

Paul practiced the voice on a daily basis. He would often contact people he met in his daily activities. Only for a brief second would he probe, testing to see whether he could in fact, reach them. Never would he probe or stay too long in their consciousness. His skill increased, and soon he could indeed tell a person's character from the briefest contact. He was amazed at the diversity of personalities he encountered. Some he found to be friendly, some witty, some brilliant, some petty. Rarely did he find someone who was truly loathsome, but when he did, he stopped contact immediately.

Each day he expected that he would be visited by Rakreesh, and he grew tense from the uncertainty.

Finally, one day after he returned from the grocery store, he received a warning from his alarm. He stopped what he was doing, and entered the voice-trance. It was Rakreesh, of that he was certain. Once he made contact, he attempted to determine his motives. He snapped out of the trance immediately. Owhindamon had given him adequate warning.

Rakreesh was not coming to exchange pleasantries, but to kill Paul Phillips. For the first time, Paul was afraid for his life. But soon, the fear was replaced with a sense of tranquility. If this is how it is to end, so be it, he thought. The others will carry on without me; they will do what they can to save the Earth from destruction. Just then, another alarm issued from his computer. He was about to determine who was coming, when the haze appeared in his living room.

Rakreesh stepped out of the fog. Paul made contact. Rakreesh was making an unbelievable effort of will to suppress the urge to kill Paul before he asked questions. Finally, Rakreesh gained enough composure to speak.

"Good morning, Paul. How are you? I have been detained for a while, and could not drop by to see you."

"Hello, Rakreesh. You look well, although it appears something is bothering you."

"As a matter of fact, something is bothering me," snapped Rakreesh as he moved closer to Paul.

Paul noticed that the Panterran's claws were involuntarily retracting and opening. He also knew that the creature's willpower was weakening.



"To be honest with you, I have been engaged in battle for the past few months. The planet which you sold us has been invaded. We have dealt with these trespassers before, but they seem to have more resources at their disposal this time, along with a greater strength of will. Things are not going well for my people, and I am losing face because of my involvement with this project."

Paul could tell that the creature was close to losing control.

"I have also heard rumors that the invaders have good title to the property. I stopped by to find out if the rumors were true. I hope for your sake that they are not."

Rakreesh was close to violence, of that Paul was certain. There was a part of his mind which was waiting for Paul to answer, however. Paul knew that his answer must be well crafted, so that Rakreesh did not kill him outright.

"Well, to tell the truth Rakreesh, I expected that you would be dropping by. Nick Sawyer stopped in a few days ago, and told me that your people were invaded. I am of course, sorry to hear that. You have title to the property, obtained quite legally. No one has the right to challenge your ownership. These other people might have other motives in provoking an attack. The story of ownership might have been invented as a plausible means of justifying such an attack."

Paul could tell that Rakreesh wanted to believe him. Yet, he was not dissuaded from his original intent.

"Well, that certainly is a plausible explanation, and I will present it to my clan. But, I am afraid that I still must save face. In order to do so, I must kill you. You understand, I do not bear any personal malice towards you, but I must avenge myself."

Just then, the blue haze formed in Paul's living room. Out from the haze stepped a man.

Paul and Rakreesh were both surprised. Rakreesh, because he had not expected anyone, Paul because he did not expect a man.

"Are you the man who is selling property? I looked your co-ordinates up from my terminal."

"Yes, I am the one selling property. This is my friend, Rakreesh, of the Panterran."



Paul was now performing a juggling act. He was trying to concentrate on Rakreesh and the stranger at the same time. Paul could tell that Rakreesh's intent remained steadfast, only the circumstances had changed. Now, he had to kill two people instead of just one. Try as he might, Paul could not make contact with the stranger. It was as if the stranger had the ability to block him out. Paul went back to Rakreesh. The Panterran had caught a glimpse of something on the stranger's hip, but could not be sure of what he saw. As if he could read the Panterran's mind, the stranger brushed his cloak aside just enough so that a weapon of some sort was evident. The Panterran obviously knew what type of weapon the stranger carried, for his plans changed instantly.

He would come back another day to finish off Paul Phillips. Rakreesh knew that Paul was trapped, it might even be enjoyable to let the human worry a little bit. He would come back when least expected and throttle him.

"Well, I was just going. Nice to meet you, ah, I don't think I caught your name."

"Elissar. My name is Elissar."

"Unusual name. Well, Paul, Elissar, I will see you later."

The Panterran disappeared in the haze. Paul Phillips breathed a sigh of relief.

But it seemed to Paul that he had escaped one problem, only to be confronted with another. The stranger still remained. He could not reach him, and he was armed.

"Well, Elissar, can I offer you anything? By the way, I don't think you'll be needing your weapon."

"Not any longer, Paul. That was a close call. I got here just in time. Next time, I won't cut the timing so closely."

Paul was amazed. The stranger seemed to indicate that he had come here on purpose.

"Of course I came here on purpose, don't be so surprised."

Paul was now becoming alarmed. The stranger had the voice and was more proficient in its use than was Paul. He could block out Paul as effectively as Owhindamon.



"Paul, I've known Owhindamon for close to two of your centuries. I was raised from childhood by the Owhinda. Do you think I am seeking revenge. If I was, I could have had my revenge years ago. You might find this hard to believe, but I could kill Rakreesh with my bare hands if I wanted to."

Paul's eyes widened involuntarily at that revelation.

"Anyway, there's the dilemma we face. If we remain at your house, we will both be in for trouble. I don't think Rakreesh will come alone next time. He's no fool; he will bring reinforcements with him."

"Well, what can we do?"

"I'm glad you asked. Owhindamon and I have concocted a plan. You're coming with me."

"Oh, how nice. Just where are 'we' going?"

"To the planet you sold Rakreesh."

"Oh, hey, that's a great idea. Want to put me in handcuffs and chain me too? Are you out of your mind. There's no way in hell I'm going there. There's a whole planet of those fucking cats waiting there. Not only that, but the place is crawling with overgrown insects as well. Your mother never said anything about you being deranged. Maybe that's why she never talked about you: ya, that's it, she was embarrassed."

"Will you calm down. I'm not deranged. Like I said, I've talked this over with Owhindamon. You know that what I say is true; there are very good reasons why we should go to the planet."

"Well, if that's the case, tell me a few of them."

"Sure. First, we have a fairly large concentration of Owhinda there. Secondly, we've also got an armed contingent there: my army. Thirdly, the Panterran would never think of looking for you there: who would hide in the enemy's camp. Fourthly, we can influence the course of the battle on the planet, while we pursue other avenues of ending the conflict. Fifthly, we are in a better strategic position to keep an eye out for the Earth. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, you have no choice."



"Paul, I will take off the block. Find out whatever you want."

Paul reached into Elissar's mind. He burst out laughing.

"Son-of-a-bitch. Oh, bad choice of words, sorry about that. I'll be damned. I wanted to ask your mother what happened to you, but I have'nt had the chance. The name should have given me a clue. You're all grown up; I expected you to be small yet."

"Yes, I am all grown up. What my mother told you happened long ago. I have'nt seen her in a while, how is she?"

"Well, I have'nt seen Elissa in a few weeks but she was fine when I saw her. What are you doing here, though?"

"Watching out for you. Owhindamon told me that the Panterran might try something like this, so he asked that we keep an eye on them. I believe he told you that all arrivals and departures from the planet would be monitored."

"As a matter of fact, he did; but I didn't think he could watch that effectively. I figured I would buy the farm a few minutes ago. I can't tell you how happy I am you're here. Look, I was just putting this food away, and then planned on having breakfast when the over-grown alleycat dropped in. Would you like something to eat, and then you can fill me in on what's going on."

After Paul and Elissar had finished their breakfasts, the conversation turned to the Panterran.

"Well, Rakreesh will come back to kill you, I am afraid. He will also figure out who I am, before long."

"I agree with your assesment of his actions towards me, but how will he determine who you are?"

"Paul, they may be strong and impulsive but they are possessed of a fine intellect as well. He will remember my mother, and connect the names. He will feel doubly threatened - you know his problems and represent a threat if you did in fact sell a bad deed to the Mantodeii. I know his people killed my mother, and to his way of thinking, I will seek revenge."

"Well, won't you seek revenge?"



"Oh, I see. Now that you put it that way it makes more sense. What the hell do you mean, I have no choice! I'm just going to get in touch with Owhindamon to see what he has to say about this."

"I don't think you'll have to."

"Why, can you speak for him, as well?"

"No, I can speak for myself, " came the familiar voice.

"Oh. am I glad to see you! Owhindamon, Elissa is a great lady; where did she get such an off-the-wall son? Do you know he's talking about going right to the planet the Panterran purchased? Would you please set him straight so that we can figure out what to do about Rakreesh."

"Let me address your points in the order raised. First, Elissa is a 'great lady,' and her son is equally 'great.' Secondly, you are going to that planet along with Elissar. Thirdly, by getting away from here, we have solved the problem of Rakreesh. He can't hurt you if he can't find you."

"Oh shit. Two psychotics instead of one. Maybe you two don't understand! I'm not going. Oh fuck, this is getting nowhere. Hang on, I'm calling for the cavalry."

Paul slipped into the voice trance and awoke in an open field. "Hi Elissa, how are you?"

"Fine Paul, but what is your problem? Owhindamon never did anything to harm you before. Why do you think he is intent on harming you now? I know you've never met my son before today, but he is an honorable man; he would never hurt you."

"Elissa, please don't misunderstand. I don't believe either of them would intentionally do anything to harm me. I just think they've gone nuts. What sense does it make to walk straight into enemy territory?"

"Paul, my son has been on that planet since the beginning of hostilities. Neither the Panterran nor the Mantodeii know of his army, or of the other Owhinda. I also know that you cannot possibly stay here; to do so would be to endanger your life. If I were you, I would leave the military strategy to those who are competent to devise it."

"Well, I guess I just got flustered. I have to admit that the friggin' alleycat had me worried for a while. Maybe I'd better go



back and apologize to Elissar and Owhindamon. Thanks a lot, Elissa. I'll see you later."

"Good bye, Paul. By the way, I thought I could keep my deranged son secret for a while longer."

"Elissar, Owhindamon: I owe you both an apology. Why don't you fill me in on the details of your plan."

"Actually, there's not much to tell. As soon as you can get what you need, we'll be on our way."

"What will I be needing?"

"A few changes of clothes. A jacket and a fairly heavy coat, some boots, hat, gloves. Any personal effects you'd like to bring along; maybe a few books."

"How long will we be gone?"

"Well, anywhere from a few weeks to forever; as near as I can tell."

"Well, that certainly narrows it down. Let me get my stuff packed; it should take me about half an hour. Hey, can I bring the computer Sawyer gave me?"

"Sure, just as long as we disconnect it from the mainframe."

"Did you remember to bring along the deed copier?"

"Yes, we've taken care of that already."

"Paul, I'm rather busy; I'll see you in a few days."

"OK Owhindamon, I'll see you. Take care."

After about forty-five minutes, Paul had completely packed and was ready to depart. "Well, let's get going, Elissar. I never thought I'd look at the last few months as the 'good old days,' but somehow I get the feeling that what comes next will make this all look easy."

"Ya, your probably right. But don't take my word for it, I'm



deranged."

Those were the last words Paul Phillips heard as he stepped into the blue haze.