

Paul had never before contemplated death; at least, not in any real sense.. He had intellectually come to accept the fact that someday he would die. But up till now, he had no real knowledge of death. The last few days had driven home the immediacy, the lingering and insistent palpability, of his own death. He was no stranger to death any longer.

He had no fear. Fear had been sloughed off like some old, discarded skin. Fear had no place with pain. For Paul had come to know real pain in the last few days. He had come to live with pain, as one lives with a lover or a spouse. Pain was his constant companion. No ordinary, physical pain was Paul's confidant; but a pain of the flesh so intense and a pain of the mind so searing that all other sensation paled in comparison. There was no escape from the pain: no separation, no divorce, no surcease. There was no beginning, there was no end: there was only one constant; the only fact in the known universe, the only reality of a tortured mind - the pain.

"Hello, Paul. How are you? Do you wish to die? Do you want me to stop? Do you still hear me? Can you respond? Do you care? I don't: I will only continue until you beg me to stop. Of course, I will cause you more pain. I will continue to hurt you until it pleases me to stop. Then I will kill you. Do you like my view of life? Do you share my theology? Will you embrace my hatred and cling to it as a shield against the pain? Hate me: it will make the pain less numbing. Hate me: for your spite will ease the suffering. Hate me: it will consign your soul to hell to be tortured forever. Whatever you choose you will die and suffer: if I were you I would at least have the satisfaction of my hatred."

"Good for you, Rakreesh. You are not me, and your place in hell is already reserved."

7H- "I tire of your prattle. Grassh, do what you like. After he passes out, wake him, then summon me: Mr. Phillips has seen his last day. I have drawn up the standard confession. He has admitted to being an agent of the Mantodeii. He has also admitted to passing fraudulent title to them, and to precipitating a war. We will present the confession to the Panterran leaders, and to the Federation. We will, of course, demand the immediate removal of the Mantodeii from the planet. If they do not leave, we will deploy the nuclears."

"What will we do for a game preserve if we destroy this planet?"

"If we are forced to use nuclears here, I have an alternative location. I believe the planet is usually referred to as earth. What's wrong, Mr. Phillips, think I won't invade your planet. I assure you, I will. Too bad you won't be alive to see your planet subjugated. I offer my solemn promise to you that it will happen. I also lay blame for the invasion upon your head. Well have fun Paul, and think how you were responsible for ruining billions of lives."

"You bastard! You stinking animal!"

"Grassh, please silence Mr. Phillips. Thank-you Grassh."

Paul lapsed into unconsciousness. At the edge of his awareness, he thought he heard a voice, a voice which sounded vaguely familiar. He strained: had he heard something, or was it his mind playing tricks on him. Was it Rakreesh; was it Grassh? He could not tell. "Get away from me! leave me alone, you bastard! I want to die! LEAVE ME ALONE! YOU HAVE NO RIGHT TO BOTHER ME! LEAVE ME ALONE TO DIE!" Was it his voice? He could not tell. He was afraid he was going insane.

The voice continued. He could hear words now. "Paul, Paul it is I. Why do you run from me? Paul hear my voice. It is Elissa, Paul."

"Elissa, Elissa; I know that name. I have known that person. Who are you?"

"Paul, it is I, Elissa. Paul, please use the voice. Paul, hear me."

"Elissa? Are you really Elissa? Is this a trick Rakreesh is pulling on me? I cannot tell."

"Paul, come into the glade with me. Paul, do you remember how to reach me? Paul, come into the meadow with me."

Paul blinked. He was in a meadow, and Elissa was with him."

"Paul, my love. You are with me. No one can hurt you here."

"Elissa, Elissa; it is you. How did you reach me?"

"Paul, I have been trying to reach you for days. Your pain was so great that you blocked me out. You are near death, my love. You are almost past the point of feeling the pain. I have come to tell you to hold on. You must hold on."

"I don't know if I can, Elissa. I can't take this much longer."

"There is a way, my love. You can stay with me in this meadow for a while longer. You will not feel the pain while you are here."

"They will kill me soon. How can I stay with you if I am dead?"

"You will not die, yet. I can see what they are doing. Rakreesh is busy, he does not have time to kill you. We have a few more hours. Stay here with me, I will ease your suffering."

"Arandur, where is Owhindamon?"

"I do not know, sir."

"Damn! He must have gone off to the Panterran camp by himself. Summon the men, we will be departing soon."

"But sir, we will all be killed. We cannot fly into that camp; we will be shot out of the sky."

"We are not flying. We will teleport there."

"I am sure the Panterran have blocked the teleport lanes. We will have to teleport near there and make our way by stealth to the camp, if we are to have any hope at all. I am also concerned about the numbers: never have so many attempted teleportation. Surely we cannot send that many at one time."

"No, we cannot. We will have to teleport in smaller groups and assemble after all have been moved. Make haste, I fear our time is growing short."

Within an hour, the army was assembled some twenty kilometers outside the Panterran encampment. Elissar called a hastily convened conference with his generals.

"We cannot possibly stay undetected for more than a mile or two from the camp. We will then be forced into combat with the Panterran," said Ullasur.

"I fear you are correct, my friend. Given that fact, we will have to choose the location which provides us with the defensive position. If we can hold off the Panterran, perhaps we can send a small contingent into the camp to aid Owhindamon and Paul. I can see no better way of proceeding. All our hard work comes down to this. A half-assed attack on a vastly superior foe and a rescue attempt that is doomed to failure. Damn Owhindamon. Why did he go running off like that without telling me. Have we had any luck trying to contact him yet?"

"None, sir. He resists our attempts to contact him."

Rakreesh entered. He saw Paul Phillips lying on the ground. His first reaction was anger. Graash could'nt wait, and killed the man. Damn him, he would pay. Then Rakreesh saw Grassh lying on the floor, neck at an odd angle to his torso. In the next instant, he saw the stuff of nightmares standing at the other end of the room.

"An Ouhinda. Now it becomes clear: you were responsible for this whole affair. So you look to exact revenge. Well, you have once again proven to be an admirable adversary. You have immersed my people in a war, defeated the Grssh-nak and killed quite a few Mantodeii into the bargain. Your race is nothing, if not persistent."

"My race is beyond your understanding. We do not seek revenge. We seek to put an end to your plundering of other races. Your time is limited, Panterra."

"Oh, this is wonderful. You walk into my camp and think to strike terror into my heart with idle chatter! This boast of yours is hollow. It is your time that is limited. I have had enough of your prattle. I will kill you now, and then kill your friend."

Rakreesh lowered into a crouch. Just then, sounds of battle broke out in the area surrounding the camp. Rakreesh was about to pounce when an aide burst into the room.

"Rakreesh, Rakreesh we are being attacked. What the hell? An Ouhinda."

"What are you talking about," asked Rakreesh as he eased out of his death-stance.

"We are being attacked by an army of men. They are beating back our troops. It is a relatively small group of men, but they fight like devils."

"Tell Rrssh-dur to lead a counter-attack. I will be with him shortly; I have business to attend-to."

"As you wish, sir."

Paul Phillips awoke from his sleep. He lifted his head to see Ouhindamon standing near him, with Rakreesh at the other side of the room.

Rakreesh again went into his crouch. He tensed, then sprang.

"Well, we have at least earned the respect of the Panterran by defeating the Grass-nak. Let us go earn some more glory: we can hope for no other outcome."

Grassh was enjoying the last few hours of Paul Phillips' life. The mind probe and laser whip were enjoyable toys, but the predatory instincts bottled-up inside Grassh were beginning to bubble to the surface. He was contemplating the use of his claws on Mr. Phillips. Sometimes it was best to use the simple tools to accomplish a task.

"If I were you, I would leave that man alone."

Grassh spun around. He could't believe his eyes. In front of him was a primate. Not just any primate, but a red one. One that his race had learned to fear. The one race that the Panterran could not subjugate, the one race that instilled fear into the heart of every warrior present at that battle over two hundred years ago.

"You were all dead. We blew your world apart. You are dead. You are not real."

"I am not dead, and I am very real. Leave that man alone, he is a friend of mine." As if to prove his point, Owhindamon walked over to Grassh, and very calmly wrenched the laser whip from his hand.

Just then, the Panterran moved. He crouched, and tensed for a spring. He leapt.

Owhindamon moved with a greater speed. He moved to the side as the cat leapt. The Panterran landed on the ground, at the spot where Owhindamon had been standing. The cat turned and concentrated on his prey. This time, his crouch was tighter. His leg muscles bunched, his eyes focused in a feral gaze of hatred and kill--lust. He sprang. Owhindamon again stepped aside. Just as the cat was about to pass, Owhindamon reached up and grabbed the cat's throat with his hand. With the force of the cat's motion, and the countervailing thrust of his body, Owhindamon broke the animal's neck. Grassh fell to the floor. His body shuddered, then was still.

Owhindamon walked over to Paul. He unfastened his restraints and gently lowered his friend to the ground. Owhindamon cradled Paul's head and sat with him. They waited.

In a few minutes, Owhindamon heard footsteps approaching. He gently lifted Paul's head, placed it on the ground, and stood up.

Paul watched as the cat jumped. Owhindamon did not move. The Panterra landed on Owhindamon and tore into him with teeth and fangs.

Rakreesh did not want to kill the creature. He would permit him to live long enough to see his friend die. He got up, and walked over to Paul Phillips.

"I see you are awake. Good, I want you to watch me kill you. Then I will kill your friend. I think I will rip your heart out and eat it."

Paul could not move. He was unable to help himself. The Panterra flexed his claws, and bent over. Paul held his breath, waiting for the pain.

"You are mine! Now prepare to die!"

But Rakreesh never moved his hand. He could move no part of his body. He could not speak; he was not sure he could breathe.

"You will not kill another creature. We have permitted your kind to kill for too long. We will not permit the slaughter of innocent lives any longer. Turn around, you disgusting creature."

Rakreesh did as he was ordered. He beheld a light, and within the light he could discern the outlines of a shape. The shape was like an Owhinda, now like a man. It glowed and shimmered, vibrated and pulsed in a halo of light.

"Who are you?"

"We are called the 'old ones' by your kind. We were the first in the universe. Made by the One billions of years ago. We are almost beyond your kind, passing into something you will not be able to perceive. We were summoned here to provide aid. Go outside. Tell your people to put down their arms. It will be better for you if you co-operate. Go now. Do as I say. One of my kind will instruct the men to do the same thing."

Rakreesh ran out of the tent, and screamed at the top of his voice for his messenger. His mind wavered for a minute. Then he looked up and saw hundreds of lights flitting overhead. He knew what must be done. He gave the word to end the fighting, then collapsed on the ground in fear.

Inside, the being approached Paul. It touched him. Paul Phillips sat upright, all pain having left him.

"Your friend is almost gone. We cannot give life back, but we can ease pain. We have assuaged his his hurts, but cannot give him his life."

Paul walked over to Ouhindamon. He sat down and cradled his friend's head in his lap. Tears streamed down his face.

"Ouhindamon, Ouhindamon, it is me; its Paul."

"Hello, Paul. How are you? Did it work, are the old ones here?"

"They came, Ouhindamon; they came."

"Praise to the One. I was not sure we could reach them."

"Ouhindamon, why did'nt you try to stay clear or Rakreesh. You did'nt even try to protect yourself."

"I had only once chance of reaching the old ones. That chance involved my death and the death of everyone that I carry with me."

Paul blanched. "That mean Elissa too?"

"Yes, my friend. Elissa and all the rest. They all consented to the plan; they all knew the risk. We needed to harness enough physhic energy to attract their attention. The only way to do so was to chance my death. While I lay in pain, I focused my energy and the energy of those with me. All the lives, all the memories, all the loves and hates, fears and joy were focused on the old ones. In that instant when we made contact, we harnessed the pain and used it to send our message. From that pain, from that sublimation of our hurt, we gave birth to a message: a message of need, of hurt, of oppression, and ultimately a message of hope. We could contact them in no other way. The odl ones were not indifferent to us: they were merely unaware of us. They are close to passing from our existence to another level of existence. When we asked for help, they consented as their final act before they go."

"Ouhindamon, are you dying?"

"Yes, my friend; I am dying."

"Where is Owhindamon?"

"What you remeber as Owhindamon is lying in the tent."

Elissar walked over to Paul, and together they walked into the tent. Lying on the floor was the body of Owhindamon.

"Oh god! He is dead. He who was like a father and mother to me. Oh, please don't let it be true. Was no one here to retrieve him from the chaos. Why did'nt he call to one of us? He is lost forever. The world will not be the same for his passing."

Paul walked to Elissar, and put his hand on the shoulder of the king.

A voice came into Elissar's head. No, not a single voice; but many voices. Voices filled with joy and love.

"I did not pass my friend: I could not leave you alone."

Elissar knew those voices. Owhindamon and Elissa. Owhindamon and Elissa!

"They are with me; they have not passed into the void. They are with me forever, the ones that we love."



"You can't leave me. I love you."

"I know Paul, I love you too. My time is short. Can you remember months ago when you asked me about the voice. I told you then that some day you will be ready for the full power of the voice. You asked me if it would cause you pain. The voice itself never causes pain. But to be ready to achieve the final and best use of the voice, one must be reborn through pain. You are ready. Prepare yourself for the final gift. Paul, my friend, I leave now."

"NO! OWHINDAMON. NO!"

Paul sobbed. He fell down, head on his friend's chest.

A rush. A wave. A force. Voices, thousands upon thousands of voices. Thoughts, words, deeds, lives, deaths, births. Whirling and whirling in a spinning gyre. Wave upon wave came crashing into him. No beginning, no end. No form, no substance. Peace.

Paul awoke. The body that was Owhindamon lie on the floor. Paul bent over and kissed it. Farewell you who I thought was Owhindamon.

Paul walked outside. The Panterran were milling about, obviously afraid of the old ones. The Mantodeii were present as well. Elissar was talking to Rakreesh and the Mantodeii leader. Terms of peace were being drawn up. Both armies would leave the planet and neither would return. Elissar proposed the terms of the Federation laws that would be enacted at the next Council meeting. The men who served in Elissar's army were talking to the Panterran and Mantodeii, beginning the long and arduous process of reconciliation. It would take many days and many years to undue all that had been done. These men, the Panterran, and the Mantodeii, had time to set things right.

After the terms of the agreement had been discussed at length, Elissar took his leave. He turned toward the tent and spotted Paul.

"Hello, Paul. I am sorry we could not get here sooner. I know that you were tortured: we suspected all along, but Rakreesh admitted the fact to us just now. Have the old ones helped you?"

"I am fine now," said Paul.

To Elissar, Paul's voice seemed somehow different, somehow changed.