

FOURTEEN

The blue haze cleared, and in the center of Paul Phillip's living room stood two enormous green creatures, approximately three meters high and four to five meters long. Their bulk nearly took up the entire area of the room. Paul was struck by their resemblance to the terrestrial praying mantis, although they were much larger than their earthbound bretheren.

"I am Shhranth, spokesman for the council of the Mantodeii. With me is his eminence Grssh Frraath of the Krsshh. We have journeyed here because it has come to the attention of the Krsshh that you are in possession of a planet that we wish to acquire. If you will state the terms of the sale, we will formulate an offering price and then purchase the property."

"Well, nothing like coming right to the point gentlemen. Would you care for any refreshment before we begin? I would normally offer you a place to sit but I'm not sure my furniture could accomodate you."

"We have no need of refreshment. Let us get down to business. I have brought my star charts so that I may indicate the planet we are interested in. Here it is. Please tell us your terms so that we may make an offer."

"Are you aware of its climate, what types of flora and fauna can be found on the planet's surface? Do you require a large amount of drinking water?"

"Do not try to increase you asking price by enumerating the details of the planet. I asked you to provide me with the sales details - now do so."

"Well to be honest with you, I have quite a few people interested in acquiring this planet. It would be ideal for a game preserve or even as a resort community. I would require the energy output of three spectral class G stars for this planet, due to the demand expressed for it."

"You insult the Grssh Fraath with your talk of three G stars. If we want this planet, we will go take it. Make another offer before I become enraged - you will then forfeit your life."

"Take it easy. I have no intention of losing my life. But, I also have no intention of selling this planet for less than 3 G stars. Don't try to intimidate me with threats. I have the backing of the Federation in the selling of these bodies."

"Ha! What is the Federation but a collection of dottering old fools," said the second Mantodeii. "Whoever has power controls the Federation, and the Mantodeii have great power. You have heard the spokesman of the council. If we wish the planet, we will take it. Yet, the Mantodeii realize that as lawful owner of the property, you have rights which, for the good of all races, should be protected. We therefore wish to negotiate a fair selling price with you. If, as you say, the planet is valuable then a high asking price can be justified. Your species is unknown to us, and to most of the members of the Federation as well, I dare say. We have no way of knowing if what you ask is a fair price, or if you are attempting to take advantage of us."

"OK, that sounds reasonable even though the way you've gone about your inquiries is rather unceremonious. Do you know the Ursinae? Here look on the terminal for yourself. Their offering price is recorded. As you can see, it is 2.75 G stars. I'm sure I can get them to raise their price to 3 G stars with the proper persuasion. Here is another offer from the Gringdilian ambassador; he has offered 2.5 G stars. Gentlemen, I think you now see that my asking price is based on the value of the property. It is up to you whether we continue our negotiations."

"We need not negotiate: we take what we want."

"You have spoken beyond your authority, Shhranth. To take something which is not ours would be to make ourselves like the cat beasts. We are not Panterran; we will abide by the rules of the civilized races. We will offer the sum of 2.8 G stars; no more. Take the offer or sell it to one of the others."

"I will have to think about your offer. To be quite honest with you, I will probably contact the other two bidders to see if they wish to revise their bids in light of your offer. How can I get in touch with either of you to make my reply?"

"We will be back in two days for your reply. Good day, Mr. Phillips."

As the Mantodeii left the room, Paul could not help but think how unpleasant they were.

"That is why we chose them to oppose the Panterran," said a voice within his head.

"It is easy to threaten with words; can they back up the threats with action?" thought Paul.

"I'm not sure how long they would last against the Panterran, but I think they would put up a rather tough fight. Remember, we're not really looking for a winner from this fight. Rather, we're looking to

stir up the Federation so that they will prevent the sale of innocent worlds. We need the Federation to be more than just a bunch of "dottering old cronies" who live well and avoid disputes."

"Well, they'll be back in a few days to claim their new possession. I just hope I can continue to play this game when they return."

"You'll do well my friend; take it easy, you've too nervous."

"I think I'll go down to the office; I've got some work to do."

"You never go down on Saturdays."

"Yeah, I know, but maybe it will help me get my mind off the Panteraan and Mantodeii. See you later, Owhindamon."

"Good bye, Paul."