

SIXTEEN

The alarm which Paul and Owhindamon installed the other day went off. That would leave him just a few minutes to get prepared, and then someone would step out from the blue cloud into his living room. They had designed the alarm to go off when someone locked-in his coordinates via the central computer at the Federation. Since Paul had a terminal of his own which was hooked up to the mainframe, it was quite easy to write the program. He cleaned up his work area and waited. His life was made immeasurably easier by the presence of the alarm; no more surprises in the middle of the night or early in the morning.

After a few minutes, Nick Sawyer stepped into Paul's frontroom. No amount of early warning could make up for the presence of Nick, but at least Paul was somewhat prepared for him. In fact, he had been expecting Nick for some time now. Ever since the fighting had begun between the Panterran and the Mantodeii, Paul expected Nick to come over to the house.

"Hello Nick, I wish I could say it was nice to see you, but of course I would be lying. What brings you into contact with decent human beings?"

"Spare me the cynicism, Phillips. I'm here because we've got problems."

"What's with the 'we,' Nick? I don't have any problems at all. I'm selling pieces of the galaxy so fast, hell won't have it. I thought maybe you were bringing me my commission check."

"When I said 'we,' I meant it. The Panterran are having trouble, and when they have trouble they usually don't lack company. It seems that another race - the Mantodeii - have invaded the planet you sold to the Panterran. I don't get along too terribly well with the Mantodeii, so I haven't heard directly, but rumor has it that they claim to have title to the property. It's been a long time since we have had any counterfeit claims, although it's possible that a new forgery scheme has been developed. I've checked the office of deeds, but the only instrument registered for the planet is the one you sold to the Panterran. I don't suppose you know anything about this, Phillips?"

Sure I do, Nick. I sold the planet to the Mantodeii; thought I'd make myself more money. They didn't even want a deed, just gave me basketfuls of money and a spaceship too. The ship's parked in my garage; want to come see it?"

"You're an asshole, Phillips."

"Ohh, harsh words from the original Hefty Bag."

"Listen, I've come here for two reasons. The first was to try to find out some information. I really didn't expect to learn anything from you, but I thought I'd give it a try. The second was to warn you about the Panterran. They are extremely upset, and there's no telling what they might do if they hear the rumors and believe them. To make matters worse, it sounds as though the Mantodeii are actually winning the battle. The Panterran are likely to seek revenge first and ask questions later. Watch your ass, Phillips, I wouldn't want the Panterran mad at me."

"Hey, thanks for the friendly advice Nick. Don't let the door hit where the sun don't shine, huh? Might melt you. By the way, you owe me some money. How about bringing it next time you drop in. See you later."

"I can take a hint, Phillips. I warn you though, be careful - the Panterran should not be taken lightly."

After Nick had departed, Paul summoned Owhindamon. After a few minutes, he received a reply.

"Hello Paul, how are you?"

"Pretty good, Owhindamon; hope you're OK. Nick was just here. Rumors are making their way around the galaxy that the Mantodeii have title to the planet. Are you sure our people erased all records of the Mantodeiiian agents coming here?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Still, the Panterran never waited for hard evidence before they took vengeance. We'd better be careful of their movements. I think we'll double our surveillance of the Panterran; no one will go in or out of that planet without our knowledge. I think we'll also have to give you additional training so that you can tell when someone is coming. I'll be over in a few hours. See if you can stay out of trouble till I get there. See you later."

True to his word, Owhindamon arrived at Paul's house in a few hours. Before he actually appeared, he sent Paul a message telling him he would be coming.

"Hi Paul, you look rather well; not even flustered by our latest bit of news."

"As a matter of fact, I'm not too terribly worried. I figure we'll find a way out of this one somehow."

"Hopefully, we will. Maybe you should be a little more concerned about this than you appear to be, however. Don't take the Panterran threat too lightly."

"Hey, you were the one who told me to lighten-up a few days ago."

"I know, but things will start getting hectic fairly soon. Let's begin with our lesson, shall we? Remember when I first taught you to be receptive to my sending a few months ago? You can send and receive fairly easily to an equally receptive mind. Our next task is to work with an indifferent or closed intellect. The process is really the same, but it requires more skill on your part. You must teach your mind to be constantly receptive. Right now, you are only receptive when you are dealing with me. Work on being in the same state constantly. Practice trying to read people all the time. You can try right now. Why not attempt to call Elissa by yourself. It is possible to reach her directly without my intervention. Once you reach her, try to contact some of the others she has told you about. Tell you what, you work on making contact, and I'll go to sleep for a while. I think I would only serve to distract you while you attempt to reach the others."

Owhindamon walked to Paul's sofa and lay down. Within a few minutes he was, to all appearances, fast asleep.

After several hours of trying, Paul made contact with Elissa for a few, brief seconds. Every time he established contact, her image would blank out inexplicably. Finally, Owhindamon emerged from his nap.

"Your trouble is, you think too much. Must be your infernal accounting background, always so logical and precise. Don't you remember, the more you think about what you're doing, the harder it is to enter the proper frame of mind? Now look, just call Elissa and go with it. You don't have to think about sustaining contact. Once you reach her, just say what you have to say."

Once again, Paul tried summoning Elissa. Once again, she acknowledged his message. He walked into the room where he had first seen her.

"Hello, Paul. I was wondering when you would stay for a while."

"Well, looks like I'll be here a little longer this time. How have you been? Owhindamon's teaching me some new tricks with the voice. We're trying to work out an advance warning system, so that I'll not only know someone is coming to my house, but also who that someone is."

"Sounds like a good idea. From what I've heard, you're going to be

"I am he."

"Surprised? I bet you thought all the Owhinda were full of sweetness and light. We have a full range of emotions, my friend including hatred and malice. I think the only reason the People allow me to exist, is to remind them of what happens when these two particular emotions rule a life. It is really a very effective situation. They keep me alive out of pity and compassion, and I grow more hateful every day. Someday I will figure out a way to be free of this captivity, and then I will reek havoc upon them!"

Paul was taken aback by the malice of the creature. The situation was more disconcerting because he looked so very much like Owhindamon.

"Yes, I look a great deal like your mealy-mouthed friend. I am his brother. He keeps me here out of brotherly love! Ha - damn him to hell. I hate him more than the rest. It is because of him that I have become what I am.

When the Panterran attacked, the People decided to remain pacifist. True to form, cowards that they are. I remember the council meetings: we should do this and we should do that, never any thought given to fighting back! At first, the pacifist side had many adherents. We would talk the cat spawn out of attacking. Once they knew the reasonableness of our request, they would go away. Idiots! They could not understand the Panterran. What good is talk to such as these. They are as I am: action, not talk, is the key.

Well, their talk did no good. I organized the first army, and we attacked the cat filth mercilessly. Most of the soldiers were too timid to be of much use, but once in awhile I got a few good men who could fight. Oh, we gave those stinking alleycats all they could handle and then some. After a few victories, the council saw the merit of my proposals. We organized regular armies, and launched successful counter-attacks against the cat slime. We had them scared. I could see it in their eyes, smell it in battle. The disgusting little alley cats were scared!

The Panterran are cowards, I tell you! Bullies! When they could'nt get their way, they nuked the whole goddamn planet.

The People blame me for the nuclear attack! As if I had caused it. Let them rot in hell. If they would ahve fought back in the beginning, this whole episode would not have occurred. It is their own stupidity which caused the holocaust. It is not on my head. I will not have that blame be laid at my feet!

needing an early warning system."

"Well, I hate to be leaving, but he suggested I try to contact a few more people just to get the hang of it. I'll see you later. Hey, by the way, now that I know how to reach you directly, mind if I drop in once in a while."

"Any time you want. Good luck."

Paul contacted a few more people, all of whom were surprised by his presence, but were cordial enough to him once he introduced himself. As he was travelling from space to space within Owhindamon's consciousness, he noticed a presence that did not want to be disturbed. He was unsure if the mind behind that presence was indifferent or hostile. He really didn't want to find out, but as he probed around the edge of this mind it reached out to him.

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Paul was transported into a dark cavern. Its walls were covered with moss and lichen, and a sickly grey light shone through an opening in the ceiling overhead. After a brief while, Paul's eyes adjusted to the light. He glanced at the form sitting before him. Paul was amazed to see that he was addressing an Owhinda.

"What do you want?"

"I am visiting."

"You are not welcome. Go."

"Who are you?"

"I might ask the same of you: you are the trespasser."

"My name is Paul Phillips. I am a friend of Owhindamon."

"Why are you here?"

"He suggested that I visit some of the other people living within."

"Did he tell you to visit the Unrepentant one?"

"I've never heard Owhindamon refer to anyone by that name. Who is the Unrepentant one?"

They tell me about the lives lost. What care I how many lives were lost. I did not bring on this war. I merely fought back: I will not deny that I enjoyed the battle. I will not say I did not enjoy ripping those filthy vermin to shreds with my bare hands. Ha! I remember the first Panterran I killed with my bare hands. He had a look of pure horror on his face, just as I snapped his neck. He looked at me as if to say, how can you be doing this to me? Well, you filthy bastard I could do it to you - and thousands of your Kin as well!

They tell me of the planet lost, of the culture gone forever. Piss on their culture. Who would want to know about a pack of stinking cowards. Tell the universe about courage, tell it about wielding arms in battle, tell it about dying on your shield. Who wants to know of meekness and suffering. Who WANTS to suffer? A madman? A martyr? My idiot bother Owhindamon?

They tell me there is a sense of calm in sharing with the others here. Calm! Calm, say you! How can there be calm. Can I be calmed by talking of old-lady stories. Of telling others about how it is to sit in the trees and sing? What songs do they sing? Tales of brave deeds, nobly won battles? No. They sing of submission, or meekness. God, they disgust me! Meekness, submission; of what use are these? Oh, they get your planet blown to oblivion. They get the flower of your manhood trampled into cosmic dust. The stinking, puling, cowardly idiots!

They say I should repent. REPENT! REPENT WHAT!! They should repent: they should beg my forgiveness. If they would have listened, we could have won the war. We would have been victorious. We would have ruled, rather than having been ruled. I could have conquered the entire quadrant, and then gone on to pay back the bastard Panteraan. Yes, we could have turned the tables on them - the attacker becoming the victim. Imagine how they would have reacted when the Owhinda starships emerged in their airspace with guns blazing! Ha! The cat scum would have yelped for sure at that!

Tell my brother to drop dead. Tell him I still hate him, and all his friends. And let me tell you something, Phillips. If you ever come back here again, I will wring your neck. Now go to hell, or go to Owhindamon, or go to that bitch Elissa but get out of my life.

Paul retreated from the Owhinda, and broke off contact with him. He emerged in his living room. Owhindamon was sitting bolt upright on Paul's sofa.

"How did it go?"

"I'm sure you know."

"Yes, I do. So you finally met him. What do you think?"

"Is he really your brother?"

"Yes, he is."

"Why did you save him?"

"He saved my life once, I returned the favor."

"He doesn't deserve to be alive."

"Maybe not, but we cannot make that decision. You do not wish to make that choice on a planet-wide level; can you make it on a personal level. You go kill him; there is a way - I will tell you how."

"I can't do that, Owhindamon. As loathesome as he is, I can't kill him."

"I know Paul, neither can I. You are to be congratulated, however. You passed the test."

"What test?"

"The test of being human. We must all pass it at some time in our life. You have been given the opportunity to change something which you do not like. Yet to enact that change would do great harm to someone else. Some people choose to do what they want, regardless of the harm caused to others. They will never pass their test. Others do what must be done for the highest good. They have passed the test."

"The ones who pass the test - they don't always get what they want - they aren't truly happy."

"You are right, my friend they aren't truly happy at least, not in the sense that they are immediately gratified. But there is a happiness that comes from knowing that the greater good was done. How did Mr Spock say it in the Star Trek movie? 'Ah yes, 'The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the one.'"

"Yet by letting him live, you cause pain to yourself and to the others

?H ?H judgements incorrectly. When you 'know' someone, you rarely make incorrect judgements. You see, you are entering the person's mind and letting them tell you what they think, feel, desire. There is no intermediary in the form of clumsy words to confuse things. However, I do want to caution you. Under no circumstances should you enter a person's consciousness to act as a mere voyeur. It is expressly forbidden in the code of conduct of the People. There are severe penalties for acting in such a fashion."

"Hey Owhindamon, calm down. I didn't mean to incite the sermon on the mount. I won't go snooping unnecessarily into other people's lives. Things are too complicated for me already, I don't need any further complications. Believe me, I will only use this technique to preserve my skin. To tell you the truth, the whole thing is slightly repugnant to me."

"I am happy to hear you say that. The mark of a truly good voice master is that he finds the whole thing somewhat disturbing. Someday you will have skills far in excess of most users of the voice. You have been given this gift, unasked-for. It is your duty to develop it and all other talents you have been given to the fullest extent possible. The People believe that all members of the tribe must use whatever talents they have; in part to aid other tribe members, but also to atone for the granting of those talents."

"Owhindamon, do your people believe in God?"

"Why do you ask such a question?"

"When you talk of paying back for the granting of talent, you almost sound like you are paying back a deity of some sort."

"Who can see God? Who can define Him? What intellect can grasp the One who created this galaxy, this universe? Our way of community unites many beliefs, many intellects. Try as we might, we have never been able to understand these things. The workings of the One who made these things are beyond us. We have therefore given up trying to rationalize a God. We have stopped trying to anthropomorphise Him. He is beyond us. Neither do we cling to outdated rituals which, through symbolism, try to capture a belief which worked in the past, but is ineffective for us now. Why do you look so surprised? Was it not the one you call Jesus who told you to live a good life? He did not make a church. He did not impose ritual on His followers. He did not say do this and do thus. He said 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.' What better words to act as a guide to your life do you require? These words are sufficient. If we had had such a One as He, those might be the same words we would take as a guide."

"But our paths along the evolutionary line differ from yours. We have come to the same belief, but we have adopted it intuitively rather than intellectually. Given our powers of telepathy, we were forced to adopt such a strategy. Were each of our people not able to believe

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living with you."

"You are right, Paul. But this is what I must bear in my lifetime. I cannot shirk my responsibility. When I saved him from the void, I knew that this would happen. I really cannot blame him too much. He was trapped in a society that was radically different from the way he was. His is the spirit of a warrior, trapped in a society of pacifists. He has gone mad from being placed in such a situation. I pity him, really; my pity only increases his rage."

"Are there many like him among your people?"

"No, only a few, scattered widely through the ages. After a time, the ones we have saved lose their desire to exist and wink out of consciousness. I suppose this will happen to my brother as well, given enough time."

"Well, you have contacted a few beings who did not expect you and one in particular who was openly hostile. Could you tell the difference between the thought processes of these people?"

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"Can you tell the difference in thought processes between Elissa and Trashiida, for instance. There is a certain personality associated with their thoughts, is there not?"

"I'm not sure. I could sense a different set of perceptions if that's what you mean."

"Yes, I think you're on to it. What I'm referring to is more than that, however. Can you tell that Elissa is Elissa just by making contact with her, before you actually exchange thoughts?"

"I suppose so, but I never thought about it. Yes, I can tell its her before I 'talk' to her."

"Good, I was hoping so. You must be able to distinguish each person's mind in the same manner. When you encounter someone you have't met before, you must still be able to distinguish the uniqueness of that person. By determining that person's uniqueness, you will be able to tell if they mean you good or ill."

"Jesus, ther's a lot more to this than I first thought. Are you sure that first impressions of people will be accurate. I mean if I see someone and make a judgement about them, I could be seriously mistaken."

"You are correct. When you 'see' someone you are apt to make many

?H- the axiom 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,' we would have perished as a race. There was a man once, of your own race, who grasped this ideal intuitively. He knew that the key to life was that people should live the phrase and not banter it about constantly. He is called a saint by your people, at least by the Occidentals, but few really understand his life or his teachings. I am speaking of Francis of Assisi, a man greatly revered by the People. Come to think of it, the one called Buddha was probably not far off the mark, either. To answer your question, Paul, we do not have a formalized religion as do most of the people on your planet. Nor do we waste a lot of time in metaphysical discussions about God. We try

?H ?P?H- to lead good lives and respect all life. This might not be enough, for all we know. But it is enough for us. From this acceptance comes happiness. We accept our limitations - we cannot have all knowledge - and we try to change those things which we can. In such a manner we balance the two pulls of life - one which comes from striving for a worthy cause, the other which seeks rest after hard exertion. Our people are happy; can the same be said of your people?"

"No my friend, it can't. We have not learned to be happy with ourselves. To be sure, there is much striving after that which is attractive at the moment. And there is an equal amount of rest - maybe even sloth. But the two pulls of life which you alluded to never seem to be counterbalanced. I remember a few lines from a poem - I don't know who wrote it - that describe what I'm talking about. 'The world is too much with us; late and soon, getting and spending, we lay waste our powers: little we see in nature that is ours; we have given our hearts away.'"

"A sordid boon."

"What?"

"You omitted a part of the verse. The line ended with the phrase 'A sordid boon.' The poem was written by Wordsworth, by the way. I agree with you, it does seem to convey the condition of your world. But do not despair, my friend, for despair is the disease of fools. William Wordsworth wrote another poem which offers hope for you, and for us all. Let me recite a few stanzas for you: 'The clouds that gather round the setting sun do take a sober colouring from an eye that hath kept watch o'er man's mortality; another race hath been, and other palms are won. Thanks to the human heart by which we live, thanks to its tenderness, its joys and fears, to me the meanest flower that blows can give Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.'"

"You may be right, Owhindamon: there is hope. Even with the problems we have with the Panterraan, and with the rest of the galaxy, there is hope. With friends such as you and Elissa, I have hope. Even with the Panterran coming for me, I have hope. A few months ago, I didn't know that there were any other creatures in the entire galaxy. I went to work each day and came home. By just about anyone's definition, I was successful - but I had no hope. Get up, go to work, eat, drink, sleep, pay bills, and someday - die. But my life was empty. Now I've got far bigger problems, but at least I've come alive. I will never

"You're right, Owhindamon: there is hope. Even with the problems we face with the Panterran, and with the rest of the galaxy, there is hope. With friends such as you and Elissa, I have hope. Even with the Panterran coming for me, I have hope. A few months ago, I didn't know that there were any other creatures in the entire galaxy. I went to work each day and came home. I just about anyone's definition, I was successful. But I had no hope. Get up, go to work, eat, drink, sleep, pay bills, and someday - die. But my life was empty. Now I've got hope again, but at least I've come alive. I can go out again walk out into the night sky and gaze at the stars and think their pretty light put there for my amusement. I will see beacons for humanity - beacons of life, beacons of hope. And the moon I once thought so sterile and lifeless, so forbidden and alien - I will know how lucky we are to have it. To think that the moon and the earth could have belonged not to humanity, but to some other race that would have pillaged and ruined it. Yes, in the midst of my despair you came along and gave me something to live for, and it has changed my life forever."

"Paul, everyone must face their time of personal crisis. For some, it comes early in life, for others, later. You would have come to this time in your life sooner or later. It was fortunate for us both that fate joined us together at this juncture. Isn't it ironic, that faced as you are with the greatest difficulties you've encountered in life, you feel fortunate? You are indeed growing, my friend. Just a few months ago, you thought that fate had dealt you a cruel blow. Now, you recognize that while you have been given a great responsibility, you also feel that you are capable of mastering it; and indeed you relish the opportunity to meet what you must head-on. You are indeed becoming the person that was trapped inside you for so long. It is like a new birth, is it not?"

"Yes, I feel as if I am getting to know myself after a long period of forgetfulness. I suppose I have you to thank for all this, Owhindamon."

"You have thanked me before, my friend. I know your thoughts, you do not have to say what has been revealed to me by your heart."

"I know, Owhindamon, but I wanted to tell you anyway. Sometimes it is good to hear what we already know."

"Yes, sometimes it is. And sometimes too, the teacher learns from the pupil, eh? Well, I must be going. I have work to do elsewhere. We have many preparations to make, should the Panterran try anything against your world. Heed my warnings. Do not treat the Panterran lightly. They are fierce warriors, and tend to be impulsive when angered. Farewell for now. Go with the love of the People."

"Bye, Owhindamon. Rest in the bosom of the People."

Before he disappeared into the haze, Paul thought he saw a brief smile flash across his friend's face, and an hand extend to wipe away a tear.