

FIVE

"Now Paul, take it easy," said Nick.

"Nick, you son-of-a-bitch, how'd you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Get in here without the blue glow and the ozone smell."

"Put down the blowtorch and I'll stay long enough to talk."

"Ya, I'll put it down all right; I'll put it down your fucking throat you plastic asshole."

Nick vanished.

"Get back here, Sawyer."

"Put down the torch."

"OK, its down, get back here."

"Very well," said Nick as he re-appeared in Paul's seat.

"Get out of that seat or I'll get the torch. Get out now, Nick or you'll be a million Visa cards in about ten seconds."

"OK, OK, but you are rather excitable. And by the way, don't swear on the computer, it's so unprofessional. I brought the deed for that contemptible little water-hovel for Mr. Fishey and Neighbor Froggy. You did a fine job of jacking up the price on that peice of Florida swamp land. I also bring compliments from our mutual employer. Now, what has you so bothered that you sent for me so urgently?"

"What's got me so bothered is a guy named Fleshrender from a species called the Panteraan."

"Oh, well that's a pretty good reason to be bothered, I must admit. RaashKrssh can be pretty intimidating the first time you meet him."



"You know him?"

"Of course I know him. Sold him several game preserves in my day. Plays cards with the old boy every now and then."

"Who's the old boy?"

"Our boss."

"Oh. You say you sold him some worlds. Didn't it bother you that they were going to exterminate the animals on the game preserve?"

"No, I never really thought about it."

"Well think about it now, you asshole."

"OK, I've thought about it. Still doesn't bother me."

"Are you crazy! All those animals are dead, that's why they want to buy a new game preserve. They need more food, or they've gotten tired of killing the same things for too long."

"Who cares? Do you think I would tell RaashKrrssh that I wouldn't sell him a preserve because he would kill all the animals on it. Are you crazy? Besides, they were all dumb mammals with little chance of evolving into more intelligent life forms."

"Oh; how philosophical of you: they have little chance of evolving into intelligent life forms. Well, maybe not by tomorrow they won't evolve into intelligent life forms, but in a couple of million years, they might have."

"You know Paul, one of the things I like about you is your naivete. Do you really think I care what happens in a couple of million years. You certainly won't be around by that time either. Come on, don't worry about it. Hey look, if you're really upset about reprisals by the other species, not to worry. The Panteraan are very careful about the worlds they buy. They insist that we do a thorough job of research on the preserves we recommend. They don't want to take the risk of a conquered race seeking retribution."

"Ya, I heard the story about how their planet was invaded. It seems that their conquerors bit off a little more than they could chew."

"Yes, that's correct; the story is fairly well known. Another story which is not so widely known is how the Panteraan did exactly the same



thing a few millenia ago."

"What! How the hell could anyone stand up to them?"

"Oh, there are other races for which even the Panteraan pose no problems; but we need not concern ourselves with them. As I said, the Panteraan made the mistake of taking a game preserve by force. Actually, they just settled in one day and began hunting the native species. The Panteraan didn't do such a good job of researching prospective preserves back then. I guess they just figured the native species was unintelligent because they were rather unprepossessing. The problem was that they were in fact intelligent, but unable to communicate with the Panteraan. I really doubt that communication would have helped though. Sometimes the only way to get through to the Panteraan is by means of force. Our friends on this world were pacifists; at least initially they were. As casualties began to mount, and any hope of the Panteraan leaving began to fade they decided to fight back. And fight back they did, with such ferocity that an entire clan of Panteraan were wiped out in one surprise attack.

That success prompted a full-scale Panteraan invasion. The war was a virtual stalemate for several months when a meeting of the clans heads was called. I don't know how much you know about the Panteraan, but this was a precedent-setting move. No such meeting was ever convened before or after; Panteraan clans don't get along very well. At this meeting, it was decided that decisive action had to be taken. The Panteraan were afraid that if they did not end the war quickly, their many enemies might think they were weakening and all hell would break loose. They resolved to atomize the world and send a message to the galaxy - the Panteraan had not weakened, they merely toyed with this world until their game had come to an end. That was that; but the Panteraan learned a valuable lesson from the experience."

"What happened to the species of that world?"

"Dead, all of them. Oh, there have been tales that some escaped; but I put no credence in such stories. They did not have space travel; they could not have escaped. Still, I suppose that the notion of surviving members of that race appeals to some of the more romantic species"

"Well, thanks for the information but it really doesn't make me feel any better. You know, I had another question about the Panteraan. I can understand that they are predators and might have some predatory instincts left after many years, but I should think they could control them. Why do they still hunt prey species?"

"You are again correct, Paul; they can of course control their predatory instincts. They choose not to; you see they choose not only for the lust of predation, but because they must. They are hired mercenaries by trade, and hone their skills in search of prey. Don't think that they hunt prey with any weapons other than those they are



naturally equipped with. When the Panteraan settle a new game preserve, weapons are expressly prohibited. They want to keep their natural abilities in constant readiness. When they are called upon to fight for real, the weapons are an added bonus."

"They must be pretty damn good to prevent constant attacks from vanquished foes."

"They are, Paul, they are. The way they prevent incessant reprisals is to leave no foe alive. But come, you talk of them as if they were repugnant. They are not. They have a way of life which they adapted to their feline nature. They accept a job and always, let me stress this because they have never failed, always complete it to their client's satisfaction. They cannot be bought off by another party after accepting an assignment; and they have even accepted less payment than was contracted-for under mitigating circumstances. No, they are not evil as you would make them out to be."

"Nick, maybe you and I have different values, I don't know. I'm still uncomfortable about selling them a world for a game preserve. I don't know what the hell I'm going to do."

"Take my advice Paul, sell it to them; if you don't, someone else will. Besides, they are friends of the old boy. He'd be hard pressed to ask for their assistance if needed again if you wouldn't sell them a game preserve. Well, it's been nice chatting with you but I've got to be going."

Nick vanished in a cloud of blue that left a stench of ozone.

"Must've tried to make up for not leaving the smell when he came in," muttered Paul to himself.