

FOUR

Paul woke up early this morning; it was a day off work and a chance to go fishing. After dressing in jeans and a flannel shirt, he stepped outside to check the weather. The first signs of autumn could be seen in the changing leaves, and felt in the chill morning air.

Coffee was brewing when Paul walked into the kitchen and removed a can of earthworms from the refrigerator. He sat down to have a cup of coffee when he heard a high-pitched droning noise coming from the den. "What in hell is that?" thought Paul as he walked into the den. On the desk, Paul's computer was buzzing. "What's up?" said Paul. A message appeared on the computer terminal. "Holy shit! These guys will be here in ten minutes. How in hell are they going to get here?"

Paul had not heard from Nick Sawyer for the past few weeks; he would, in fact, have forgotten him completely but for the computer and deed recorder. As it was, he had forgotten to query the machine about possible buyers for the galaxy. The message that two aliens were expected within a few minutes caught him completely by surprise. At least he had learned that the computer would make appointments for him unless specifically instructed not to do so. From now on, he would have to instruct the damn machine to confirm appointments with him.

Paul was just completing his ruminations when he detected a faint smell of ozone. A blue haze filled the den, and out stepped two people. Well, almost people.

"Hello, how are you?" said Paul.

The other two creatures stared at him in a state of bewilderment.

"Hi, my name is Paul Phillips. Nice of you to stop by."

The aliens merely looked at him with a puzzled expression. Paul cursed Nick under his breath, and wondered if there was any intelligent life in the galaxy.

After a few more bungled attempts at communication, Paul remembered that he had not instructed the computer to act as translator.

"Computer, please translate for us. Extend my greetings to our visitors."

The computer dutifully responded.

The aliens smiled (at least Paul hoped that their expressions could be construed as smiles) and exchanged greetings with him. Paul asked them to make themselves comfortable before they got down to business.

"May I get either of you something to eat or drink?" asked Paul, hoping to be able to comply with their request.

"You don't happen to have fresh Kelp or perhaps some Krill, do you?" said one of the creatures.

Paul replied in the negative.

"Well then, perhaps some water for myself. By the way, do you chemically treat your water?"

"I believe its chlorinated. I'm not sure if they fluorinate the water in this part of the country. Why do you ask?"

"My species is extremely sensitive to certain chemicals, one of which happens to be chlorine. Would you mind boiling the water before you bring it?"

Paul boiled the water, as requested, but was unsure of how to serve his guest. The creature noticed Paul's discomfort, and correctly assumed it was due to Paul's uncertainty as to how to serve the water. "Please Mr. Phillips, bring the water in a bowl. You may add some ice to cool the water off. I don't think the trace element of chlorine in the ice will disturb me."

?H- When he returned, Paul offered the bowl to his visitor who extended one of his two leathery appendages to grasp it. At such close range Paul noted how this creature looked like a bipedal turtle. The creature's skin was a mottled brown over most of his body, and a tan color around his face. What would have been a shell in a terrestrial turtle was a form-fitting carapice which covered both the back and the front of the creature with scalloping for the arms, legs and neck. The carapice appeared to be almost bony, but Paul guessed that it was merely a thicker section of the leathery skin that covered the creature. Paul also noticed that the creature had five fingers, and that each finger had four joints. The fifth finger was almost opposable and similar to a man's. The creature's facial features were almost man-like. Binocular vision, a nose rather than a beak, and somewhat pronounced eye ridges made the creature look more human. Its small ears were reminiscent of a reptile's however.

?H- "How may I help you?"

"We are interested in acquiring a planet."

"I see. What are your specifications?"

"We'd prefer a spectral class G star system. A combination of Oxygen-Nitrogen atmosphere; a ratio of land to water of from 1 to 1.5 to three; gravity of .9 to 1.1 G; no sentient life form currently on the planet; a mean temperature of between 85 to 105 degrees fahrenheit and if possible, we'd like no mammalian life forms present. By the way, we mean no disrespect to your person by that last requirement."

"None taken; but if you don't mind my asking, why no mammals?"

"We have evolved in our home system in the absence of mammals. In comparative studies we have made with neighboring systems, we have found that mammals adapt more quickly to changes in climate and terrain than do reptiles or amphibians. Hence, they tend to become the dominant groups of species in those systems. Other animal forms tend to stagnate and remain further down the evolutionary scale than do mammals.

"Since we did not compete with mammalian forms, we were able to evolve, albeit more slowly, into an intelligent and civilized society. Our two species rule the planet in harmony and peace, each co-existing with the other. Our purchase of a new planet will be a joint effort between our races."

"Let me inform the computer of your specifications and see which star systems have planets such as you seek."

Paul told the computer to begin the search, and within a matter of seconds, the process was complete.

"There are several hundred thousand planets to choose from, as my computer assures me. Do you have any particular location in mind, gentlemen?"

"We would prefer to be as far away from mammals as possible, yet near to our home system."

After several re-sorts were accomplished on the computer, a location was chosen. The star was located in a backwater section of the galaxy, toward the end of one of the spiral arms. In many ways, it was situated much like the Sun and its satellites. The planet was somewhat closer to its star than was Earth, being some 87 million miles distant from its source of heat and light.

A price was agreed upon, and payment terms settled. All that remained

Paul watched in amazement as Raashkrssh vanished in a blue cloud.

Fishgatherer awakened him from his reverie.

"I should have known the Panteraan would be looking for a new prey colony before long. At least this time they are willing to pay for their new preserve rather than taking it by force. Still, I don't suppose it matters much to the prey. At least they've learned a lesson from the Owhinda."

"You know that person?" asked Paul incredulously.

"No, I don't know that one personally but I have heard of his clan. I would imagine that everyone in the galaxy has heard of the Panteraan."

"Well, make that everyone but me. If you don't mind, I would like to know something about them since it looks like we'll be doing business."

"As you can see they are a rather large race, quite powerful physically and inclined to be short-tempered. They are predatory by nature but are bound by a fierce extended-family tie that they refer to as their clan or pride."

"How could they have ever developed space travel? It doesn't seem that they would be inclined to co-operate with anyone for an extended period of time."

"They didn't develop space travel. They were colonized several thousand years ago and eventually overpowered the colonists. That was the little joke Fleshrender made about intelligence in prey species."

"Quite a sense of humor that guy has. Well they at least seem co-operative enough to want to purchase a game preserve."

"Appearance often belies reality. Ask two Panteraan about something and you will invariably receive two diametrically opposed answers," this from Stickeytongue.

"You don't say a whole lot but when you do it's a mouthful, no pun intended. Well, the government must be involved to force a consensus on the issue of the preserve."

"The Panteraan have no government body to speak of," said Fishgatherer. "They are composed of clans of up to two hundred members. There is no larger assembly than a clan recognized by the Panteraan, except in times of war or dire emergency. Occasionally, one of their number becomes strong enough to declare himself King."

?H- was for Paul to send for the deed and arrange for funds to be transferred. Fishgatherer and Stickeytongue were to return to Paul's house in three days to inspect the deed and take title to their property.

Paul was beginning to think his earlier misgivings about this assignment were foolish. His first first sale was certainly auspicious, and the following sales would be equally as rewarding.

Fishgatherer and Stickeytongue were preparing to leave when the now-familiar ozone smell invaded Paul's house.

Out of the blue mist stepped a creature that frightened the hell out of Paul Phillips. It was a feline bipedal, approximately six and one half feet tall, with an extremely thick bownish-black fur. Its eyes blazed bright yellow, and its mouth was all fierce teeth. Its voice was raspy as if it ripped its words from its larynx, as meat from its prey.

Paul somewhat timidly introduced himself, and asked his guest if he could be of assistance.

"Yes you can. I am called Raashkrssh of the Panteraan."

"Hello, Mr. Raaskresh."

"You may call me Fleshrender, since you have trouble pronouncing my clan-given name. Most of the non-carnivorous races have trouble with it. Their languages are usually too sibilant to pronounce the gutturals properly. As I mentioned, I am a member of the Panteraan and have been sent to find a prey preserve. We will reward you handsomely for locating a suitable world. Ideally, the habitat should be approximately 50 to 55 degrees celsius in the temperate areas. We would prefer a ratio of two to one land to water with a fairly mixed topography. Topographical features must contain a minimum of plain, rain-forest and savannah; other habitats would be a bonus but not necessary."

"In terms of prey species," said Raashkrssh as he sheathed and unsheathed the claw on his first finger "we would require a minimum of four or five in each habitat." He slowly ran a claw up and down the side of his face as he spoke, much like a man might run his hand through his hair, or scratch the side of his face with a fingernail. "Mammalian prey species are of course preferred. We will, for a reduction in fee, settle for other forms of prey species such as reptile, fowl or fish provided that they present a challenge in capture. We do not require a high degree of intelligence in the prey species, and actually would prefer that they be of rather limited intellect. Intelligent prey species have a way of coming back to haunt one's race. If you have no further questions, I will be leaving. I will be back in five earth days to inspect the list of alternative sights."

Kingship is not a very stable position in such a society, however. When groups of clans come together there is no sense of shared allegiance or camaraderie. More often than not, when such a large gathering is held a fight will ensue."

"How then did the Panteraaan decide that a new game preserve was necessary?"

"The Panteraaan did not; at least not the entire assemblage of the Panteraaan. Most probably Fleshrender or one of the members of his clan decided that they wanted a new game preserve. All Panteraaan like to think that they speak for the entire species; makes them feel important or something. That's not to say that the whole lot of them won't wind up on the new world sooner or later. You have large felines on your world, don't you Mr. Phillips?"

"Yes we do, but they are not at all like the Panteraaan."

"In one way I'll bet they are. Have you noticed that the larger felines hunt in small packs or by themselves? When the hunt is finished and the prey is killed, the hunter feeds first. If any food is left over other members of the pack, or even other packs join in for the spoils. It is similar with the Panteraaan. If there is more than enough prey for the hunter, he shares his good fortune."

"Well, I'll tell you I was a little worried before you told me this. It seems that the Panteraaan are nothing more than the equivalent of our lions eating galactic zebras."

"I don't know what a lion is, and I'm not sure what a galactic zebra is either; but if you think the Panteraaan are not a force to be reckoned with, you are sadly mistaken. They have come here asking for a game preserve to keep themselves active and fit; what they did not tell you is that they train their young in predatory techniques on these worlds. They like to demonstrate their prowess by a show of fang or claw, but remember that they possess the ability to atomize your world in the blink of an eye. In fact they have atomized countless worlds just for sport. And don't forget one very important aspect of the nature of the Panteraaan: they have lived for millions of years as a dominant predatory species. They have developed a need for predation, a need for stimuli, a need for mastering new challenges. And one final thing you should remember: the Panteraaan have no formal method of disciplining one of their members. I see you are somewhat taken aback by my last comment. Consider this, Mr. Phillips, if you do not recognize something as being wrong, how can there be discipline?"

"Are you saying that they don't recognize any of their actions as being wrong?"

"That is precisely what I am saying."

"That is 'nt possible."

"It is possible, and also fairly simple. If a Panteraan wants something, he just takes it. If two Panteraan both want the same thing, the stronger one takes it. If an entire clan wants something, you had better give it to them, and give it to them quickly. On rare occasions, when the entire species want something, well a galaxy would'nt be large enough to hide from them."

"Of course, they do encounter problems as a result of their rather odd behavior. If a Panteraan decides he no longer wants something, he just walks away. I have heard reports that in the middle of a battle, an entire clan of Panteraan have walked away because they lost interest. How much truth there is to such an assertion, I can't say. I have seen them appear to lose interest in more trivial matters, and abandon them as disconcertedly as possible."

"Holy shit. And these guys want to buy a vacation resort from me. What the hell am I supposed to do."

"Sell them a nice world populated with small, dim-witted mammals, as far away from our new world as possible. We'll be back in three days."

With that, Fishgatherer and Stickeytongue departed in a blue haze.

Paul Phillips walked over to his computer terminal, and typed in the following message: "Sawyer, where the fuck have you been lately? If its not too much trouble, how about stopping by so I could determine what the melting point of plastic is. Your friend, Paul."

Paul walked into the den and sat down in his favorite chair with a bottle of beer and a blowtorch.