

The first words he heard upon emerging from the haze were his own.

"How long will it take to get there?"

"We're here already," came the reply from Elissar.

Paul noticed two things almost at the same instant the haze cleared. The first was that the sky had a reddish cast. The second was that Elissar's voice seemed different. He scanned across the horizon. It occurred to him that not only was the sky colored in a reddish hue, but that almost everything else was tinted red as well. It was as though someone had placed a red lens across the his field of view and had forgotten to remove it.

"Elissar, why is everything tinted red?"

"This star is a spectral class G star, as is your sun. Yet, unlike your star, it is a red giant. Look for yourself," said Elissar as he pointed toward the sun.

Paul looked at the huge disk pendulant in the sky, then continued his conversation. "What is the significance of its being a red giant?"

"Because of the way in which it emits energy, it tends to create light which is in the red end of the spectrum. Everything appears to be bathed in a reddish hue. The effect is shared on other planets possessing the same type star. You will become accustomed to it after a while. It will probably take your system longer to adjust to the atmosphere than to the color of the sky. Have you noticed that the air tastes slightly tangy? The taste is due to the nitrogen in the atmosphere. The atmosphere of this planet contains more nitrogen than on your earth. While the increased nitrogen is not harmful to your system, it will nevertheless cause you some discomfort initially, especially under conditions where you might exert yourself. Also, the trace elements contained in the air are slightly different than on the earth. I would advise you to proceed slowly for the first few days you are on the planet; under no circumstance exert yourself, or you might experience real discomfort."

"Why does your voice sound different?"

"The air pressure is different than on your world, hence the difference in tonal quality."



As they talked, Paul and Elissar made their way through a forest of towering plants, which Paul assumed to be trees of some sort. The plants did not have bark, nor did they have true leaves but they rose into the sky to an immense height, which Paul estimated to be in excess of several hundred feet. Underfoot, the planet was covered with a mossy, lichen-like substance which was springier than grass. As they walked along, Paul was bothered by a vague feeling of uneasiness. After a few more minutes, his discomfort became apparent to him.

"Elissar, are these 'trees,' and the moss on the ground, really plants?"

"Yes, of course, why do you ask?"

"Well, I can't see how they could be plants, they are not green."

"Why should they be green? Oh, you are referring to the color plants take on your planet as a result of photosynthesis. These plants also undergo the process of photosynthesis, although they do not turn green. Again, this is due to the light source on this planet."

As they continued their walk, Paul began to notice a difficulty with his breathing. He began to experience cramps in his stomach, and a general dizziness in his head.

"Hey, Elissar, we have to rest, I'm not feeling well."

"What's wrong, Paul?"

"I'm feeling dizzy and out of breath, and my stomach and legs are starting to cramp."

"OK, I'll send ahead to the camp for oxygen. In the meantime, sit down, and place your head between your knees. You are experiencing a mild form of the bends as the excess nitrogen enters your bloodstream."

Paul sat as directed, and Elissar nervously paced back and forth. Finally, a man arrived with an oxygen tank for Paul. After a few minutes, Paul felt better and could breathe without the oxygen.

"We're close to camp; hopefully we can arrive there without further incident. In any event, we have the oxygen if you will have further need of it, thanks to Arawan."



"Don't you have difficulty conducting this war given the atmospheric conditions?"

"The Panterran, Owhinda, and my men have problems adjusting to the atmosphere. The Mantodeii can breathe it quite comfortably. New recruits have problems similar to what you are experiencing, but after a few weeks they get used to it."

"Can't the excess nitrogen be removed somehow?"

"Yes, it can. The Panterran are attempting to moderate the level of nitrogen. The Mantodeii, seeing an advantage to their enemies if the nitrogen level is lowered, are taking steps to maintain the present atmospheric components."

"The foliage seems to be getting thicker," said Paul.

"Yes, we are very near the camp. Just around that turn up ahead, and we will be there."

Elissar, Paul and Arawan walked into the camp.

"Where are the guards?" inquired Paul.

"We have no need of guards; every member of the camp is adept at using the voice."

Once in camp, Elissar called a council and requested food to be made available.

"What news have we since my absence?" asked Elissar aloud for Paul's benefit. The councils were generally conducted through means of the voice, but Elissar judged that Paul did not possess the necessary skill to differentiate between members of the council.

"The Mantodeii have gained a definite advantage, and have taken the southern continent. We are receiving mixed signals from the Panterran leaders. Some wish to continue conventional warfare, others wish to employ nuclears."

"Thank you, Grand. What preparations have we made to restore some semblance of parity to the conflict?"



"No, my friend, if the Mantodeii were to defeat the Panterran, so thoroughly, we would be replacing one tyrant for another. Better to eliminate the tyranny completely."

"Elissar, we could try the mind block on them," this from Ulrasur.

"I have considered that possibility, but am afraid of the risk involved. We have only attempting mind blocking techniques on animals possessing much less intelligence than the Panterran. Besides, even if it were to work, I find that method abhorrent. We must try to find another way."

"May I make a suggestion?" asked Paul.

"Certainly, you are among friends," said Elissar.

"Would it be possible to insert a 'worm' in the computers which control the deployment of the nuclears?"

"I don't know. Grand, summon Albertus to the council at once! I hope he can do it; with such a program we can effectively block the threat of nuclears from both the Panterran and the Mantodeii."

An old man walked up to the council members and bowed to each in turn. Not a full bow, but a slight bend at the waist his head slightly averted from the gaze.

"Albertus, my commendations to you for your worm program. Once again, my friend, you have served the People well. We have further need of your service. Is it possible for you to write a program to debilitate the launch systems for the nuclears for both the Panterran and the Mantodeii?"

"Thank you for your kind words, Elissar. May the peace of the People be with you all the days of your life. I believe I can write such a program. It may take a few weeks. I will have to study the systems quite extensively, since they are not the same as the other computer systems those two races employ. All things considered, I believe I can do what you request."

"Well, then go study; go study. The faster you get them written, the better. You will get a commendation for this, Albertus."

"None necessary, Elissar. I will be happy to write the program. Well, I'd better be going, I have work to do."



"I have dispatched a garrison to debilitate the computer network which they have established on the southern continent," said Orand.

"With their computer network dysfunctional, won't the balance of power swing to the Panterran?"

"No, I don't believe so. We are not concentrating on the hardware, but rather the software. We will place a worm in their utility programs. The worm will disable the system, but we can re-direct the worm at will. For instance, we will be able to control any element of their system that we choose. If we wish to leave their lasers operational, we can. If we choose to disable their generators, why we can do that as well. If we choose to restore full power to their equipment to stave off a Panterran attack, we can do that as well."

"Once again, my thanks Orand. Whose design was used for the creation of the worm?"

"It was Albertus' design."

"Please commend him for his work. My only concern is that the Panterran will still not be satisfied with a modest victory. Which of the Panterran favor nuclears?"

"Grshnaak and his clan are the most vocal in their support of nuclears. Rakreesh and most of the other clans are opposed. I think that Rakreesh can prevent others from joining Grshnaak with a modest victory. Rakreesh has not let the Panterran forget the devastation wrought on the planet of the Owinda. They have paid a handsome price for this planet. I do not believe they will be anxious to destroy it."

"But do not forget, Orand, the Panterran will have to save face. They might be driven to the holocaust by their damned pride."

"I hope that you are wrong, Ulrasur. Your council has always been good, however. We shall have to increase our watch on the Panterran leaders. Any drastic change of thought process should be brought to my immediate attention. In the meantime, we will have to devise a contingency plan, in the event the decision is made to employ nuclears," said Elissar.

"I suppose the easiest thing to do would be to leak information to the Mantodeiii. They would therefore be able to launch a pre-emptive strike against the Panterran," said Arawan.



"Paul, you have brought us good fortune! This program will buy us time. We must continue to play this cat and mouse game until my sister can convince the Federation to enact sanctions against the Panterran and Mantodeii. Our plans are made: let us go now to put them in place. Orand, take your men to the southern continent, and the watchfulness of the People remain with you. Be careful my friend. Ulrasur, have your men redouble their watch on the Panterran. Much depends on their diligence; keep them in good stead. Arawan, supply Albertus with anything he requires. If you have programmers who may assist him, please make them available. Remember all to be careful; I do not wish to inform wives or rs mothers that their loved one will not return. Go with the blessing of the People."