

SEVEN

"Let's begin by looking at the problem in its component parts. You have been assigned the task of selling the Galaxy. Do you feel comfortable with this assignment?"

"No, I don't. I have a hard time accepting the fact that someone can own a planet while the people living there have no apparent rights at all. I somehow feel responsible for selling a planet and perhaps jeopardizing the future of all the inhabitants."

"Am I correct in assuming that Nick Sawyer politely blackmailed you by pointing out Earth's potential as a preserve? I thought so. Well, that's another problem we'll have to tackle."

"Finally, you have the immediate problem of providing a new game preserve for the Panteraan. The solution we devise should solve all three problems at the same time. I think that we should immediately eliminate the use of violence as a solution to our problems. Your people cannot hope to win a war against the Panteraan and there are too few Owindha left to provide military aid. No, we must devise a scheme which does not use force in combating the enemy."

"Owindhamon, you said there are few Owindha left to help us. It may have been a bad assumption on my part, but I thought you were the last of the Owindha."

"No Paul, there are a handful of us remaining in the galaxies. As I said, we cannot help you militarily, but we can act as advance scouts and as messengers."

"With so few remaining, and scattered as you are through space, how can you communicate effectively?"

"Well my friend, I shall let you in on a well-kept secret: the Owindha are telepathic. I am quite surprised the Panderaan never suspected it. We were badly under-supplied and under-manned in our war with them, yet we were able to react to their moves with great speed. They could never figure out how we managed to stay one step ahead of them. I think that the real reason the Panteraan destroyed our planet was that they feared our apparent superiority in telecommunications."

"I will never forget the day of the final battle. We countered every move the Panteraan made, and at each juncture we drove them back. I cannot forget the thoughts of my friends and family as they fought in that battle. The voices will never be silenced. The power of telepathy is a double-edged sword: I was there as each member of the

People who died faced the end. It is especially hard when you are helpless to prevent their suffering. Still, I hope the message of peace I sent back eased their pain.

"And yet, as painful are the memories of the last battle, they pale in comparison to those I have at the death of my world. There was a scream that echoed in my mind for what seemed like hours: I have never heard so loud a noise, a buzzing, a droning that went on and on as each life passed into oblivion. I, and those that survived the holocaust were the receptacles of those lives: we live with the memories and the pain of the People. I have so many lives stored inside me: of mothers torn forever from their children; of fathers coming home from battle with no final chance to see their loved ones; of elderly people not able to finish their days in peace and happiness after a life of work and toil; of the young who would never know the challenges and hardships of the world. So many lives lost that day, so great a burden we must carry.

"How did you escape, Owhindamon?"

"The council of the Owhinda were aware that the Panderaan might react by destroying our world. They knew that we would not be able to evacuate all the People in time. We did not have space travel, so we were unable to leave by conventional methods; the Panteraan would have hunted us down had we tried escape through the skies. Instead, we discovered molecular dispersal and recombination - the blue mist - from the Panteraan and transported select individuals to various locations throughout the galaxies."

"How did you find out about molecular dispersal and recombination?"

"We arranged to have some of our people captured, and taken to Panterran headquarters. They died brave deaths and provided us with the secret of the blue mist. They were happy to die in such a worthy effort. These I cannot forget either; their courage sustains me in times of trouble or weakness.

"I'm sorry to bother you with my ramblings, Paul, let's get on with our prior discussion. My people can act as advance scouts, for we will need them if we are to carry out this plan. Now, what do you see as being the weak link in the sale of the galaxy?"

"As far as I can tell, there is no weak link. The whole system is extremely efficient. A planet can be bought and sold in the wink of an eye. Not only that, but questions of adequate title are virtually eliminated since all matters pertaining to the property are recorded in the deed itself. Maybe the transference of funds is a problem, but I really don't know since I'm not involved in that end of the transaction. It seems as though the funds are credited directly to the seller's account; if that is correct, that end of the transaction is foolproof also."

?H- "Paul, I can tell you've never had experience in breaking systems; only designing them. One thing I have learned in my many years: if something is done, it can be undone. The one weak link in the system is its strongest feature: that being the deed itself. What is to prevent us from making multiple copies of the deed and recording several sales transactions for each deed? No one would be able to prove the legitimacy of their claim over that of another person."=

"That's a pretty good idea, Owhindamon. There's only one problem with your solution. As I understand, the only place where a deed can be recorded is on Nick Sawyer's home planet."

?H- "Paul, that is ridiculous. Nick was playing upon your inexperience in these matters. Your machine is a read-only document machine. There is another type of machine which is also capable of molecularly recording documents. We must therefore obtain a document recording machine."

Owindamon, I would imagine that obtaining such a machine would be rather difficult."

"Yes, obtaining such a machine would be next to impossible. Sawyer's people would guard such a prize possession very jealously. But, what if, through many years, plans for building such a machine were gathered. The actual building could be accomplished at almost any time. Remember Paul, no one has suspected the ability of the People to communicate telepathically. We have assembled this data through millenia, knowing that someday it would be of use to us. All we require is for the machine to be built from these blueprints."

Owhindamon produced the blueprints and laid them out on the floor of Paul's den.

"Do you know someone who could produce such a machine?"

"I'm not sure, Owhindamon. These drawings look incredibly complex. There is also the problem of financing a project of this type."

"Don't worry about the expense, Paul. As I told you before, the Panteraan have many enemies. We can raise the necessary capital for building the machine."

"OK Owhindamon, let's say we can build the machine. Your idea still has plenty of holes in it. For starters, we are we going to get enough twenty-four carat gold to make multiple deeds for each transaction? After we've solved that problem, what are we going to do when people come around here wanting to know how come someone else is claiming their property? Finally, who is going to stand up to the Panteraan in a deed dispute. I don't think the plan will work; I don't think there's a way out of this mess."

Owhindamon stood in the center of the room and vanished in the blue mist.

"Good night, Owhindamon," said Paul to the air. Somewhere in the recess of his mind, he thought he heard Owhindamon's voice replying "Good night my friend. The morning has a way of assuaging our fears. Sleep well for now, in the bosom of the People."

"You raise some good points, Paul; let me answer them one by one. First, as to the gold. We have a guaranteed supply of as much as we need. Secondly, as to the multiple deeds we will of course plead ignorance. You can maintain that you acted as an unsuspecting agent of Nick Sawyer. By adopting the attitude of someone ignorant in the workings of the rest of the galaxy, you will get quite a few people angry with Mr. Sawyer. This will solve the problem of getting you off this assignment. Finally, as to the Panteraan, we sell the preserve to one of their enemies."

"Owhindamon, you make this whole thing seem like a snap of your fingers. This plan is more than a little risky. How can we be sure people will accept that I don't know what's going on?"

"Paul, no one has heard of Earth before. You are in a remote sector of the galaxy, and are a very young race. They will be inclined to believe you were blackmailed by Nick, and then duped into selling multiple deeds. As far as an element of risk being involved; I will not lie to you. There is a tremendous amount of risk involved in this scheme. But ever since Nick Sawyer came into your house, you have been living dangerously. Perhaps you were not aware of how high the stakes were until you made the acquaintance of the Panteraan. In any event, do not worry that this plan was just hatched. It has been incubating for many, many years.

"There is one final thing I must tell you before we break for the evening. The People have the ability to teach - in a limited way - the ability of telepathy. If you choose to help us, we will be with you in this venture. But I must warn you, there is a price to pay: we cannot eliminate the memories of the ones who have gone before us. If you choose to learn our ways, you must accept the sendings of those in the last battle, as well as the last day. The choice is yours, my friend."

"Hell, I don't know what's worse; dealing with the Panteraan and Nick or dealing with you. At least with Nick and Fleshrender, the choices are all upfront. With you, I don't know what in the hell I'm getting into. Shit, why the hell did Nick Sawyer ever come to me?"

"I can't answer that, Paul. The People believe everything happens for a reason, even if that reason is not readily apparent. Remember, we didn't ask the Panteraan to invade our planet."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. I just don't know what to do, Owhindamon. Why don't we call it a night. I'm going to need some time to think this over."

"OK Paul, I'm sort of tired anyway. I'll see you in the morning."