absolutely trust—Jesus was, is and will always be the Messiah. That offensive word, ‘salvation,’ is mine and yours, if you want it.”

All was quiet except for electronic buzz in the background. Vasquez frowned, shaking his head.

“I want that,” Chen said.

“Then pray to the true God: the same God over Centauri Terra’s sand worms, flying creatures, assassin bugs, plant Sundews, reptilian hominoids, and light beings,” McQuaid said. “He is the same God over our solar system, our Milky Way and the universe.”

He stares at Vasquez, then says “Eduardo, my physicist friend, this is the same God who created the four fundamental forces of physics: gravity, electromagnetism, weak and strong nuclear forces.”

Glancing at Chen, “Ming, Pray to God that you now accept Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah. That’s how it works.”

Fairchild said, “Why not?” She closed her eyes and folded her hands in prayer. Chen did likewise.

“It doesn’t matter your worldview—whether atheist, agnostic, super-naturalist, theist or religious—Christ welcomes all.”

“Count me out,” Vasquez said, waving his bandaged finger back and forth.

“Me too. I’ll stick with Allah,” Moyer announced.

Looking at his watch, panting, Chen said “Time is about over.”

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They finished and signed letters to their families as breathing became strained.

“Forget the suits. Now or never,” Vasquez said. He swallowed his pill and leaned back in his seat.

“I’d like the honor of taking mine last,” McQuaid said. “Sentimental as this sounds, I’m privileged to die in your presence. Eduardo, we’re galaxies apart in theology, but I love you as a person.”

Fairchild couldn’t resist. “If you’ll indulge my warped humor, ‘there are no atheists in black holes.’ ”

McQuaid smirked. Vasquez ignored her.

“Same here, Matthew.” They rose, embraced, and the crew joined them in a circle, most crying. Offering a macabre toast, they swallowed their pills and reclined with their letters in their laps. Soon they ceased breathing.

McQuaid took his pill, got on his knees and prayed. Becoming sleepy, he stumbled to the pilot’s chair and settled in. He gazed back at his dead crew, up at the ceiling, then out the front window. He stared at the distant sun, growing larger, until it faded into darkness.