

THREE

Paul woke up at 6:00 AM; showered; ate breakfast; read the paper; and waited. At 8:00 AM he noticed a blue glow forming in the den. Nick Sawyer stepped-out of the glow.

"So, you finally caught me in the act."

"What the hell is that smell?"

"Ozone. It occurs as a result of the electrical charge dissipated when I materialize. It's harmless, really. It just smells quite horribly."

Paul noticed for the first time that Nick was carrying two rather large suitcases.

"I hope you're not planning to stay."

Nick emitted what sounded like a snort. "Wouldn't dream of it. Just brought along some tools of the trade. You'll be needing these shortly, and they'll help explain some of the questions you asked yesterday."

Nick walked over to Paul's desk and placed the larger of the two suitcases upon it. He opened the case and took out a device that looked like a small photocopier.

"This is a deed analyser. A deed is inserted on this flat surface and its molecular structure is displayed on the screen. Its element is also displayed on the lower right-hand portion of the screen."

"What the hell do I care about the molecular structure of a deed? And I would imagine the elemental structure of a deed would be mostly carbon. Paper is carbon-based, isn't it?"

"Why yes, paper is carbon based; our deeds are not made of paper, however. Paper documents are too easily forged. Also, you must remember that paper disintegrates over time. These deeds are thousands; hundreds of thousands of years old. Our deeds are made of gold."

"Gold! You mean twenty-four carat, Fort Knox type gold?"

"Yes, sort-of. Its been altered somewhat to suit our purposes. Plain twenty-four carat gold would be too easy to duplicate. We've altered the molecular structure slightly in a process known only to the deed recorders in my home system. It's virtually impossible to duplicate, assuring the authenticity of the deed. In matters of real estate transfer, the claim to a deed must be absolute and incontrovertible. Here, let me show you how the instrument works."

Paul walked closer to the machine and waited as Nick removed two gleaming pieces of gold from his second suitcase. Each was the size of a standard piece of paper turned sideways, but with a thickness of perhaps one-eighth of an inch.

"These deeds carry a lot of weight, don't they?"

"I don't understand."

"It was a joke, Nick. The deeds appear to be heavy, being solid gold."

"You've got a lousy sense of humor."

"So I've been told."

"Can you tell the difference between these two documents?"

"Can't say as I can. Tel you what, I don't know if I'd care to. The goddamn things must be worth a fortune."

"A mere pittance compared to the value of the world they represent. Actually, on of these is a forgery. This machine will indicate the true deed as well as the fake instrument. Let's put this one in and see if it is genuine or counterfeit."

"Why choose gold? Why not use some other material?"

"Gold is highly malleable and can be embossed fairly easily. Look at the filigree work on the surface of the deed; that would be all but impossible on another type of metal. Gold resists tarnishing and ages very well. There's also some snob appeal associated with gold; most cultures prize it greatly."

Nick inserted the first gold sheet into the machine and flipped the "on" switch. An image appeared on the screen.

2H-
"This document is a forgery."

"How can you tell?"

"See the bonds between the separate molecules? Note how sharply defined they are? That's a dead giveaway. Let me put in this second document. See how some of the bonds appear to be fuzzy? The one in the upper left corner looks slightly out of focus. Let's just press this button on the side of the machine, and we'll see some numbers appear next to the fuzzy bonds."

"What's the significance of the numbers?"

"Those are records of transactions for this property. If we press this second button on the opposite side of the machine, like so, we'll see what happens."

A typewritten page appeared on the screen.

"What the hell does that say?"

"Oh, forgive me, it's written in galac. Only a moment and I'll convert it to English. There we go: the King's English."

"This is incredible. It lists the names of the planet, transaction date in some kind of calendar system, planetary system where located, composition and frequency distribution of elements, atmosphere type if applicable, and galactic location. Oh yes, the elemental listing for gold, AU, appears on the screen as well. How is this possible?"

"Each number you saw on the screen earlier contains the same type of information. It is encoded directly into the molecular structure of the deed. Alteration is impossible without sending to my home system for the recording of the deed. Forgeries are therefore out of the question since detection is so easy: if a transaction is faked, the information won't be on the deed. Removal of a transaction is also not possible without destroying the deed itself. The entire system is really quite foolproof. It also serves to keep census information quite accurate."

"It seems that this process keeps your home system in a quite prosperous and secure position as well."

"Why, yes, it does. We are quite highly respected within the galactic community."

"Well, your demonstration certainly answers my questions about deed recording and proof of ownership. Where are the deeds for each of the items we are to sell?"

"They are in safekeeping in my home system. When you notify me of a sale, we will arrange to have any deeds delivered to you. That way, we can be assured that only deeds are sent for consummated sales. You will keep the deed machine here to authenticate deeds subject to client purchases."

"Well, I guess this finally does away with lawyers. No more need for deal-killers. Title search and document recording accomplished right in the deed. This is a pretty slick system you guys have developed."

"Yes, it is a system well-suited for inter-galactic transactions. Proof of ownership has to be verified immediatley over such great distances and relative times.

"I believe your initial objections to the job have all been answered to your satisfaction. With the aid of your computer and document verifier you should be able to knock off this sale rather quickly. I've loaded the data concerning title and ownership into the database so all you have to do is down-load it when necessary. Don't forget to check in with your database to see if there are any interested buyers. Well, I've got to be running; I'll check in with you in a few days.

"Oh, I almost forgot. If you should make an appointment with a client, just tell the computer to act as a translator. It has a two-way synthesizer built-in so that communication is possible between yourself and your client. See you later."

"Ya, its been a slice."