

A few days had passed. Fishgatherer and Stickeytongue had come to claim their new home and pay Paul for the property. After the business had been transacted, Paul heard a few more tales of the Panteraan which only increased his discomfort.

He was unsure of how to proceed. He did not want to offend the Panteraan by refusing to sell them a game preserve. Neither did he wish to offend his boss. He really didn't care too much whether or not he offended Nick. Nick's admonitions aside, Paul was concerned about the fate of a race which would be helpless against the Panteraan. Maybe, as Nick said, intelligent life could not be possible for millions of years for such a race. Paul could not help but think that it took that long for one Homo Sapiens to evolve into a sentient creature.

Paul was even more bothered by the fact that he couldn't talk to anyone about his predicament. He couldn't very well call one of his friends up and ask his advice. He couldn't call up his girlfriend and say "Hey Stella, do you think it would be OK if I sold this little out-of-the-way planet to a bunch of mercenaries? Oh, by the way, the animals that live there will serve as food and target practice for these guys." No, he didn't think that would go over too well.

Damn, this was a tough one alright, no way out.

Paul barely noticed the blue glow and pungent smell, so deep in thought was he. Yet, he noticed in time to become alarmed at the intrusion.

Paul was prepared for the worst when a large monkey-like creature stepped out of the haze. It was the first creature to exit that haze that did not make Paul uncomfortable.

"Hello, Paul," said his visitor in perfect English. "My name is Owhindamon, which means strength of the people in my native tongue. I am of the Owhinda, who were all but destroyed by the Panteraan. May I be welcome in your house? If not, I shall leave. Please pardon the sudden intrusion, but I had no way of contacting you and I thought you might be needing someone to talk to."

"No you haven't intruded, please come in." Paul indicated a place to sit, and his visitor slouched in a chair.

"I am told my people resemble a species of primate common on Earth. I believe you refer to these kindred ones as Orangutans. Our fur is somewhat darker in color than is theirs, and our arms are somewhat



shorter, so I am told. Do they possess opposable thumbs as we do? Oh, that is a shame; they come in handily for so many things. Can they vocalize? Some day it will come, eh? That is the benefit of time, so many things which are glimpsed only fleetingly are made crystal clear with time. So much potential is achieved when nurtured and cherished; so much that is lost can be found - in time."

"I see you are troubled by my remarks, Paul. Have you felt perhaps that the Panteraaan wish to rob the precious legacy of time for some races. I felt this way, and often. My people have had their heritage destroyed. There are few of us left; we have no home; we are wanderers in the vastness of the universe. We are hunted by the Panteraaan as a threat to their strength. We are feared by all races as outcasts, lest they provoke the wrath of the Panteraaan. We are ever lonely; ever searching; never finding. I know of your dilemma; I know of your fears for I share them too. But I have hope, Paul Phillips and I have my hand to offer you as friend. It is yours to take or reject as you so chose. If you choose not, no offense will be taken."

"Owhindamon, everyone who has come into this house lately has demanded something of me, or asked for something I would not freely give. I cannot say why, but I trusted you from the minute you stepped out of the blue mist. I will accept your friendship gladly, but I don't think you have any idea what kind of a problem I have."

"We have a saying among the People: Problems are opportunities which are cleverly disguised."

Paul laughed out loud for the first time in several months. "That's pretty good, I'll have to remember it. I almost forgot my manners. Do you want anything to eat or drink?"

"A glass of water will suffice, thank-you."

Paul returned with the water and handed it to Owhindamon. "You are the people whose home world the Panteraaan invaded and destroyed?"

"We are the same."

"It sounds as though you know that Fleshrender has been looking for another game preserve."

"Yes, and I know that he has asked you to provide him one. I also suspect that Nick Sawyer suggests you give them one."

"That's true; do you know Nick?"

"I've never met him personally, but I know him rather well



nevertheless."

"Well, then I guess you have a pretty good idea of the extent of my problem. I just can't figure a way out of the mess."

"There is a way, but it is dangerous. It is also illegal according to the rules of the Intergalactic Federation. The Federation tolerates the Panteraan, however, so the illegality of my proposal does not bother me too much."

"Can we slow down just a bit? I've never heard of the Intergalactic Federation before; who are they, and what do they do?"

"The Federation was developed eons ago to act as a governing body for the Known Universe. The Federation was empowered to regulate trade, encourage dissemination of scientific information, and maintain peace and harmony among member groups. Membership was voluntary, and the 'Known universe' was much smaller back when the Federation began."

"In the beginning, although membership was voluntary, everyone joined. As the eons passed, first one new race, then others, refused to join. When problems arose, the Federation was not able to impose its will on non-members because force was seen as a method of last resort. Soon, even members sensed the growing impotency of the Federation in dealing with thorny issues. After the passage of even more time, powerful races saw the advantage of having their own people in control of the Federation. Every few centuries, a new member group becomes strong and either places their own people at the head of the Federation, or buys the current leaders. The Federation is now a figurehead for the dominant race or races."

"Does that mean the Panteraan control the Federation?"

"This is a time of transition in the galaxies. The Panteraan do not have absolute control of the Federation. There are other races equally strong or stronger than the Panteraan, but they choose not to take as active an interest in the Federation. Let us say that the Federation is heavily influenced by the Panteraan, but that the scales can be tipped one way or the other."

"OK, well I'm a little bit clearer on Galactic politics thanks to you, Owhindamon. Now how about if we discuss that plan of yours."

"Whenever you're ready, Paul."