

Close Encounters of the Fast-Talking Kind

Garth Spencer

(previously published in *BCSFazine*, August & September 2004)

Hrothgar Weems' world started coming unglued about the time he lost a steady job, and had to work as an office temp. He was coming home from a very late, *very* stressful assignment, and was tired and sweaty and his cheap suit was rumped, when he boarded his bus; he didn't notice a brilliant white-and-pink light source speeding through the clouded sky above him.

By the time he got off the bus, Hrothgar's mood was grey, rather than black. He had finished re-reading the last pages of the *Illuminatus!* Trilogy the day before, and reading Philip K. Dick was turning out to be a downer. While he crossed an ill-lit, soggy track field, he still didn't pay attention to the aurora-like lights playing on the cloud cover.

The vast metallic bulk that swiftly blocked Hrothgar's path was rather hard to miss, though. Especially eye-catching was the shifting colour of the engines, going from white-and-pink through burnt umber to gunmetal grey. Hrothgar had a brief, startled impression of a bran muffin the size of an apartment complex, before the lights went out. His usually petulant baby-face was slack with astonishment.

A dimly-lit port opened before Hrothgar; a bulky robed figure trod out, and Hrothgar heard noises he couldn't identify. After a few heartbeats he realized the deep, hoarse sounds were something like English:

"... our conquest, you will obey us without question or complaint. We are the Dominies, and destined to rule ..."

The alien voice went on in this vein for several minutes, detailing the Dominies' military strength, and their policy toward resistance, and their general ideological attitude. *—This is a prepared speech*, Hrothgar realized. *They must make this announcement as a * legal * requirement, every place they show up.* Almost immediately, he also realized: *—They're enough like us to have a drive to dominance. Are they like us in other ways as well ...?*

Hrothgar waited politely, as he had been raised to do, then raised a hand when the Dominie stopped speaking. "Do you have some promotional literature?" he inquired.

The Dominie shifted a little. Presently it said, "What do you mean?"

"I mean, any government pretty much depends on the support of its population, not just their compliance. Also, we've never had a society that was completely united; a proposition like foreigners governing us is bound to polarize us, into your supporters and your opponents."
Hrothgar was improvising rapidly as he spoke. "But you might simply your work by setting up a political party, *advocating* for you, playing up the reasons to vote for Dominie administration."

The hard-to-grasp bulk of the Dominie shifted again. Hrothgar thought it might be puzzled. "Party? Support?"

"Yes. Most of our nations are representative republics," Hrothgar went on. "But most of them have problems right now with employment, or economic failure, or ecological trouble ...even mass hunger, and tribal wars. So you could advertise the benefits of administration by experts, demonstrate your experience at allocating resources; maybe you could start by setting up organizations that mediate disputes on contract, or employ your technologies on a commercial basis." He paused. "We used to have some colonial and mercantile empires on this planet. Maybe that could work for you?" He bit his tongue before saying it would work against the aliens.

A querulous-sounding alien said something from within the flying muffin. The robed Dominie turned slightly and barked something very brief. Then it turned its attention back to Hrothgar.

"I do not quite understand why we should take this trouble," the alien said.

"How often have you lost lives and property to resistance groups?" Hrothgar asked. "And how often have they claimed that you had no *right* to their worlds, that no-one *asked* for your government? It might be a different matter on a world where a constituency supported the Dominie, and some people actually voted for joining your empire."

"AW, COME ON, BOSS," a roar came from inside, "LET ME KILL SOMETHING!"

"Why kill?" Hrothgar asked interestedly.

"IT'S MY JOB! I DON'T GET MY REWARD UNTIL I KILL SOMETHING!" the voice bawled from inside the unidentified flying muffin. After a beat the same voice bellowed: "YOU A TARGET?"

“Never mind him,” the lumpy robed figure interrupted, “he is a subordinate under my orders. Now. Did I understand you to mean that we might *save* something by mounting a political, and not a military campaign? O child, the Ambassadors have been telling this tale to the Dominie High Council since your ancestors were using stone tools.”

“Ah,” said Hrothgar. He felt just as much out of his depth as he had arguing with his grandfather, about Japanese internment camps. “Have you any room to maneuver, I mean, any discretion about your program?”

“GIVE ME A TARGET, BOSS!”

“Not very much,” the Ambassador admitted.

“Maybe I have a solution,” Hrothgar said. “Please, allow me to speak to your excited subordinate.”

The Ambassador, as Hrothgar now identified him, shuffled out of the portal and to one side. A larger, faster-moving figure now loomed out of the portal, and Hrothgar realized why it was hard to make sense of these figures. From the front they stood somewhat like men, but a protuberance or extension followed them ... in fact, they were centauroids. The bulky figure in body armour was easier to resolve. Especially, as Hrothgar now realized, when it stood two inches away and leaned into his face.

“READY TO FIGHT, MONKEY?”

“With what?” Hrothgar quavered.

The massive warrior looked him up and down disbelievingly. “WHAT?! NO WEAPONS?!”

“Not much use for them in this part of the world, at least here in the city. But in other countries, it’s a different story ...”

“TELL ME WHERE !”

“Most of the tropical countries,” Hrothgar babbled, “much of the Southern Hemisphere, in fact anywhere that the industrialized nations take their resources. That’s what we call the Third World.” Inspiration hit him. “In fact, if you want to be directed to countries that might *ask* for your military services, you might inquire at the United Nations.”

“United Nations?” the Ambassador said. “We wrote them off as another bureaucracy, less useful than most ...”

“Well, several bureaucracies,” said Hrothgar. “But they’re extremely good for several kinds of information. So is the State Department of the United States. So is the Central Intelligence Agency public website.”

“GOOD HUNTING?” said the warrior. Hrothgar finally realized the armour must conceal an audio amplifier.

“Excellent, in some places. I particularly recommend sub-Saharan Africa and some parts of South America,” Hrothgar babbled. “It often seems that local governments are deliberately trying to reduce their populations.”

“We were beginning to wonder about that,” said the Ambassador. He re-entered the portal. Pausing there, he turned to say, “Thank you for your helpful advice. Farewell.”

The warrior re-entered after him, and also paused. Assuming a present-arms stance, he announced, “You fought formidably, without weapons, and deflected a threat without even violence. We shall honour your cunning and vigilance, when we meet your con-specifics. Honour and glory to you, and victory if you deserve it!” The portal closed on him.

Hrothgar watched the multicoloured alien muffin weave drunkenly across the sky, realizing that the faint aroma the Dominie left behind reminded him of horse stables.

He never heard of the Dominie again for a very long time.