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THE VOICE WITHIN

A Novel by: Peter J. Ponzio

This book is dedicated to four people who had a profound influence on my life. I hope that it can in some way repay them for what they have given to me.

To Palma: "...She doth teach the torches to burn bright..."

To Paul: "...who was, we may fairly say, of all those whom we knew in our time, the bravest and also the wisest and most upright man."

To Aunt Marge and Uncle Ted: "Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife  
Their sober wishes never learned to stray; Along the cool sequestered vale  
of life They kept the noiseless tenor of their way."

Paul Phillips got out of his BMW and walked up the driveway to his house. On the front step, he stopped to pick up the newspaper. A gust of wind threatened to blow the paper away before he could reach it. "City Swelters - No Relief in sight" read the headlines. "At least this breeze might cool things off a bit," thought Paul. Paul fished through his pocket for his housekeys. From the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of the full moon, just coming over the horizon. He stopped looking for his keys and turned his full attention to the moon. The disk was large, and appeared to glow red. He was reminded of a fragment of a poem he learned in gradeschool "The moon was a ghostly galleon," but he couldn't remember the rest of the poem. "Too many hours work. Can't even remember a few lines from a poem." He found his keys, unlocked the door, and entered the house.

He turned on the hall light and walked into the kitchen to get a beer. "It'll be good to take a load off my feet," he thought as he loosened his tie and walked into the den. There, sitting in his chair was what appeared to be a man. "Oh, this is great, now I'm hallucinating. Shit, I've got to get some sleep."

"Why don't you finish your beer first?" said Paul's apparition.

"Hallucinations can't talk; at least, I don't think they can."

"I can however. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Nick Sawyer."

"That's great Nick, you mind telling me what in hell you're doing here. By the way, while you're at it you might also tell me how you got in, and when you plan on leaving."

"You know Paul, that's what I like about you: you're so levelheaded. Most people would be afraid or hysterical if they saw a perfect stranger sitting in their favorite chair in the den. Not you. You just ask your questions, calm as can be. That's part of the reason I'm here."

"Look Nick, just answer the questions. If you don't think I need the answers, maybe you'll change your mind when I call the police."

"Take it easy, Paul. I plan on answering your questions. Relax, have a seat. By the way, mind if I have a beer?"

"I'm surprised you didn't just help yourself."

"Paul, that would have been rude. What kind of person do you take me for? I'm not some kind of thief."

now."

"Excellent. I was hoping you would come to your senses. As I was saying, my client has read several of your articles concerning forced liquidations. He has need of the services of an accountant, specifically one who has been involved in liquidations, bulk sales, etc. You have been recommended very highly."

"I'm flattered. What was it that you wanted to liquidate?"

"The Milky Way Galaxy."

"Right. The Milky Way Galaxy. And you just happened to be in the neighborhood, and you thought you'd drop by and see if I wanted to join in the fun."

"No, we really want your help. My client has a claim against the Galaxy, but he needs liquid assets. He's rather an inveterate gambler and he has a short-term cash-flow problem. He therefore wants to liquidate his holdings and get the most out of his investment that he can."

"I see. So we'll have a fire sale."

"Not at all. My client recognizes the inherent value of his property. He wants a nice, smooth sale of assets, and he intends to maximize the return on his investment. That's why we have come to you. You're the recognized expert on these matters."

"How does one go about acquiring a galaxy?"

"My client won it in a poker game."

"Oh, I see. And now he wants to bail out. I didn't know you could have title to entire worlds. I thought that the inhabitants had certain rights as holders of the property."

"Don't be ridiculous. A galaxy is nothing more than real property. Inhabitants are no more than leasees or tenants. The holder of the deed is the true owner of the property, and my client has good title. Do you want the position or not?"

"Tell you what, Nick. How about if you let me sleep on it; we can talk more in the morning."

"Until that time."

"Oh, excuse me, I was confused. You're a burglar, not a thief. I suppose there is a difference."

"Look, I'm going to get a beer, I'll be right back." Nick walked into the kitchen and returned with a beer. "As I was saying, I'm very interested in you. I know you've been working a lot of overtime lately, and I was thinking maybe you were dissatisfied with your job. I'm sort of a personnel recruiter, and I've got an interesting job offer for the right person."

"Most recruiters I've talked to keep regular office hours. I can't say I've ever heard of one making house calls, either."

"Well, I'm not exactly an ordinary recruiter."

"No shit," thought Paul. He was beginning to worry that this Nick guy was some sort of nutcase. He also noticed that Nick was built pretty well, in case violence ensued.

"Paul, my client is very interested in employing you. He has read several articles which you published regarding liquidation sales. I think he would be prepared to make you a most attractive offer."

The guy might be a nut, but he certainly did his homework. Paul was trying to figure out what was wrong with the guy, and then it hit him. Nick wasn't sweating. Paul certainly was. He had forgotten to turn the air conditioner on, and the house was clammy. He noticed that Nick's skin looked waxy, almost plastic.

Nick noticed Paul's concern and guessed at its probable cause. "We don't have sweat glands in my home system. We regulate our body temperature to compensate for temperature fluctuations. We have a three hundred degree range, celsius, over which we have control. Clothing is a lot less expensive, but alas, we don't have a deodorant industry. I'm afraid our advertising industry will never be as creative as yours, as a result of our glandlessness. Oh well, it's a heavy price to pay. We all have our crosses to bear."

"I've got to get some time off. I'm going ape-shit. I'm standing here talking to a plastic man whose life is unfulfilled because he can't use Right Guard. I've got to wake up, maybe I'm already late for work, and I'm punishing myself with a stupid dream."

"You're not sleeping, and this is no dream. I'm real, and my life is quite fulfilled, thank-you. But I'm here to talk about Paul Phillips, and to offer him a job. Are you interested in my offer?"

"What the hell, I'm not going to wake up, so I'll humor you. Ya, tell me about the job offer. It can't be any worse than the place I'm at

Paul woke up somewhat slowly. Something seemed to be a little different this morning, but he couldn't quite figure out what was wrong. He glanced over at the alarm clock and noticed the time. "Eleven-thirty. Oh shit! How in the hell did I oversleep. I thought I set this God-damn thing." Paul got out of bed and headed for the phone. "Got to call the office. Ah, the hell with it; they already know I'm going to be late. Might as well grab some breakfast, then shower. I'll have to work late again to make up for this screw-up."

He walked downstairs and headed for the kitchen.

"It's about time you dragged yourself out of bed," said a plastic-looking man sitting at the kitchen table.

Paul suddenly remembered what was troubling him when he awoke. "I thought you'd be gone. If this is a dream it sure is a long one."

"I told you; this is no dream. Sleep well? I hope you've reached a decision."

"I can't believe this. How can you expect me to sell a whole god-damn galaxy? I wouldn't even know where to begin. I know a few heavy hitters at banks, but they're worried about big deals - third world debt crisis, too many junk-bond deals around - I don't think I could arrange financing for a big multinational these days, much less a whole world. What do you expect me to do, call up a few heads of state and ask them if they'd like to buy a few new acres of territory on Alpha Centauri? I'd be committed in a matter of minutes."

"Actually, it's a lot easier than that. I have a prospect list already developed. We have three dimensional charts of every body in the galaxy larger than 10 kilometers across, so that you have access to all our assets. I can provide you with names of certified appraisers to make sure that our values are in line with the compensation my client is expecting. As far as financing is concerned, we can set you up with the finest capital men in the universe. But we need someone to co-ordinate the whole thing, and as I said yesterday, you're our man."

"If I understood what you said yesterday, I'm supposed to sell the entire Milky Way. That includes Earth too?"

"That is correct."

"I have a small problem with that. You see, I don't think I have the right to sell an entire planet with over three billion people living on it."

"Let's not dewy-eyed about this, shall we? There are over 20 septillion intelligent life forms in this galaxy, although by your standards some of them are rather different or unprepossessing. We can't let the presence of life deter us from our task. After all, most of them are trespassers on the original claim. Most of them will not be bothered by the new owners. Of course, in some of the more desirable locations things might be altered somewhat for the tourist trade. But, by and large, most things will remain the same."

"What do you mean, some things will be altered for the tourist trade?"

"Well, in one of the deals we did recently, a planet was converted to a game preserve for the very wealthy. The native species was the principal game. The new owner is very happy with the arrangement, and is profiting quite handsomely. Of course, this only happens to the planets at the periphery of the galaxy. In the galactic cluster, there are too many systems crowded together. People like to take vacations out in the country, as it were."

"Earth is at the galactic rim."

"Why, yes it is. It would be an ideal resort, don't you think? Look, you've found an application for a planet already! I knew you would be right for this job."

"Hold on, pal. I don't want a bunch of aliens hunting people for sport. You can take your idea about a game preserve and shove it up your ass, or whatever it is you shit with."

"Take it easy, Mr. Phillips. You could acquire earth with your fee if you wanted, and do anything you pleased with it. I was merely making a suggestion. I do think it would be highly suited to a game preserve, however. Your species is quite feisty; always nice in a prey species."

"What the hell are you saying now? Prey species! Why not just come and blow us away all at once instead of toying with us, if you've already made up your mind. That would be the humane thing to do."

"I was just paying your species a compliment. You are quite independant for so young a race. I find that quite refreshing. We haven't decided to exterminate you, either. I was just listing a possibility for a sale, that's all."

"What if I refuse?"

"You could, but we'd find someone else. If you accepted, you could choose the applications that the various worlds would be put to. You'd also stand to loose more money than you could possibly imagine."

You'd be the richest man in this quadrant of the galaxy. Plus, should you ever need him, you'd have a powerful ally in my client."

"I see. High-class blackmail. I still don't like the idea. Makes me feel like I'm auctioning-off someone's heritage or robbing someone's right to their world. Not too much I can do about it though. When do we get started?"

"As soon as we agree on compensation and terms of employment, we can sign a contract."

"I can hardly wait."