

Aeolian Master Book One

Revival

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[Chapter One](#)

It could have been considered a whirlwind event, but it was more like a hurricane of circumstances and political intrigue that brought him to the Galaef. He didn't just think it was a rouse, he was certain of it. No one at this level of government would take an interest in the myth of the Aeolian Master, unless there was some nefarious subplot lurking just below the surface.

But why had they involved him—a nobody from an insignificant planet?

He didn't care. He wanted the money for the archaeological dig. So when they ordered, he came. The fact was, even if he didn't want to come, he had no choice.

As the translucent metal door slid quietly into its recess, Professor Benjamin Hillar stepped through the doorway and into the huge, lower lobby of the Galactic Empire Headquarters.

Maravan, the G Staff Guide, stepped beside him. He obtained a better grip on Professor Hillar's luggage, and asked, "So, what do you think?"

Ben looked around. "Incredible."

"Yes, sir, that was my reaction the first time I stepped through these doors.

"All this wealth."

"Yes, sir."

Ben raised an eyebrow. He noted what riches beyond imagination could buy—exotic plants with beautiful multicolored blooms sitting in lavish pots, priceless pictures by ancient artists hanging on the walls, expensive furniture made from imported hardwoods from around the galaxy, which were placed in expertly designed alcoves and recessed into the exquisitely decorated walls.

"I suppose," said Ben, "the Galaef has no limits as to what he can acquire—entire planets, if he so chooses."

“Yes, sir. If you will follow me, sir, I will take you to the registration desk in the upper lobby.”

They stepped off the golden colored tiles—which appeared to be real gold and onto the plush, soft carpet with its architectural patterns and brilliant colors.

They walked down the steps and started for the escalators on the far side of the room.

As they continued forward Ben started thinking about his extremely controversial theory on the Aeolian Master Fable, and then he thought about the reaction he had gotten when he reported his theory to the higher-ups. The President of the college, and even the President's secretary with her coy smile, had, in one way or another, made it plain that this theory was beyond absurd. How could he consider the story of the Aeolian Master to be anything more than a myth?—a real man, indeed. The Magistrate's Undersecretary, putting his book down and looking up from behind his desk, had said it bluntly, "Don't get your hopes up, Professor Hillar. Money isn't granted for the sake of chasing a myth; especially one with no basis of fact." The Undersecretary paused, and then said, "I don't understand how you can think anyone is going to take you seriously." He twisted his lips in such away as if to say, 'Come on, let's get it in perspective,' and then he continued. "Putting in for this grant is just a waste of your time and mine. For hundreds of years this story has been told to children around the Galaxy—a story about a super human man from, ummm," he paused trying to remember without hiding his ignorance.

"From ancient Earth," said Ben with an amused smile.

The Undersecretary nodded his head and continued his train of thought. "Yes, from ancient Earth. A story about a man who was evil in the beginning—a man who destroyed cities and killed people by the billions, but then he repented and started doing good for the people with his super human powers.”

That's not quite the way the story goes, thought Ben. But he didn't say anything. It wasn't his intention to get into a lengthy, boring discussion about the myth.

The Undersecretary frowned. “But it's just a fairy tale—a bedtime story for children, and everyone knows it.” He paused a moment and then added as an after thought, "There's even a Tarmorian comic book about Em the super hero. And that's all it is—a comic book. How could you possibly think there is a man still alive in a suspended animation chamber who has God-like powers?"

“Who gave you that ridiculous piece of information?” asked Ben. “I have never said there would be a man still alive. In fact, if we find a man in a suspended animation chamber, I am sure he is just a pile of bones by now.”

Ben had known the Undersecretary for a number of years. He was now in his late-middle years, a little overweight, and balding. He had a wife and four kids, all boys who had gone on to college. One of them was a professor at the college where Ben was working. But what Ben had remembered most, and what he had observed over the years, was the Undersecretary's lazy demeanor. He didn't want to do anything unless he absolutely had to.

Ben stood in front of the Undersecretary's desk and waited, but the man said nothing, so Ben finally asked, "What is it you want?"

"The Magistrates will never approve the grant. So let's forget it." He sat waiting for Ben to say, 'Okay, tear up the documents.'

But Ben didn't say it.

And now, in spite of the Undersecretary and in spite of what everyone thought, and through a series of events, which baffled Ben, here he was—about to meet with the ruler of the Galactic Empire to discuss the myth of the Aeolian Master.

As they started up the escalator, Maravan asked, “If no one believes it, then why are you having an interview with the Galaef?”

“Exactly,” said Ben.

At the top, Ben found himself in another large room with more people milling about, and off to his left, approximately twenty meters, was the receptionist and several assistants sitting behind the biggest and most exquisitely decorated registration counter he had ever seen

“It appears the rumors about the Galaef's Galactic Empire Headquarters are not exaggerated.”

Maravan smiled as he said, “No, sir.”

The counter was to his left situated near the back wall and took up the entire width of the room, which was approximately three hundred feet. The back wall was a huge aquarium with thousands of beautiful tropical fish. Located around the room, were guards dressed in colorful red and gold uniforms, standing at attention and watching the proceedings of the activities throughout the room. They all had holstered phasors strapped to their

hips.

Ben and the G-guide approached the counter.

"Pass your number over the identifier, please," commanded the receptionist as she looked up. She was an extremely beautiful woman with long blond hair streaming down her back with a few unruly wisps lying on her shoulders. A large bosom crowded against the front of her white uniform.

She was all business.

Ben ran his finger about four inches up the zip-seam of his tight fitting body suit, opened the cuff, and rolled it up exposing a series of numbers and letters which were embedded in the skin on the under side of his wrist—Ben wasn't one to be bothered with carrying a space traveler's ID card, which could be lost or stolen, so he had had the numbers genetically embedded in his skin.

He waved his wrist over a small violet colored window projecting up from the surface of the desk in front of the secretary.

Lights flashed on the control panel, as the receptionist's fingers raced nimbly across the buttons, selecting and pushing in a sequential pattern. Ben noted instead of talking to the computer she used a keyboard behind the counter, which made it impossible for Ben to see what she was typing. Confidentiality and security were measures to assure protection of the Galaef. If she pushed the secret button, a thousand armed guards would appear from nowhere.

"It'll just be a moment," she said as she looked up from behind the screen. "Would you like to have a seat?" Her tone was friendly, but standoffish.

"I'll just wait here," said Ben with a hint of impatience. There was no doubt that politics and protocol bordered on the division between common sense and absurd sense.

"This is where I leave you," said Maravan. "I wish you success, in spite of the you-know-who."

"Yeah," grumbled Ben. "And thanks for picking me up at the spaceport."

"You're welcome, sir."

As Maravan walked away the receptionist looked up from the screen. "Your presence in the Galactic building is now recognized and established, and I see from the read-out you'll be having a personal audience with the Galaef today." She looked a little surprised.

"That's correct," said Ben. "It has something to do with a mythical God."

The receptionist ignored his statement and said, "Professor Hillar?"

"Yes?" asked Ben looking into the beautiful blonde's blue eyes.

She eyed him up and down and then continued. "Have you ever been interviewed by the Galaef before this time?" It was merely a transitional question being asked to lead into certain procedures, which Ben would have to follow. He knew she already had the answer to this question.

"No, I haven't."

"Then I must inform you of the protocol which shall be observed at all times." She looked at Ben with an expression of seriousness on her pretty face. "First," she continued, "when you are called into the Galaef's chamber you must drop to one knee and bow your head. You must not rise until he has given you permission." She stared at Ben, waiting for a reply.

"Is that all?"

"Oh, no. You must then rise and bow to his second in command. He will be standing on the Galaef's left. After you have finished, you must wait for the Galaef to begin the conversation; at which time you will never address the Galaef as an equal. You must always end your sentence with 'Sire' or 'Your Majesty.'" She paused a moment and brushed the few unruly wisps of hair back over her shoulders. "And finally, you must never laugh in the presence of royalty."

"Never?" Ben was wondering why the Universe couldn't get along without politicians.

"Never," she answered. "It's considered to be a sign of disrespect."

"What if he says something really funny, and I can't help myself?"

An angry expression crossed the receptionist's face. It was apparent she didn't appreciate Ben's flippancy.

"Never mind," he said quickly, "I understand. I have met with a lot of dignitaries in the past."

The receptionist eased her attitude. "Do you have any questions?" she asked.

"No."

"Good," she replied. She motioned to one of the guards at the end of the counter, and as he approached she said, "Then, if you will follow this gentleman, he will lead you to the preparation chambers." She indicated a man in a red uniform—a handsome man. He stood six feet three inches tall, had a muscular build, and a face

that looked like a God.

The guard said, "This way, please," and then moved quickly toward a door against the far wall where the other guards were standing.

Ben picked up his luggage and followed the guard.

They stepped through the doorway and turned left. They walked down a long, vitalite hall passing transparent doors on both sides with people hurrying in and out of the rooms, obviously scurrying about on Empire business.

It didn't take long for them to reach their destination. The only door along the hallway, which was not transparent, slid open, and the guard ushered Ben into the room—an austere looking room with only a panel of switches and lights against the wall on the left and readout screens, other various equipment, three simple chairs, and a robe hanging from a hook next to a body analyzer.

"I'll need to take your luggage," said the guard. He stretched out his hands. "They'll be returned after the interview, and if it's decided you'll be staying awhile, they'll be delivered to your room."

Ben handed over his bags. He knew his things would be searched for anything untoward, especially assassination devices.

The guard tucked the luggage under his arm and barked out three more commands.

The first two didn't surprise Ben, even though it was unexpected.

"Remove all your clothes and put on that robe," he said. "And wait here."

The third command, however, the 'wait here,' seemed a bit unnecessary. Where was he going to go while walking around in a robe with no clothes on?

The guard, with Ben's luggage, turned and disappeared through the same doorway they had entered.

Ben sat on one of the chairs and took off his shoes, then he undressed and threw his clothes over the back of the chair. He donned the robe.

He knew his physical body would be analyzed more thoroughly than ever before, not only for assassination devices, but for any communicable diseases—bacterial or viral strains or any kind of fungus or other types of parasites which could be transmitted to the Galaef or his second-in-command.

As he sat in the chair, scrutinizing the equipment, he thought about how things had happened so quickly. Two weeks earlier, he had just finished a dueling practice—any thought of the Galaef was far from his mind, in fact, billions of light years away. Sweat dripped from his brow as he loosened the grip on his sword. "Your lunge is a little slow," said Ben. "If you will keep a slight bend in the wrist, and then snake it forward with the lunge while straightening your elbow, you'll find yourself lunging quicker, and you'll be more successful in tournaments." His sparring partner smiled gratefully and lunged a few times practicing what Ben had just told him. He obviously appreciated Ben's advice, and for good reason: Professor Ben Hillar, at the age of nineteen, had been the youngest man in the planet's history to achieve First Master Swordsman. And every year since, he had successfully defended his title. He also held the record for being the youngest to place third in the intergalactic games. And he was the odds on favorite to place first the next time around. Ben was hoping to prove the odds makers right.

He was putting his sword in the case when one of his students bustled into the sparring chamber. "The President wants to see you right away," he said.

Ben snapped the case shut and stood up. "He wants to see me?"

"Yes Sir."

Ben frowned. "What for?"

"He didn't say, Sir."

"Alright," responded Ben, "I'll be there as soon as I take a shower." He finished getting his things together and started slowly toward the locker room. What did Gurke want? He had known the University President for a long time, and it wasn't like him to call a professor in without prior notice. Ben considered the possibilities. Finally, it occurred to him it was probably news about the grant he had requested. If he were allotted the grant, he would be able to pursue his requested archaeological expedition and finally be able to put to rest whether or not his theory was correct. Once and for all he could bring his theory to a conclusion.

The President looked up from behind his desk, "I don't know how you did it, Ben." He shook his head from side to side.

"Did what?"

"Asked for a tal and ended up with a pot of gold."

This piqued Ben's interest. "Does that mean I got the grant?"

"Not at all," replied the President.

Ben responded quickly: "Right now, this grant is the only pot of gold I'm looking for."

"Don't be so sure." The President grinned and sat back in his chair. "Somehow your request went further than just the governing board of inter-collegiate magistrates on our fair planet." The President paused, still grinning.

Ben sat down in a chair and gave the President a sardonic look. "Come on Gurke, what's going on?"

Gurke's smile vanished. "The Galaef wants to see you, that's what's going on," he retorted.

"The who?"

Ben could still remember being astonished when he realized what the President was saying. It wasn't possible. In the first place there were very few who gave his project any credence. Secondly, because of that he never thought he'd get the grant. And thirdly, no one could have ever guessed the most powerful man in the Universe would take an interest in this project.

But now, here he was, sitting in, what the receptionist had called the 'preparation chamber,' which in reality, was a 'take off all your clothes and have every square inch of your body—inside and out—inspected chamber.' And soon he would be standing in front of the Galaef trying to explain why he wanted money to chase a myth—one which no one believed in. It wasn't conceivable that a man so powerful would take an interest in something so trivial. How the hell did the Galaef get involved in this?

He pondered for a moment, then looked at the body analyzer at the far end of the room. It was completely enclosed in a dark, opaque material, except for the door in the front, which was transparent. Hooked up to a computer resonator for the purpose of scrutinizing every minute part of a person's body. Anything out of the ordinary will be found. A great invention for medicine, but also good for detecting assassins with built in flesh detonators.

Ben was just becoming engrossed in the history of the assassinations of political dignitaries when two beautiful women, a blond and a redhead, clad in yellow body suits and wearing phasors strapped to their hips, entered the room.

He was amused by the fact that he was told to take off his clothes, and then women were sent in to perform the examination. Not a bad psychological ploy.

"Please step over here," said one of the women.

As he walked toward the woman the other one began turning knobs and pushing buttons on the panel in front of her. Then the woman who had spoken stepped up to a large machine next to the control board on the far side of the room. "If you will be seated here, . . ." she said, indicating a chair next to the machine.

After he sat down she picked up a long, thin metal skein, which protruded from a metallic tube in front of the machine. At the end of it was a small metal disc, bluish in color.

"Open your mouth—wide," she ordered.

He opened up, and she began passing the disc back and forth over his tongue and teeth. She did it in a slow precise manner making sure she didn't miss any part of the oral cavity. Finally, she withdrew the instrument and put it back in its holder.

"Find anything?" Ben smiled as he tried to make light of the situation. He would have said something about cavities, but undoubtedly, being uneducated in ancient Earth history, she wouldn't have understood his dry sense of humor. As it was she didn't find his question humorous anyway.

"Please be quiet and follow instructions," she said.

The beautiful woman who was giving the orders had long red hair, which hung down to the middle of her back. It fell in thick waves like a red sunset with some of it falling over the front of her shoulders. It was rare to see a woman with red hair. In fact he had never had the pleasure of seeing it in real life. Only a few of the top fashion models had naturally red hair. And he had only seen them on the home viewer. Genetically speaking the trait of red hair had become a very rare occurrence in the last two hundred thousand galactic years. The gene, by course of nature, had become very weak.

Ben, looking at the red-haired woman and ignoring her last command said, "Science can be a strange discipline." The statement held her gaze for a moment. So he continued, "The genetic engineers of the empire can induce the genes to pigment a gold number in the skin; and yet, they can't figure out why red hair is becoming extinct." He looked at the red hair and suddenly had the urge to reach out and touch it, but, at the last moment, thought better of it.

The corners of the woman's mouth turned up slightly. It appeared she was about to say something when the woman standing over the computer screen looked up. "Negative." She said.

"Good." The woman with the red hair became serious again. "Now, Professor Hillar, if you will take your robe off and step into the chamber, we will complete the examination."

Ben stood up and walked to the chamber. He slowly scrutinized the small room paying particular attention to the floor, and then he took the robe off and hung it on the hook. He stepped inside. As the transparent door slid shut, he turned until he could see the two women programming the computer. They were giving it instructions to search every cell and every space in his body. It wasn't long until he felt a tingling sensation pulsing through his skin. It felt like a million little fingers softly touching, feeling, massaging his skin and muscles. Every space, every square inch of tissue was lightly probed. His body began to feel warm all over as the machine sent high energy particle waves through his flesh looking for anything which could be harmful to the Galaef.

The sensation stopped and the door slid open.

"Please step out, Professor Hillar." The redhead turned and walked back to the control panel. She manipulated a lever, and a black body suit tumbled out of a small opening.

She handed it to Ben. "Put this on," she said.

He took it from her and started dressing. When he was finished, he turned and faced the two women, waiting for further instructions.

They seemed to eye him with a little more interest than they had previously shown, and there was a slightly detectable smile on the redhead's pretty face. Perhaps she was amused by his casual personality, but then the smile quickly left her beautiful face. It appeared that as he moved toward her, his strong build and taut muscles changed her inward mirth to admiration. Ben was barely six feet tall, but his build was well defined and his stomach was flat. He was a trained athlete, physically fit and capable of performing all types of activities. He had dark brown, almost black, hair which curled around his small ears, and his nose was straight, perhaps a bit too long, and it had a little hook at the end, like that of a hawk. His eyes were brown and piercing; and although his personality wasn't dignified, a deep strength could be detected.

"You have successfully passed the examination," said the blond. "You're now ready to proceed to the Galaef's antechamber. Please follow"

The red-haired woman interrupted the blond. "I'll take him," she said.

The blond gave her a funny look. "Okay," she answered slowly.

The red haired woman led Ben out of the examination room and down the corridor to an Etron mover.

As soon as they stepped inside, the redhead said, "mover—take us to the top floor." It started upward, slowly at first, but with a gradual increase in acceleration until it finally reached its top speed.

Ben watched the lights as they quickly flashed on and off in turn, indicating the level of the floors passing by. Again his eyes moved to the red hair, and lingered upon the long flowing waves falling down her back. Finally, as he began to admire her shapely physique she turned her head, and her eyes met his.

He smiled in a tactful manner. "You're very beautiful," he said matter of factly. His eyes were pleasantly locked into hers. "In fact," he continued, "every woman I've seen since entering the Galactic Headquarters has been no less than beautiful, and every man no less than handsome." He continued his stare. "It seems the rumors I've heard all these years are more than fiction. The Galaef has computer chosen all of the personnel not only for their intelligence and loyalty, but also for their beauty," he said, "Ha. And why not? I'd do the same thing if I had the populations of two million planets to choose from."

A sincere smile crossed her lips. "Thank you," she said.

His eyes finally broke the grip, and he looked back at the flashing lights.

"I'm surprised," she said.

Her formal attitude melted away 'like ice on a red hot stove.' "Surprised?" he asked.

"That you would say something like that." A pleased look crossed her lips.

The Etron mover came slowly to a stop, and they stepped out.

They walked toward the large transparent, sliding double-doors facing them at the end of the hall. There were two rugged-looking guards on either side of the doors wearing bright, blue and gold uniforms. Ben noted that these colors were different than the uniforms worn by the guards in the lobby. These guards were the Galaef's elite security personnel. They followed him wherever he went. And they were trained to lay down their lives for him, to take a phasor bolt in the chest if they had to. Ben slightly shook his head—he hated politics, and yet, he understood the need.

"Listen," said the woman as they came to a stop near the guards. She put the tips of her fingers on Ben's arm to keep him from entering the room as the doors slid open. "I get off work at five o'clock. So, if you would like

someone to show you the city," she paused a moment. "My name is Lyil. Ask for my number at the front desk."

"Sounds like fun," Ben muttered in a surprised tone, but she had already turned and was walking briskly toward the Etron mover. It happened so fast Ben didn't know what to think. If he understood it right, here was one of the most beautiful women he had ever met, and she just asked him on a date.

The guard on the right side of the door looked at Ben, raised an eyebrow, and smiled. "I've never known Lyil to show anyone the city," he said, still smiling.

Ben looked at the guard. "What's your name?" he asked.

"My name's Frostadeem, but my friends call me, 'Frosty.'"

"Well, Frostadeem," said Ben as he turned and watched Lyil walking down the hallway, "I think I might, indeed, want to see the city." Ben wondered if it was his fame as a swordsman, which caused her to take an interest in him.

Chapter Two

As Ben entered and stepped onto the plush carpet, a beautiful woman, behind the only desk in the room, motioned to him. "Professor Hillar?"

"Yes."

"Please have a seat and make yourself comfortable. The Galaef will see you momentarily." She smiled pleasantly.

Ben walked over to a luxurious lounge chair and sat down.

When he was told the Galaef wanted to see him, he assumed it would be some lesser official at the Galactic Headquarters who would be conducting the interview. How many people actually saw the Galaef in person? How many stood and spoke before him? Out of more than two million inhabited planets the number was extremely small, perhaps less than a thousand people would ever meet the Galaef in person.

After waiting three hours and some change in minutes the receptionist motioned Ben toward her desk. "The Galaef will see you now," she said.

Ben was wondering if anyone understood the word, 'momentarily.' That was the longest three hour moment he had ever experienced. He walked across the room and entered the Galaef's office. He stepped on tiled marble and then, as he proceeded further into the room, he stepped onto a carpet which felt unusually soft beneath his feet.

He stopped a second. *Damn!* He thought. A strange sensation came over him the moment his foot hit the carpet. It seemed as though thousands of little electric messengers were coursing through his body, stimulating the cells, the nerves, and awakening his brain to such an awareness that he never thought possible. The colors throughout the room took on a new meaning. They were more vibrant. The air came alive with heightened scents. Breathing became a joy. His mind became sharper, and his ability to concentrate became more focused.

"L" Carpet, he thought. Another Galactic rumor come true.

Only the very rich had "L" Carpet. Only the very rich could afford to buy this type of floor covering.

As he became accustomed to the new sensation coursing through his body he noticed the room in which he was standing was huge and, of course, exquisitely designed. There were several split-level sections located in appropriate areas with different types of equipment in each section—mostly computer terminals, screens and viewers. The wall to his right was solid, but designed for visual elegance with hues of gold and brown, and the wall to his left was a spectacular three dimensional window which overlooked the Inner and Outer city hundreds of stories below. Near the back wall of the room were four transport tubes for emergency exits. At a quick glance Ben could see seven people in various locations. There were two uniformed guards standing against the back wall next to the transport tubes, a woman near the right hand wall, another guard to the right and closer to Ben, two men to the left. And in the middle of the room, standing on a platform, which rose from a sunken area, was a tall, distinguished-looking man.

Ben recognized him as the Galaef. He was easily six feet four inches tall. His hair was white, but that of birth rather than that of age. He looked young for a politician, perhaps only in his early forties. His eyes were steel gray. His nose was long and straight, and was set above a mouth which was full but handsome. His dark skin made a stunning contrast to his white hair, and strength and authority radiated from his being. *No doubt*

about it, thought Ben, he looks better in person.

Ben suddenly remembered what the receptionist had told him, so, he started down on one knee. Being subservient, especially to politicians, or so-called royalty, did not please Ben, however, what could he do except follow protocol.

"Get up!" boomed a voice from across the room. It was the Galaef speaking. "We have no need nor time for formality around here."

Ben slowly rose from his knee. He was thinking he was already starting to like this man—in spite of the fact that he was a politician.

"My name is Taul Winler," he said. "I am the Galaef of the Galactic Empire." He paused a moment and looked at the man on his right. "This is Thorne, my second-in-command, and behind him is his personal secretary, Jordan."

Looking at Thorne he saw a man of seemingly good looks with a bearing of strength as of all the other men he had seen in the building. He stood tall, at six foot three—only an inch shorter than the Galaef, and he had the most perfect posture Ben had ever seen, the posture every mother dreams of.

The Galaef continued with the introductions. "And this is Mordrous." He pointed at a man standing ten feet in front and off to the left. "He is my chief security officer." The man was six foot three, built like a bull, had huge, muscular arms, and was extremely handsome.

Only the best, thought Ben. He knew this man was versed in all forms of weaponry and hand to hand combat, and could probably kill you in an instant.

"And let me not forget my personal secretary." The Galaef motioned toward his immediate left. "This is Myra."

Ben had heard about Myra even as he had heard other rumors about G-staff. And though he had seen the Galaef on the viewer a few times, Myra was never in the news, because the Galaef didn't allow it. So, until now, in Ben's mind, she had only been an unknown face, involved, but behind the scenes of Galactic politics.

As Ben looked in her direction he saw a tall woman sitting serenely in a form-fitting chair. She was manipulating some type of recording device, using a keyboard, and watching a computer screen. She sat at an angle, in accordance to the position of the computer, exposing mostly her profile. Her long hair was flowing in waves of reddish gold and stopped about half way down her back. She was approximately five feet ten inches tall. Her sensuous figure fit snugly into a white suit. She had a small nose and delicate lips. But as she turned and looked at Ben, as if studying him, he noticed that her most striking feature was her eyes. It was like looking into the eyes of a cat. When the light hit them at a certain angle they would glow like orbs with the light penetrating through a translucent blue. Her eyes were vacant in expression, like a vacuum pulling upon the world. Ben had never seen such eyes—ever.

"She is very beautiful. Isn't she Professor Hillar?"

Ben had heard that the Galaef knew just how beautiful, and he was quick to take advantage of it. He used her in political bouts. He staged her beauty in front of planetary heads of state—it didn't matter if they were men or women.

And rumor had it that the Galaef had used her magnetic presence at the great debates of Ar. The debates were not going well. The planetary council wanted forty percent of the Zen I mining profits. To this they had good claim, but the Galaef was proposing five percent and trying to make it seem reasonable. He wasn't able to persuade them, and consequently the outcome looked like a hard fought battle with a final compromise of twenty-five percent. It was then that his personal secretary entered the room. The five members of the council seemed dazed. When the Galaef spoke they would be attentive, but somehow their eyes always wandered back to Myra. At this time the Galaef began his tirade on the cost of supporting an empire. He talked about the support of the star fleet, the cost of supporting the personnel and maintaining the equipment. The cost was staggering. He spoke of the planet Galactus VII, the home of the Galactic Empire Headquarters. He spoke of the giant complex of the computer system and the personnel needed to run it.

He went into great detail, being long winded, he left out no particulars. Finally the councilmen could do nothing but agree.

The outcome was ten percent.

Indeed, Myra was a great asset to the Galaef's political reign. And Ben could understand why. It seemed she possessed an unnatural magnetism, which altered a person's concentration and drew them unwittingly into her spell. But the eyes

The Galaef turned and picked up a notebook. "After I read your proposal on the Aeolian myth, I wanted to

know more about you." He opened the notebook. "A few years ago you received your Ph.D. in Galactic Archaeology. Very commendable, I must add, at having done so in such a short period of time. After receiving your Ph.D. you continued to do post doctoral work on your original thesis. You went to Earth, on an expedition, where you uncovered enough information to lead to a reasonable theory about the origins of the myth. Then two months ago you submitted to the council of your home planet a request for a grant in the sum of two thousand tal. As you put it, 'just enough to sponsor a most important archeological expedition. One that may lead to answers concerning the mystery behind the myth of the Aeolian Master.'"

The Galaef leaned forward as he continued. "Normally, these matters are left to the lesser councils to decide upon, but I have found an interest in your theory, and I feel there may be some truth to it." He stood up, stepped off the dais and walked toward Ben. He stopped when he was but a few feet away. He stared down at him.

"According to your theory," he continued, "the Aeolian Master is more than just a myth." The Galaef turned and walked toward Myra. He looked over her shoulder at the screen, and then turned again toward Ben.

"The myth of the Aeolian Master . . .," the Galaef paused, "am I pronouncing that right, Professor? e o lee an?"

"Yes, that's correct, Sire."

"Well then, the myth describes him as a giant of a man eight feet tall. He wore garments made of metal—garments that were put upon his body with locks that had no keys. His physique was so muscular, his face so handsome that mere mortal women swooned at his presence and could not regain consciousness until he was gone. During his life, of the twenty-second century of ancient Earth, he never did wrong, but was always helping those in need. But then one day he became so angry at men's petty bickering and wars and killings that he turned upon his chariot and flew into the sky. There he captured bolts of lightning and hurled them onto the Earth causing much destruction and death. And since he is the God of the winds, he was able to summon up the winds causing tidal waves, hurricanes and tornadoes, and with these he wreaked havoc upon the cities of the Earth.

"After his anger had subsided and after seeing his ill deed, he sorrowed grievously. Finally, he went to another planet, and there he drank poison. But, of course, poison cannot kill a God. Instead it rendered him into a state of unconsciousness. There he would remain for eons of time, sleeping in his chariot until the effects of the poison wore off," he paused. "Have I forgotten anything?"

"Generally speaking, you have covered the major story line of the myth, Sire."

The Galaef walked back to the dais and sat down in his chair. "Well then," he said in a thoughtful tone, "the proposition that there was a God of the winds who became angry with the inhabitants of the Earth and destroyed them is an absurd idea. And when considering all the facts, we could say that the holocaust, which destroyed all human life on Earth was just one of those unusual events and that, in reality, it was the nuclear war that caused the annihilation. Yes, we could certainly say that; except for one strange phenomenon—most scientists, who have studied the Earth, agree that only a small part of the damage was caused by the nuclear war. Most of it was caused by natural disasters, such as hurricanes, tornados, and tidal waves, which started sometime near the end of the war. And even though it would be extremely unusual for winds to cause this much damage, it could still be considered a possibility, except, and this is the real mystery—our scientists know conclusively that the climactic conditions on Earth are not right for continually producing winds with these destructive capabilities—winds that never cease, hundreds of hurricanes ravaging the Earth every second of the day." The Galaef, with a pensive look on his face, continued, "When I studied the Earth in a post graduate course, I was convinced that this was probably the most puzzling mystery in the Universe. I asked myself, 'what is causing these winds? How could they be so strong as to destroy most of the cities on Earth? How can they be created when our scientists have shown that the atmospheric conditions do not support their existence?"

"Then, you add all these facts to the myth of the Aeolian Master, in which the God of the winds was angry at the citizens of the Earth, and it really makes you wonder.

"I realize there are no Gods who can control the winds, but maybe there was a man or an alien, who . . . , who No. I don't know. It's not often that I am unable to make an educated guess, but this is too much of a mystery." The Galaef paused in thought, then he asked, "What do you think, professor?"

Ben shrugged his shoulders. "My interest has been more in the myth than in the climatology, but if I had to make a statement, I would say it puzzles me as much as it does you. As far as I know there is no scientific explanation for what has and is taking place on Earth. The winds are out of control, and no one knows why."

The Galaef gave Ben a look, which said there is still hope of finding an answer. "So, if we conduct a search in accordance with your theory on the myth of the Aeolian Master, we might be able to solve the mystery. As

most scientists and historians will agree, myths usually have a basis of fact or foundation of truth. The extent of the fact involved in a myth is dependent upon several factors: one, how old is the myth; two, how much retelling of the story was involved; three, how socially acceptable were tales of fiction in the culture from which it sprang; four, how superstitious were the people telling the story, and to keep from oversimplifying, I am sure there are other factors involved." The Galaef leaned back in his chair. "You have done extensive research on the 'Aeolian Master' myth. From this you have come up with some very interesting ideas."

Thorne frowned. "Sire, if I may interject?"

"You may," answered the Galaef.

"Sire, it seems to me that Professor Hillar may have found some trivial archaeological research to perform, and perhaps we should invest some money in it, but I feel, Sire, that for you to personally take part in this research is beneath your station."

"Nonsense," reprimanded the Galaef in his loud voice. The Galaef smiled. "Tell us about your theory."

"It occurred to me, though I wasn't willing to accept it at first, that possibly the spaceship—named the 'Chariot,' which went to Ar just before the nuclear war ended, was the chariot in the myth. It was an intriguing idea, if nothing more.

"Later, as I delved further into the deciphering of the ancient Earth writings, I discovered that Earth had not only colonized four planets, including Mars, Venus, and two of the moons of Jupiter, but they had also built the first computer complex just under the surface of the planet Mars. It was a very large complex, or so it was thought by the Earthians at that time. It was two miles deep, four miles wide, and five miles long. It was similar to the forerunner of our modern complexes using the same type of energy to power its circuitry—Zirnon Eneferrin I. I also found that they had discovered the principles of suspended animation."

Thorne interrupted without the Galaef's permission. "The most brilliant minds in the Galaxy have yet to discover the principles of suspended animation. You actually think Earth was able to do so?" He looked at the Galaef. "If I may continue, Sire?"

The Galaef nodded his consent.

"Do you actually believe there is a man in the middle of Ar who has been living for six hundred years in suspended animation? Do you . . ."

"That's enough," interrupted the Galaef.

Thorne sat down in his chair. He continued a stare of indifference at Ben—a stare which caused a chill to go down Ben's spine.

"Please continue," said the Galaef.

Ben replied, "Thorne has just about said it all." Without making it obvious, Ben glanced at Thorne, but only for a moment, and then he looked back at the Galaef. "A man, who later became the figure in the myth," continued Ben, "was a volunteer for a scientific project designed to test suspended animation. Later, after several months or even years had passed, the war on Earth became so threatening to the project they decided to move it to the computer complex under the surface of Mars, or Ar, as it's called today.

"I'm assuming eventually the war caused the supply line to Ar to be cut off. The colonists and those running the computer complex were forced to leave Ar and return to earth or to one of the other colonies, but for some reason it wasn't possible for them to revive the man in the chamber. It may be that reviving him too fast would have killed him, so they left him in the chamber and fled.

"Somewhere in the computer complex his life functions were given over to the control of the computer. Considering that a man's life was involved, and considering the value they placed on human life at that time in their history, there can be little doubt that there were fail safe systems incorporated. If the computer had shut down due to an energy shortage, a very small part of it would continue to function on an energy supply reserved especially for the failsafe system.

"I, like Thorne, am skeptical that the man may still be alive, however, finding an ancient computer complex would be well worth the time and money for the expedition. It's even possible that new facts about suspended animation would be uncovered."

"It's a very interesting theory, Professor. If I hadn't thought so you wouldn't be here now. But there is one more question, how do you expect to finance an excavation with a mere two thousand Tal?"

"Immediate excavation wasn't part of the plan. An assistant and I were going to lease a planet analyzer and go to Mars to set up a systematic search for excessive amounts of artificially molded metal alloys beneath the surface of the planet."

"And then?" asked the Galaef.

Ben shrugged. "If we were to locate the computer complex, then I would have expected no trouble in gaining another grant for the excavation."

The Galaef stood up and walked over to Myra. He bent down and whispered something in her ear. She sat calmly watching Ben as she nodded.

The Galaef straightened up and said, "Thank you Professor. You can wait in the antechamber."

And just like that, the audience was finished. So, Ben turned around and walked into the other room.

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When making political decisions or taking action the Galaef was not one to hesitate. He knew he had to act quickly, and he assumed no one, not even his personal secretary, knew his motive for taking an interest in Professor Hillar's project.

"Myra, considering the facts at hand, what conclusions can be drawn?"

In addition to her magnetic beauty, Myra had another quality, which was kept confidential and was known only by herself, the Galaef, Thorne, and the confidential storage compartments of the Galactic computer. Though her IQ, for a Galaef's secretary, was relatively low at one hundred and fifty three, she had an innate ability of deducing through facial expressions, muscular movements, other habits, and word usage what a person was thinking, what his motives were, whether he was sincere or not, and other personal thoughts. According to computer tests she was accurate ninety-eight point four six percent of the time.

Myra calmly punched a button on the keyboard. "The computer reports a seventy-eight percent chance of finding an ancient computer complex beneath the surface of Ar; and less than one percent, at ninety-eight one hundredth, of finding a man; and less than one percent, at sixty-four one hundred billionth, of finding him alive in suspended animation." She paused as she looked up from the computer read out. "With enough Zen I a small computer, or a functional section, could operate nearly three thousand years."

The Galaef nodded, waiting for Myra to give her opinion on the project.

She continued after a short, thoughtful pause. "To undertake this expedition, in my opinion, could only meet with success. I have come to this conclusion based on the computer readout and the fact that this Professor Hillar radiates an aura of sustaining accomplishment." She slowly leaned back in her chair and waited for any possible questions.

Thorne scowled and reddened slightly. "Sire, if I may," and then he continued without waiting for the Galaef's permission. "So, the Professor will make a scientific discovery," He rose from his chair. "That's no reason to personally supervise this expedition. There are more important matters of state to attend to than running off searching for a myth."

Abruptly, the Galaef asked, "Myra, why is Thorne opposed to this project?"

Most of the time Myra could predict the Galaef's next question, but the Galaef noticed, even though it was very subtle, a shocked expression on her face. It disappeared very quickly.

She became composed and calmly replied that Thorne was uninterested in this type of scientific advancement and that he would rather be involved in more important matters of state.

"That's fine," said the Galaef. "But I have taken a personal interest in this project because I see that it could turn up some very important scientific discoveries." He paused, then said, "And I can make the time when I will it." He waited a moment for further comment, but receiving none, he pushed a button. "Send in the Professor."

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Ben stepped onto the El carpet.

"Come closer," said the Galaef. It appeared he wanted a better look at Ben's face as he relayed some new information.

Ben moved closer and waited for the news.

"I have decided not only to finance your expedition, but also to personally oversee it. You will be given credit for any discoveries that might be made."

Ben's outward appearance didn't change, but it occurred to him that the Galaef might be lying through his teeth. *Nevertheless*, he thought, *who gets the credit isn't important. What's important is the discovery itself.*

The Galaef continued. "The preliminary work need not be done by us. Instead, I will have a team organized

within the next day or two to do the planetary analysis. After all, we don't need to travel all that way if there's nothing there." He looked at Ben with an expression that asked, 'Don't you agree,' but Ben only nodded his head and remained silent, so, the Galaef dismissed him, saying, "Meanwhile, you'll be a guest at the Galactic Headquarters. We'll keep you posted on the findings, and if you should have any questions, you may contact Myra.

"Now I must attend to other matters."

Realizing the interview was finished, Ben turned and left the room.

Chapter Three

Ben exited the Federation Palace, walked down the steps, and out of the shadow being cast by the palace. He sat down on the seat of an auto transport. He punched in the number of his guest suite, then touched the Robo Conversation 'on' button. He sat back as the transport started slowly down the roadway and into a large park. To his left was a smooth artificial path for pedestrians.

"Good morning Professor Hillar," said the Robo Conversation in a slow and calm, feminine voice. "What would you like to talk about today?"

"Well first, what's your name?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. My name is Augustawnoleeawnostiviach," replied the robo.

"Auga . . . what?"

"Augustawnoleeawnostiviach. I was named after one of my creators, but you can call me Augy for short."

"That's better," said Ben. "For a moment I thought I was going to be stuck with that tongue twister for the rest of the conversation."

"I can tell you have a sense of humor," said Augy pleasantly.

The park and garden, through which Ben and the transport moved, was a large expanse of vegetation and benign wildlife extending as far as Ben could see. Branches with flowers hanging down, loomed high above in the cospes of beautiful trees. They were densely populated in calculated locations throughout the park and strategically placed so that the transport would travel under the flowered branches. In the open, sunny areas, there were colorful flower gardens, vibrant with every color of the rainbow. They shimmered brightly bringing forth a pleasurable sight, and they gave off a sensuous scent, bringing back pleasurable memories of the past. And wherever the flowers and trees were missing, the ground was covered with an elegant blue-green grass. Birds of various shapes, sizes, and colors flitted from tree to tree singing melodious songs.

Ben had been in parks and gardens on his home planet and on other planets, but he had never seen one this exquisite. This was the best that money could buy.

He took in the beauty of the moment, then he purposely turned his head and body so he could look at the Galaef's palace. It was made of a smooth, shimmering-black material on the outside, which formed the three tall high-rise towers reaching higher than any of the other buildings in the Inner City or Outer City. Behind the black material the walls of the palace were composed of norimuinatit, the strongest atomically forged metal in existence, so strong that it could withstand the destructive forces of a sonic bomb. Also, hidden behind the structure of the walls in strategic positions were rapid-fire laser guns, which could be moved out of their hidden recesses in a moment for use against an enemy.

As Ben continued to look he was suddenly wondering about the security protecting the internal workings of the computer planet. What would happen to an unauthorized person or persons if they were able to get inside? Was there a way to stop them? If not, could they get to the control room to reprogram the computer to take control of the Starfleet? And if not, how much damage could they do to the computer?

Ben turned to the front as the transport automatically came to a stop for a couple of pedestrians crossing the roadway. They had just passed over a small bridge, which traversed a small stream flowing from a nearby fountain. As they moved out of the way the transport started up and drove slowly through the park.

Ben thought the information regarding Galactus VII security was probably classified, but it might be that he could get some information out of the auto transport. He decided to be subtle.

"Augy," said Ben, "Why don't you tell me about Galactus, starting with the park."

"I would be happy to, Professor Hillar." Augy paused momentarily as she searched the computer banks. "The park encompasses a little more than one thousand acres and completely encircles the Galaef's castle. It

was planned and constructed for the pleasure of the Galaef and his G-staff, but it is not just for them. It is for all the people of the Inner City as well as for visitors from other planets. And sometimes people from the Outer City will visit.

"The park and all the buildings in the Inner City were designed by a large staff of top architects and architectural computer programs. The purpose of the Inner City is to hold one hundred and fifty thousand people in comfort and luxury, so that they can do their job while running the Federation in pleasurable surroundings.

"Most of the time the population of the Inner City is close to a hundred thousand, give or take five thousand. It depends on the projects being handled by the Galaef and the Galactic Federation.

"During intra or interplanetary wars the population can become as high as one hundred and twenty thousand. When war breaks out between two or more countries on a single planet, the Galactic Federation rarely intervenes. But when a war starts between two, or among several planets, the Federation calls in many of the top minds. First they have to decide whether or not to become involved, and secondly, if they do, then to what extent. At the top of the list is always the monetary cost of taking on the responsibility. Then they have to take into account the impact that the war might have on trade in that sector of the Galaxy; also social, cultural, and environmental impacts have to be considered.

"Throughout the one point six million year history of the Galactic Empire it has been usual for the Federation to step in with all its might and squelch interplanetary war. Thus saving millions of lives and preventing costly damage to the planets. Political bargaining then solves their disputes, and it usually turns out fair and economical for all parties involved.

"There is no doubt that the Federation is responsible for peace and prosperity throughout the Galaxy. If ever the Federation fell, there would be terrible wars, planetary destruction, and the deaths of countless numbers of innocent beings."

Augy paused, and at this point, Ben let out a small chuckle.

"Why do you laugh?" asked Augy's calm, feminine voice.

"Don't misunderstand," said Ben. "I'm not disagreeing, nor do I think death is funny. I merely think you've gotten off the track. We were going to talk about Galactus. Remember?"

"But Professor Hillar, I am giving some background information as I proceed toward the historical construction of Galactus."

Ben smiled. "That's fine, Augy. Please continue."

"The first artificial planet, which was entirely a computer, was designed and constructed by the eight most technologically advanced planets in the Galaxy. After its birth, Galactic unification took place. The Federation armada was built, and with its power and especially with the strategical intelligence of the computer behind it, all inhabited planets with inter solar system space travel capabilities were forced to pledge allegiance to the Federation. Since that time the Galaxy has been mostly peaceful and prosperous.

"After 357,268.613 galactic years the first computer planet advised that a second computer planet needed to be built. It told the Galaef that too many components were beginning to malfunction and that in another 30,000 years it would begin to make erroneous decisions.

"The second computer planet was built with the intention that it would be the last one, but as it turned out five more had to be constructed.

"Finally, after Galactus VII was built, it was concluded by top scientists, in conjunction with the computer's input, that the Federation would never need to build another. This one has the capability for not only continual self-repair, but also for an ever increasing intelligence as the discovery of new knowledge continues.

"Janus VII, upon which you are now riding, is twenty five thousand miles in diameter. The outer shell is 20 feet thick and is made of Lastinite, the strongest metal ever made by positronic forging. It is so strong, it would take forty days to cut through one inch with continual phasor torching.

"The inside of the planet has many corridors, elevator shafts, ventilator shafts, and information and technical rooms. Much of the computer is made of living, organic, self-propagating matter. It was found that organic matter can store more information and do problem solving in a smaller space than inorganic matter, and, more importantly, since it has self-repair capabilities, it is virtually maintenance free.

"Only the Galaef and a few top computer engineers (chosen by the Galaef) have access to the inner workings of Galactus, and no one can enter the inner planet without being accompanied by the Galaef.

"After the construction of Galactus VII, soil, rocks, and boulders were brought in from an uninhabited planet and used to produce the outer covering which includes small mountain ranges, plains, tropical forests near the

equator, and one large desert. The ground is a minimum of fifty feet deep. Water was also imported, and Galactus VII has streams, rivers, lakes, two oceans, and snow in the mountains.

"The biologists created a chain of wildlife, none of which is harmful to humankind, and includes edible sea life such as fish and crustaceans.

"When the planet was finished the Galaef's palace was built on the outside surface of the computer planet, midway between the North Pole and the equator.

"Since space wasn't a consideration, the palace and the Inner City grounds were built with walkways and roadways lined with trees and flowers. There are even high-rise walkways connecting various buildings. The public buildings, such as libraries, restaurants, and entertainment centers (operated by non-G-staff personnel), and the Galaef's spaceport, and even the barracks which houses more than 10,000 security and patrol guards were designed not only for usefulness, but also for aesthetic qualities.

"Long ago, when Galactus VII was first designed and built, it was not planned that there would be another city on Galactus other than the Inner City. However, . . ."

"Please," interrupted Ben, "don't retell the story of the Tarmorians. I already know how their population was decimated by a microorganism accidentally brought to their planet by a Federation cargo ship, and how the survivors were allowed to move to Galactus VII because they had nowhere else to go."

"Fine," said Augy, "then I will tell you about the city they built on the other side of the castle wall."

Ben made a fake yawning noise.

"Am I boring you, Professor Hillar? You know, you can push the 'off' button any time you like."

"Don't be so emotional," replied Ben.

"Professor Hillar, you know I can't be emotional. I'm a computer."

"Yeah, sure. That's what all you computers say, and yet, you're always getting your wires in a tangle and your circuit boards heated up."

"Professor Hillar, you aren't very funny. Do you want me to continue?"

"Yeah. Sure. Okay. But tell me something I don't know. Everything I've heard so far I already learned in a high school history class."

"I'll try," said Augy and then she continued. "Space was not a consideration, when the Tarmorians moved here, so an extremely large avenue, approximately two hundred yards wide, was constructed. Starting on the outer side of the front gates, it travels in a straight line for twenty miles. It was planned that this street, named Main Avenue, would be the location for the businesses and that the housing for the citizens would be in the outlying areas several blocks out from the Main Avenue and radiating away.

"It took only a few years for bazaars to crop up. They had been very popular on their home planet, and the Tarmorians prefer doing their business in an outside environment rather than in the enclosed confinements of a building. Colorful tents and awnings line the broad avenue. They start near the front gate and continue for several miles. Vegetable and fruit stands, weapons, household items, almost anything can be bought at the bazaar; even black market items can be purchased from the right people for the right price at the bazaar." Augy paused, then said, "but don't tell anyone I told you."

In an assuring voice Ben said, "I won't."

Augy continued. "As one passes out of the bazaar, and for the next seven miles, small businesses of all sorts, designed to cater to tourists, line the broad avenue. And for the last ten miles you will find the glamorous hotels and gambling establishments. Entertainers from all over the galaxy are hired to perform in the showrooms, even famous holoview stars come to perform. Over a period of time the tourism trade became very profitable and the Outer City is now a famous vacation resort, a get-away for fun, relaxation, gambling, and good entertainment.

"Finally, a large spaceport was built on the west end of the city. And thousands of spaceships come in every year with vacationers."

Ben lurched a little as the transport came to a stop.

"I think that pretty much covers it. Do you have any more questions?"

"Actually, I do," said Ben. He decided he should have used the direct approach to begin with. "What would happen if an unauthorized person entered the internal workings of Galactus VII?"

Augy didn't hesitate. "The internal computer, being made mostly of organic matter, has the ability to make lethal monsters. The unauthorized person would be killed by such a creature shortly after entering."

Ben laughed. "Come on. You're pulling my leg." Ben realized he had used an ancient Earth saying. "I mean, you're lying to me."

"Oh no," replied Augy. "I can't lie. My program won't allow it."

Ben, with an aggravated tone in his voice said, "Well then I think your programmer has a weird sense of humor."

"I don't understand," said Augy.

"Never mind. I have one request."

"Yes?"

"Tell me what you know about Lyil."

"Lyil? Lyil who?"

"Lyil, the redhead who checked me out before I was interviewed by the Galaef. You know. She's a G-staff member. She's about five foot seven and . . ."

"Oh, you mean Lyil Zornburst. I'm sorry I'm not allowed to divulge information about G-staff members."

"Well, if you can't, you can't. It's been nice talking to you." He switched off the Robo Conversation. "You gave me a lot of information I already know, and now you won't tell me what I don't know and want to know."

Ben stepped off the transport and started down the hallway toward his suite thinking about the Outer City. It wasn't the gambling and the shows that interested him. It was the tournaments.

When the survivors of Tarmore restructured their civilization, they kept swording as their planetary sport (It had been very big on their home planet). Eventually they built an arena on the Northeast edge of the city. It contained exactly 100 combat platforms, which included warm-up and competition. And the complex had the capacity to hold more than seven hundred thousand spectators. The main arena, alone, had a hundred thousand seats. It was the largest swordsman complex in the Galaxy.

At first, it appeared that the Tarmorians had been overly optimistic in building such a large complex; especially since their population was not allowed to grow to more than one million.

But as it turned out, with all the huge hotels and other types of tourist housing, the city's population was continually close to two million. The city directors held tournaments four times a year, and they always had a large number of spectators, consisting of Tarmorians and tourists. There was even a large number of G-staff who had an interest in swording.

Since the guaranteed prize money was high, there were usually one or two of the Galaxy's top swordsmen competing. This brought an even larger turn out of spectators. Swording was one of the major sporting events on a large number of planets throughout the Galaxy, and people would come from all over to see top swordsmen; especially swordsmen who had placed in the Galactic Games.

The money was nice, but that wasn't Ben's motivation for wanting to compete in one of the Tarmorian's tournaments. Over the years the competition had become high level and therefore the prestige had grown until it was finally considered the elite of all the swording competitions (with the exception of the Galactic Games). He had heard of these matches when he was a child, and it became a dream of his to compete and win in a Tarmorian tournament.

Ben always stayed current with the major swording events, and because of that he knew a tournament had just started in the Outer City. Since he had to wait for the results of the Galaef's research team, he thought he would see about entering.

[Chapter Four](#)

Lyil, while looking at Ben with an expression of friendliness, touched the palm lock with her fingertips, and then smiled as the door slid open. "Would you like to come in?" she asked in her usual, calm manner.

In anticipation of his answer, she walked in ahead of him and turned on the lights.

Without saying 'yes,' Ben followed her lead and stepped through the doorway and into her apartment.

This was the second time during his first three nights on Galactus that Lyil had asked him into her apartment. From her actions on the first night, it appeared there was no sexual intention. She liked him, and Ben could sense an attraction, but Lyil wasn't willing to go any further than a goodnight kiss, a friendly smile, and a handshake. It was evident she didn't want to get involved romantically, and instead considered him a friend and enjoyed his company.

Ben understood it, or at least he thought he did, and he accepted it, with a slight disappointment. Certainly she was a beautiful woman, but it was more than that that caused him to feel a letdown. During the two nights

he had spent with her, going out on the town, he had found her to be a vibrant, wonderful woman. She was outgoing with a touch-of-class. She had warmth and generosity, and people liked her. She had lots of friends—almost to the point of annoyance. Everywhere they went, to dinner or even walking along the sidewalk, people stopped to talk to her. It was almost impossible to have a conversation without being interrupted, and the only time they could truly be together, one on one, was when they were alone in her apartment.

The funny thing was, Ben didn't want to get involved with anyone at this time in his life, anyway. He had his swording, which took up a lot of his time, and then there was his research, and now an expedition to Ar. If they found a computer complex, it would take several years of researching, cataloging and documenting in order to create a history from the archeological discoveries. And then there was . . . It seemed there was always something, which kept him from getting involved with a woman. When he was in school, while his friends were out finding romance, he was practicing on the swording mats. And when he went to the Cyton School of Higher Learning he spent most of his time studying for his PhD in archaeology, and at the same time he was preparing for the Galactic Games. His romantic life got off to a slow start, which was the reason for his shyness around women. Oh sure, he was confident on the swording mat, or in the classroom, or around people in general, but when it came to one particular woman with whom there was a possible relationship, he always backed off a little, waiting to see if there would be anything more than just a friendship.

A casual relationship was convenient, and that was all he had ever had with a woman. His fame as a swordsman had brought a lot of women into his life, but he had never met one with whom he thought he could have a permanent relationship.

Until now.

He had only known her for a few days, but there was something about Lyil, which made him think, for the first time in his life, he had met someone with whom he could be serious. It occurred to him, you can't always determine why you're attracted to someone, but with Lyil it could have been because she had a quality, which most beautiful women didn't have. She had heart. She had a genuine concern for the needs of other people. She had . . .

He decided he liked her for many reasons, but it didn't matter. She made it clear that she didn't want a romantic relationship with him.

During another time or place he may have tried to overcome her indifference toward him, and to get her to view him in a romantic light, however, as it was, with everything that was going on, . . .

Ben looked around the room. By his standards not only was the location of the apartment, with its bay window overlooking the Galaef's grand park, well chosen, but also the construction of the building was, especially the walls with a hue of three-dimensional radiation, most pleasing to look upon. On his professor's salary he would never be able to afford such an apartment.

Lyil had done a great job of choosing furniture and decorating—a talent in which Ben was severely lacking. In the middle of the spacious living room there were two form-fitting chairs, one in which he was sitting, and both of which faced opposite a form-fitting couch. Recessed into the wall, with easy viewing from the couch, was a very expensive, dual capability viewer screen (it could be used for entertainment or for contacting another party). There was also a wet bar, a soft pile carpet, and various pieces of artwork which sat on small tables or hung on the walls. The room was lighted with several adjustable vitalites, which were on stands in different corners and with one hanging from the ceiling.

Ben hadn't seen any of the other rooms, but considering what he had seen here, he was sure they were just as nice.

Lyil unstrapped her phasor and set it on a small table. "I'm sorry about this," she said, indicating the weapon. "It's in my job description. I have to wear it at all times," she paused, "except in my home, and even then the rules of the job recommend we keep it close at hand."

He looked at the phasor. "It doesn't bother me," he said. "Actually, for some reason, which I hope isn't twisted, I kind of like it." He admired a woman with authority, a woman with confidence, a woman who wasn't afraid to move forward with the moment. Maybe her gun personified this in his subconscious mind.

Lyil smiled. She walked over to the wet bar. "Same as before?" She guessed his answer and poured a non-alcoholic drink into a glass and then she poured herself one.

"That'll be fine," he answered.

She handed him the drink and sat down on the couch across from him. Using an oblong object she swirled the drink in her glass. "Rumor has it, if they find what you're looking for, you'll be leaving in about four weeks."

Ben sipped his drink and set it on a small table, which was situated in front of the chair. "I've always found that rumors, like myths, have a certain amount of truth behind them. The problem is—you just never know how much."

Lyil laughed softly. "You can believe there's more truth than fiction in this rumor. In fact, the expedition left this morning and with the equipment they have, it shouldn't take them longer than three weeks to survey the entire planet."

After a moment's hesitation Ben said, in his off-handed manner, "Well, you know, if I'm having too much fun here, I might not want to go." He wasn't serious, but he was having a good time with Lyil.

The night before last, and then again tonight she had taken him to an elegant restaurant. The food, the surroundings, the band, and the atmosphere were great, but more than that she was fun to be with. They had pleasant, and sometimes interesting conversations. And they made each other laugh.

He sat silently sipping his drink. Finally, to take his mind off future possibilities, he asked, "So, what planet are you from? I notice your Komotu has a slightly sibilant sound to it."

Lyil leaned back on the couch. "I'm from an obscure little planet near the edge of the Galaxy. I'm sure you haven't heard of it. Our Solar System has fourteen planets, two of which are inhabited." She crossed her legs in a womanly fashion. "There really isn't anything out of the ordinary about my planet, nothing which would bring it to the attention of the news media nor would be of any interest to an outsider."

"Do you miss it?"

"I miss my family, but I don't necessarily miss the life style. It's not bad, but what I have here is much nicer, plus, I like my job."

And your family?"

"I have two sisters and a brother, and both my parents are alive and healthy."

"They must have been disappointed when they found out you would be going to a planet so far away."

Lyil shrugged her shoulders. "Actually they became quite excited. I'm only the second person from my planet to be chosen for G-staff, and it made me an over-night celebrity." She took a sip of her drink. "They were happy for me. Besides they know I'll be coming home when I retire after twenty Galactus years. By that time I'll have enough money, and I'll be able to settle into a new life and raise a family."

"Sounds like a plan," said Ben. He had a habit of translating ancient Earth colloquialisms into Komotu. It all started in fun, when he and Dr. Suzn were translating the Earth books. Now he found himself doing it more frequently, even when talking to strangers. It suddenly occurred to him that it might be offensive. "I hope my use of archaic phrases doesn't bother you."

"Not at all, in fact, the more I get to know you, the more I realize how you like to keep a conversation from becoming dull." She emitted a small laugh. "Tell me about your family," she said as her laugh turned into a smile.

"I only have one brother, but we're close. So I don't miss not having any other brothers or sisters. And both my parents are alive and well, . . ." He paused considering the situation, "but I suppose you already know about my family."

Lyil looked calmly surprised. "Why do you say that?"

Now it was Ben's turn to be surprised. "Why? . . . Because you're a security agent and interview analyst. It's your job to check people out before . . ."

"Oh, I see what you mean," Lyil smiled. "But that's not the way it is. You see my partner, Mandril, reads the files of those being interviewed by the Galaef, and I read the files of those being interviewed by Thorne."

"So you haven't read my files?"

"No. I didn't think it was necessary, or fair since I offered to show you the city. And if there had been anything I should have known, Mandril would have told me."

Ben set his drink on the small table in front of him. "Well I can't say I wouldn't have read your file if the roles were reversed."

"That's okay," she smiled, "I don't have anything to hide."

"Neither do I," said Ben quickly and then more slowly he brushed back his hair with his hand as he pondered for a moment, "and maybe you haven't read my files, but you do have an advantage over me."

Lyil quickly sobered, but said and then asked, "No I don't. What do you mean?"

"You've seen me in the nude. That's what I mean."

Lyil became serious. "Maybe you were nude, but I didn't look. It wouldn't be professional."

Ben wagged his finger at her. "Am I supposed to believe that? Not even a little peek?"

"That's right." She smiled sweetly. "I may have inadvertently seen you. It's difficult not to when we have to check you out, but there is never an intent to 'check it out.' The fact is we are too busy doing our job and making sure that you are of no threat to the Galaef to be looking or to be taking a personal interest."

"Nevertheless . . ." said Ben. Then he hesitated and seemingly changed the subject. "You seem to be a fair person. I mean you haven't even read my files."

"Yes. So?"

"Then I think it would only be fair if I got a quick glance."

"Of me?" Lyil laughed. "In the nude?"

"Of course."

"Forget it. The only way you'll ever see me in the nude is if my clothes catch on fire, and you have to help me rip them off."

Ben looked around, but decided not to ask for a light. "So what do you like to do for fun besides eating at extravagant restaurants and going to the theatre?"

"Among other things, such as vacationing on a white sandy beach, I like to watch swording matches," she replied. She leaned forward and swept her long red hair over her shoulders. "As a matter of fact a friend of mine took me to a swording match last night."

Ben grimaced. "A friend?"

"Yes, Tam. She's a Tarmorian, and her husband is in the tournament. Actually she was too, but she lost in the second round."

"You like swording?"

Lyil thought for a moment. "Not when I was younger, but after I moved to Galactus I made friends with some of the Tarmorians, and they got me interested. Now I really enjoy it." She paused and then asked, "Do you like to watch swording?"

Ben nodded his head, and then shook it. "It goes beyond that," he answered. "The fact is I am a swordsman."

A delicate smile crossed her lips as if to say that was one more thing they had in common. And then she asked, "Why don't we go see a match tomorrow night? Rand, my friend's husband, is still in the tournament."

"Actually," said Ben, "I'm going to be in the tournament myself."

There was a puzzled look on Lyil's face. So Ben added, "I signed up yesterday."

"Signed up? But they just finished the third round, and I've been told they only let in expert swordsmen after the third round." She paused, waiting for Ben to say something, but he remained silent. "Are you an expert swordsman?" she asked.

"I'm the top Master Swordsman on my planet, and . . ."

"I thought poll ball was the international sport on Cyton?"

"That's true, but there are a lot of other sports and swording is one of them."

Ben smiled. He didn't know why it mattered since they weren't going to have a relationship, but he liked the idea that she was interested in swording.

"I would really like to watch you in a match," she said. "If you're a top swordsman on your planet, you must be pretty good."

Ben noticed she said 'a top swordsman' instead of 'the top swordsman,' but he decided not to say anything. It wasn't important, and it wasn't in his nature to be boisterous.

She took a sip of her drink and then set the glass down. "What time is your match?" she asked. And then, with a second thought and in a questioning tone, she added, "You know I have to work tomorrow?"

Ben shifted in his chair for a more comfortable position. "My first match is three o'clock tomorrow afternoon, and if I win, then I have another one at seven."

"That's great," she said. Then her smile was quickly supplanted by a concerned look. "I just want you to know that if you lose your match, it's okay, and win or lose," she continued, "I know a great little restaurant in the Outer City."

She looked at the watch on her wrist and then stood up.

Ben knew it was time for him to leave.

For the second time that week she said to him, "I have to be at work early," and then she added, "Why don't I meet you at the front gate of the arena at six o'clock? If you've won, I can watch your next match. If not, we can have dinner."

Ben stood up and before he could answer Lyil moved in a little closer. He gave her a good night kiss, which

lingered a little longer than the night before.

"Good night," she said as they parted. "See you tomorrow."

"Good night."

Ben could still feel her long, wavy red hair in his hands as he left her apartment and walked into the pleasant night air.

Chapter Five

Lyil had stayed up too late with Ben, and because of that she had slept in, past her built in alarm clock, and now she was running behind schedule. She jumped out of bed, dressed in her workout clothes, ate a quick breakfast, strapped her phasor to her right hip, hooked her backpack over her shoulders and moments later was jogging toward the athletic complex.

As her toes landed softly but steadily upon the artificial pathway and then sprung her forward toward her destination, she started thinking about Ben. She hadn't known him long enough to form any kind of emotional attachment, and she didn't believe in love at first sight. No, there had to be a long time involvement, at least a year, before two people could really determine if their relationship was the real thing, if it was going to last, and if it was going to be worth the effort it takes to maintain a relationship, and yet, there was something about Ben that attracted her to him. She knew it was there, and she could feel it. But what was it?

. In a small, unsure way she hoped they would have enough time together to get to know each other.

She rounded the corner of the path, breathing hard, and peered ahead at the grey tinted windows of the athletic complex. They seemed to be staring back at her with a cold, steely sheen as if to say, 'Jog faster. Work out. Learn the art of combat. Someday you will be fighting for your life.'

The athletic complex was designed to keep G-staff personnel in a physical state of combat readiness. There were phasor-firing ranges; wrestling, boxing, and Situ arenas; swimming pools; half-mile tracks with steep incline runs; obstacle courses; different sports complexes which included, among others, hand-to-hand dagger combat, dagger throw, and archery; and, of course, lounges, viewing rooms, snack-bar areas, and locker rooms with showering facilities. The only in-close fighting sport, which was not practiced, was swording. The combat experts and the computer predicted it would never be used in actual combat situations, that is, considering the other types of weapons and the hand to hand combat already being taught and practiced. Overall the complex was constructed for and utilized by G-staff members only, with the exception that sometimes crewmembers off the smaller spaceships of the Galactic Armada would use it. (The smaller ships did not have the space for workout equipment.)

During the course of the ten-day workweek on Galactus, G-staff personnel were required to workout two hours every day. For this reason Lyil always got up early as she liked to do her work-out in the morning before going to work. But the problem was finding one of her friends who would workout with her. None of them liked to get up that early. Mandril wouldn't. So, she finally had to settle for Hast, and it occurred to her that he was only doing it because he wanted to date her.

Today they were going to practice Situ defense, a type of combat in which Lyil excelled. It was referred to as a defense, probably because of the way it first started eons ago. In reality, however, there was as much offense as defense, and with the right moves, a master of this form of combat could easily kill the adversary.

This particular form of combat has only a little dependency on strength. For this reason, women, who are quicker and more agile than most men, usually fair better. Unlike wrestling or boxing, which are strictly hand to hand, with no artificial help, the Situ Defense utilizes electronics to perform many of the holds before executing the throws. Two pliable, metallic finger caps fit over the first digit of the forefinger and thumb on each hand. Inside the caps are microscopic power supplies with electronic circuitry, which provide the energy needed to cause severe muscle contraction in the opponent's body. The moves are quite varied and many, but most of them involve grasping a muscle of the opponent such that the finger and thumb are in close enough proximity as to create a complete circuit between the finger cap and the thumb cap. The resulting muscle spasm is so severe as to cause complete loss of function of that limb or that part of the body. At that time the person with the muscle contraction can be thrown or moved into position for the kill.

Hast, who was not even fast for a man (or, at least, was slow compared to most G-staff men), and who had little interest in combat or war, was seemingly inefficient when it came to Situ. He had gained his master status

in Situ, but just barely, and only because it was required in order to be G-staff. As soon as he gained his title he lost interest.

Upon analyzing his skill performances and test scores, the computer decided he was best suited for housing control, and assigned him to that duty. It was his job to oversee all the guest quarters, making sure they were always kept clean, in good repair, and ready for any dignitary of the highest order, including kings and queens from far away planets.

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Lyl hurried into the building. By jogging she had managed to meet Hast at the appointed time, and ten minutes later they were situ sparing.

Hast, a tall, handsome man, looked up at Lyl from the mat. His masculine face was frowning. "You always take your practices too seriously," he said.

There was a snicker from the practice mat next to theirs. One of the two G-staff men who had been sparing before Hast and Lyl got there had overheard Hast's comment, and he either thought it was funny that Hast couldn't take on a woman or he was trying to impress Lyl with some macho bullshit.

Whichever it was, Lyl didn't like it. "Shut up and mind your own business," she said in a low voice.

The man tried to make light of it and made a noise as if to imply, "Oh please don't hurt me," but under Lyl's glare he finally ignored her and went back to his match.

In this particular situ arena there were one hundred mats, and only half of them were being used. Why did we have to choose this mat? she asked, chastising herself. She looked down at Hast. "No I don't," she replied. She reached down and gave him a hand up. "It's possible that someday we'll be in a combat situation. And if we are, I want to be ready."

Hast laughed sarcastically (which didn't please Lyl). "The possibility of that happening is almost nil," he said. "The Federation is too strong, and most, if not all of the governments are happy with the political structure." He gave her that all knowing look.

Lyl went into the Situ stance. "Maybe," she said, without displaying any anger, "but I'm still going to my best to kick your butt." She was only half serious, but she said it softly so the G-staff on the mat next to theirs wouldn't hear her.

It was apparent that Hast was surprised by her comment. He stood speechless for a moment, then asked, "What's wrong with you today? You don't seem to be quite yourself."

"Nothing's wrong," she replied. "In fact, everything's great." She smiled up at him.

"Well maybe someday I'll kick your butt. Maybe even now." It seemed she had stepped on his ego a little, and he wasn't handling it well.

"Maybe," she said as she stepped forward. "Let's find out."

Hast stepped forward and executed an unorthodox move, probably hoping to catch her off guard. He quickly took the stance of a boxer and sent his right fist toward her jaw.

She saw it coming and ducked her head to the right side. She reached forward with her right hand and grabbed his right thigh. As it went into spasm she crossed over, reached down and hooked her arm around his left calf muscle. She then gave a pull while simultaneously slamming her body into his abdomen. He went down on his back while she landed on her feet. She immediately put her right foot to his throat.

"Okay, okay," he said. "You win this one." She let go of him and walked over and sat down on a bench. "It's almost time to go to work," she said.

"Good. Next time let's do something besides Situ."

Lyl smiled. "Let's practice on the phasor range."

"Fine," he agreed.

They sat for a moment while resting.

"So, how's the job going?" she asked.

"Same as always." Then after a pause, "Well, that's not quite true. Thorne has had a great many visitors lately. They've almost taken up all the guest quarters. And for the next three weeks he's got more coming in.

"I've never seen anything like it," he continued. "So, just out of curiosity I checked with the computer, and the second-in-command, throughout the entire history of the Federation, has never had this many visitors at one time."

"So, I know," answered Lyl. "I've read all his files." She pondered the situation for a moment and then

asked, "Why do you think he has so many visitors coming in?"

"I have no idea. Since you're closer to this information than me, I thought maybe you would know."

Lylil had never liked Thorne. His personality was cold, impersonal, and calculated with no emotion, except for his occasional fits of anger, and in conjunction with that there was something about him that made her think he shouldn't be second-in-command of the Galactic Federation. She could never quite figure out what it was. But his haunting eyes made her feel there was something sinister about him.

Aside from that, and more importantly, Thorne's resume was too suspect for him to have been considered for the job as second-in-command. His birth records and school records were destroyed in a fire when he was twenty-four years of age. (Since he lived in a small town all these records were kept in the same building). In order for his existence to be verified and new birth and school records to be created and filed, witnesses had to be called in to testify of their knowledge of him during his babyhood and childhood. The circumstance that Lylil found odd was that most of these witnesses had moved to the planet just before Thorne was born. But checking it out she found no discrepancies in their testimony, so considered it simply a coincidence.

Later, when he took the tests for Galaefship the computer denied him consideration for the job because of the records reproduction, but his test scores were very high and because of this he was given consideration for the job as second-in-command.

Lylil had been G-staff for eleven years and was on her second Galaef, so to speak. Two years into her G-staff status the first Galaef died of old age, and two months later the computer chose Taul Winler as the new Galaef. After all the ceremonies and all the hoorays had taken place the Computer offered one hundred names of men and women to be his second-in-command. Since Lylil had interviewed all the prospective candidates for the job and since she knew their backgrounds, it was a mystery to her as to why the Galaef had chosen Thorne. But the mystery didn't stop there. Over the years Thorne had had many strange visitors who gave a reason for their visitation, which didn't seem to fit the circumstances. Then several years back, he organized an archeological expedition to the fifth computer planet for the supposititious purpose of enhancing the archaehistory of Galactus Five. Since then he had made seven more trips and then about a year ago the trips stopped. But Lylil had yet to see any papers written on the subject by Thorne or any of his associates. The entire project had an air about it which smacked of insidious stratagem and political deception. If this were true, then she couldn't imagine what Thorne could be trying to accomplish. What could he possibly gain?

Nevertheless, the project was never questioned by the Galaef nor his upper echelon G-staff. So Lylil assumed everything was okay, mainly because she didn't always understand the internal workings of Galactic politics and since the Galaef appeared to be on top of the situation.

"Maybe he's organizing another archeological expedition," she said without having any idea what Thorne was up to.

"Yeah, maybe," said Hast. A smirk crossed his lips.

Even though it only lasted a split second, Lylil noticed it and was quick to say, "You know something."

"What?"

"I saw that look. You know something, and you're not telling me."

"No. No. I was thinking about something else—about when I was in college and went on an archeological expedition. It has nothing to do with Thorne. Believe me, if I knew anything, I'd tell you. After all, you and Mandril do the interviews and need to be up on everything concerning Thorne and the Galaef."

"That's right," said Lylil. "And I'm glad you understand that." She stood up, slung her sweat-suit jacket over her shoulder and started toward the shower room.

Hast yelled after her. "After all the beatings I take, you should at least have dinner with me."

She turned her head and body slightly to the left as she continued to walk. Her long red hair partly hid her face to him as she said in a soft, singsong voice, "I don't think so." She wasn't trying to be cute, but she was growing weary of his continual hounding.

She rubbed her right arm. It was a trifle sore from the workout. Early in the sparing Hast had caught her with an unexpected move and almost had her on the mat before she got out of it. All in all it wasn't very graceful, and the price she paid was an elbow to the right biceps.

The injury wasn't bad, and she knew the pain would be gone by the afternoon.

Before Lyil stepped off the etron mover, she said to Hast, "I'll see you in the morning."

He grunted an "Okay," but his tone indicated he was still upset that she wouldn't go out with him.

And that's why not, she thought. *Most of the time he acts too immature.* With her looks being what they were—pretty face with a small nose, large breasts, athletic legs and arms, long red hair, and a well proportioned body, she had met a lot of men who were constantly, in one way or another, trying to get her into bed. They used different approaches, some were suave, some were macho, some were shy and innocent, some were intellectual, but in the end, when they didn't get what they wanted they reacted as if she were a bitch who was giving them a come-on, when in reality she never came on to anyone, and she certainly wasn't a tease. She was waiting for the right man—the one who was sincere without having to play games. And for these reasons she seldom dated.

Hast is just another typical man, she thought. She walked down the hall and stepped through a doorway, which brought her into a huge administrative room with G-staff personnel. They bustled about tending to Federation business. She continued down the aisle until she was about half way. She turned to the right and walked toward her desk, which was next to a window. Her desk faced the front of the office, but if she looked to the left she could see the park in front of the castle.

Mandrill, whose desk was next to Lyil's, looked up from behind her computer screen as Lyil approached.

For many years they had been best friends. They liked to do things together such as go to restaurants and to the theatre. Several years back they got the approval for two other G-staff members to take over the interviews, and then they went on vacation together.

Lyil and Mandril looked so much alike that those who met them for the first time thought they were twins, even though they had different colored hair. Mandril, like Lyil, was a beautiful woman. Her blond hair was straight and shoulder length, but the shape of her face was nearly a picture image of Lyil's. And her facial features were also the same—the nose, the mouth, the eyes, and the cheekbones. And their physical bodies were the same height with the same build and body proportion. When these two beautiful women walked into a room with people they didn't know, they ended up telling them several times that not only were they not sisters, they weren't even from the same planet.

Before Lyil had a chance to sit down, Mandril picked up a folder from the stack on the right and handed it to Lyil. "We have another Thorne interview to prepare for," she said.

Lyil took the file and sat down at her desk. She reached forward and turned on the computer screen. "Lyil - red." She paused briefly and then said, "files. Over." Instantly a menu of files appeared on the computer screen.

Lyil started staring through, instead of at the screen, all the while she was thinking that maybe she should take a vacation. She certainly didn't feel like being at work interviewing all these Thorne visitors. She started thinking about the white beaches of Critton. How long had it been since she had had a vacation? *About a year,* she thought. That meant she had four weeks of vacation coming, and she could use them any time she wanted.

Mandrill smiled and asked, "Where are you?" Then she acted as if it suddenly occurred to her, "Oh, with your new boyfriend—that guy who's from the other side of the galaxy."

Phil, whose desk was straight across from Lyil's, became attentive when he heard Mandril's comment. He looked over the top of his monitor. "New boyfriend?" he asked in a surprised tone. Phil was a tall man at six foot six with broad shoulders, and, of course, he was very handsome. "Or maybe I should just say 'boyfriend' since you haven't had one the entire time you've been on Galactus."

Without hesitation, but in a calm voice Lyil said, "That's not true. I have had a boyfriend. I know it didn't last long, but I still had a boyfriend." Then she said to Phil, "And don't pay any attention to Mandril. I don't consider Ben to be my boyfriend." She turned and gave Mandril a look of disapproval. "I can think of several reasons why I can't get involved with him—big problems, which means nothing is going to happen between us."

Mandrill ignored her. "Let's see," she continued, "he's been here three nights, and you've been out with him . . . How many times?"

Lyil turned back to her computer screen. "Twice."

"Twice!" Phil let out a low whistle.

"That's two out of three possible nights," said Mandril. "I'd say it's more than a casual relationship. You haven't dated anyone more than once in . . . probably five years." She put the file, which she had been looking though, on her desk and pushed her chair closer to Lyil's. "I don't understand it."

Mandrill paused, waiting for Lyil to respond.

Mandrill was a friend, but sometimes she was too motherly. "You don't understand what?" Lyil started shuffling through the Thorne file, but was having a difficult time concentrating. Her mind was going a hundred different directions all at once.

"Why do you turn down the best looking guys in the Inner City, far better looking than this . . . what's his name?"

"Ben Hillar. And I know you know his name."

Again Mandril ignored her statement. "You turn down a guy like Hast, who is better looking, probably has more money, and even more importantly, lives right here on Galactus, and yet you go out with this offworlder, Ben. He lives on the other side of the Galaxy, millions of light years from here."

"Not quite on the other side of the Galaxy, and I told you, I don't have a relationship with him. And that's one of the reasons we can't get involved, he lives too far away."

Phil shifted his chair to the left so his monitor wouldn't block his view. He said, "You're going out with an offworlder? How did you meet him, and I'm hoping he's a tourist and not somebody you interviewed."

"Don't you have work to do?" asked Lyil.

Phil ignored her and sat back in his chair.

Mandrill started musing. "I never could understand why you turned down Manne. He's not only good looking and has a great personality, but he's got position." She pointed up, "you know, one of the Galaef's top strategists."

Lyil looked at the top sheet of the next Thorne interview. "Lyil-red. Pull up a file on Lorin Windover, I.D. number, top: 641 3972; bottom XZdMA 721798561, red-red-yellow-blue-red-green-green-green-blue-yellow. over. I'm not looking for a man with position. I just want a man who feels right. And Manne is a nice guy, but he's not my type."

"What about Jarad? I know he's a noncom, but he's good-looking, and he's from your solar system. Plus you have gone out with him in the past. Maybe you should go out with him again and see what develops."

"I like Jarad, but he's just a friend, to be truthful we don't have much in common."

Mandrill thought for a moment. "So you think there's a spark with this offworlder?"

"He's fun to be with, but I haven't noticed a spark."

"I don't think you're being honest with yourself. If there's no spark, why are you still going out with him?"

"I just told you, he's fun to be with."

"It may be fun, but if you keep going out with him, it's liable to become more than just fun. In fact, I'm sure it will."

"No it won't."

"And what do you know about him?"

Lyil reflected for a moment, then said, "He's intelligent. He's . . ."

"No. I mean his past history."

"You've read his personal files, not me." She paused, "But I do know he's a swordsman."

"Hell," said Phil, "I haven't even met this man, and I'm already starting to like him."

"Don't encourage her," said Mandril. "She has enough going on without becoming involved with a man who lives a hundred million light years from here."

Lyil stopped listening to the two of them. It occurred to her if Ben lost his three o'clock match she might never get to see him in competition. "He has a match this afternoon," she said out loud, but mostly to herself.

She was beginning to think she should take a vacation. Why not? She had accumulated enough time, and there weren't any wars going on between any of the planets, which meant G-staff wasn't on an emergency alert status. She leaned forward and punched a number into her viewer.

There was a slight intermittent hum, which lasted several seconds. Then Tam's face appeared on the screen. "Hi Lyil," she said. "What's up?"

Lyil leaned forward. "I've decided to go to the matches this afternoon."

"I thought you were planning to be here this evening?"

"I was, but I have a friend who has a match at three o'clock."

"Your off-world friend?"

"Yes, Ben."

"Well let's get together. If you could come a little earlier, we could watch Rand in his match. You know he's dueling against Doog?"

"Yes," she answered. Lyil knew how excited Tam was. This was the furthest Rand had ever made it in a

tournament—to the fourth round. And now he was going to go against the swordsman who won the third tournament last year.

Even if Rand lost, which everyone expected, he would still gain a lot of prestige. And the loser's share, 10% of the gate, would be a handsome prize since the seats were usually half full for fourth round matches.

Lylil deliberated for a moment and then said, "I'm going to put in for vacation time starting at noon, that way I can make it by 1:30."

"Okay. Come to the main arena and I'll meet you at gate B."

"See you then." Lylil punched the off button just as Tam finished her 'good-bye.'

Mandrill smiled. "Now you're using your vacation time? I thought you were saving it for Critton, the vacationer's paradise."

"I have enough for both." Her fingers raced nimbly across the keyboard as she put in the necessary information to start her vacation.

Chapter Seven

Lylil looked around at the people as she and Tam sat down in the box seats.

The arena was a little more than half full with a few spectators hurrying through the gates. Most of the crowd was made up of Tarmorians, but there were some off-worlders, and Lylil even saw some G-staff.

It was five minutes before start time.

Lylil sat back in her chair. "Looks like a big turn out," she said.

Tam looked at her with a smile on her face. Her dark-brown eyes sparkled portraying delight as she shifted in her seat to get a better view of the audience. Tam was a typical Tarmorian—a race that had no variance in color from one person to the next. Her hair was black, eyes brown, and she had light brown skin. All the Tarmorians had this look. Their features had a rugged exterior, and, indeed, the Tarmorians had had fierce battles and bloody wars throughout their history on their home planet, and because of that they were a people no one would want to fight in a war, especially hand to hand combat. Another quality of note, was their ability to make money. Their history showed that they were good in business, crafty in their business sense, and smart in finding a good deal.

"Isn't this great?" Tam said in her husky, Tarmorian voice. "Doog has a big following; especially since he won the third tournament last year—the first Tarmorian to win a tournament in five years. And to do it he had to beat the swordsman who placed eleventh in the Galactic Games. It was the biggest upset in twenty-three years."

Not only had Lylil heard this story many times, she had seen the highlights on the viewer. Still, she didn't say anything. She knew the Tarmorians loved to retell stories, especially swording stories. They eagerly anticipated their tournaments, and they had great respect and admiration for the Tarmorian swordsmen. Actually they showed great sportsmanship and gave credit to all the swordsmen of the Galaxy.

Tam was watching the tunnel, where Rand would be making his entrance. She kept looking, but sat back and asked, "Did you check the board to see where your boyfriend's match is going to be?"

Lylil always spoke in a reserved and dignified manner. Calmly she said, "Ben? Ben's not my boyfriend."

"Oh, I just thought . . ."

"It's okay. It seems Mandrill has the same misconception, but the truth is I've only known him for three days."

"But you've been out with him twice in those three days, and I get the impression it would have been three times if you hadn't already had plans to come to the matches with me."

"Probably, but when I think about it there are too many reasons why we shouldn't get involved, the main one being that we live so far apart."

"Why is that a problem? I've known a number of Tarmorians who married off-worlders and then one of them would relocate. Zord, the top matre de at the Gala hotel met a tourist, fell in love, and got married. This just happened two months ago. Before they got married they decided that he made more money in his job, and she could get a job working in one of the hotels, so, she relocated to Galactus. And I've know a couple of Tarmorians who relocated to another planet for the same reason." She paused, and then said, "Hey, if you like this guy, and I think you do, then don't worry about it. Just let it happen."

"But that's the problem. I don't think he'd be willing to give up his job, and I know I wouldn't. And even if he were willing to give up his profession, there are other reasons."

Lyil was about to give the reasons, but at that moment Rand walked out of the tunnel.

The audience cheered and clapped, and stomped their feet. Tam stood up and waved.

It took her a minute to catch his attention, but finally Rand saw her and gave her a slow bow of acknowledgement—with his right hand in front of his stomach (holding his sword case) and the left hand behind his back, he then bowed his head slowly toward his knees. As he straightened, he blew her a kiss, and walked to the swording mat.

Lyil had always been impressed with Rand. He was not the typical Tarmorian male with the gruff exterior, crude manners, and grumbling voice, instead his personality and characteristics portrayed a natural charm, elegance, and touch of class.

Tam was smiling as she sat down. "With the money from this tournament we'll be able to pay off our apartment and most of our bills."

Rand opened his sword case and took out his sword. The blue sheen color of the sword flashed in the air as he whipped it back and forth. He pretended a mock adversary and did a few feints, a few parries, a few thrusts, and then, with his sword by his side, he stood waiting for Doog to come out of the tunnel.

o o o o o

The match lasted five minutes and twenty-three seconds, which was longer than many had thought. A lot of wagering had been placed on a four-minute match. The Tarmorians, over the years, had devised an intricate and complicated scheme for wagering. The bottom line, however, was to accurately predict, within a fifteen second window, how long the match would last. This is where the large payoffs started, and then it became larger depending on how accurately the gambler predicted the number of hits, feints, thrusts, parries, and so on. And who would win.

Since Rand's match lasted as long as it did, there were only a few winners. Most of the spectators were tearing tickets and throwing them on the floor in disgust. The few who had predicted accurately, hurried away to collect their winnings.

"I told Rand to meet us here, and then we'd decide what we're going to do." She paused. "He really wants to see the next match here in the main arena, but I told him we were going to watch your, uuuuhh, friend. So, he agreed to go with us. He's such a sweetheart."

Lyil smiled. "Well that works out good, because this is where Ben's match is going to take place."

A puzzled look came over Tam's face. "Your boyfriend is Professor Ben Hillar?" she asked.

"Yes, I told you . . ."

"No, you only told me, Ben."

"Well, his name is Ben Hillar, but I don't see what difference it makes."

An amused smile crossed Tam's face. Lyil had been friends with Tam for more than three years—long enough to know that smile meant Tam was privy to some trivial piece of information.

Tam said, "No difference. I just heard he's an excellent swordsman. That's probably why he's swording in the main arena."

Maybe she misread Mandril's smile. "He's a champion on his home planet, which I'm sure means he is very good."

Tam smiled again, but this time it wasn't that amused smile, "Yes," she agreed, "like Doog is a champion on Galactus, and we all know he is extremely good at swording."

Lyil leaned back in her seat while thinking about Ben. She had only known him for three days, but during that time she had found that he liked classical music and old movies. This was something they had in common. Also, he loved to eat out at restaurants—as a bachelor he rarely ate at home, besides, as he put it, 'why eat at home when you can eat out for nearly the same price and let them do the work.' And when he had time he liked to read novels, but he had stated that he rarely had time for that, except when he went on vacation, which was very seldom.

Among his other qualities, the two that Lyil liked most was his confidence—something he was good at hiding—something which she was sure most people never realized. Inside his mind he was a Titan. And two, she had finally found a man who felt he didn't need to play games. He was who he was and that was good enough for him. He wasn't going to pretend he was something that he wasn't.

She was thinking about their last kiss when Rand stepped into the box and sat down beside Tam. He slid his sword case under the three seats that he, Tam, and Lyil were sitting in. "Well my sweetheart, what did you think?"

"You were great!" Tam leaned over and gave him a kiss, and then patted his cheek.

He smiled broadly. "Did you see all the people? The place was more than half full. And you know what that means."

Tam laughed in her husky voice. "It means tomorrow morning I'm going to pick up your check, and we're going to pay off our bills. And next year you're going to practice everyday, and make it to the fifth round, and then it's money in the bank and retirement on the horizon."

Rand leaned forward. He looked around Tam, and said, "I'm sorry. In all the excitement I forgot to say 'hello.'"

"Hello Rand," returned Lyil with a pleasant smile.

Rand leaned back in his seat. "About the upcoming match between Xil and Ben Hillar"

Tam put her hand on Rand's arm. "Actually, I just found out that the match between Xil and Ben Hillar is the match Lyil wants to watch, which means we can stay here."

"Stay here? Hey, that's great. I'll get us a refreshment. Would you ladies like a mead?"

"Sounds good," said Tam.

"Fine," said Lyil. She pushed her long red hair over her shoulders. She liked Tarmorian mead. It had a slightly distinct, bitter taste, but, nevertheless, was pleasing to the palate.

Rand pushed himself up from his seat and walked up the isle.

Usually all the spectators would file out after a match, but this time most of them had stayed—even though it was a half hour wait. Obviously they had purchased a ticket for Ben's match, too. The ushers were busy collecting tickets. And more people were starting to file in.

Just then an usher walked up the steps and stopped in front of the box in which Tam and Lyil were sitting.. "I'm sorry," he said with a tone of indifference. "You'll have to leave now."

Tam looked him up and down. You seem like a nice young man—just doing your job. And since it's on the spur of the moment, I'm sure you haven't been informed. So, let me introduce you to Lyil Zornburst. She has a friend competing in the next match, and that means we can stay here without purchasing a ticket."

"A friend?" asked the usher.

"Yes," said Lyil. "Ben Hillar."

"Professor Hillar is a friend of yours?" An expression of doubt crossed his face. "He didn't report any friends or family."

Tam looked up at the young man. "Like I said, we decided at the last moment to come to the match."

"I see. . . . But you realize I have to check on this?"

Lyil knew it was a matter of procedure. "Of course, I understand," she replied. She didn't take it personally. The usher hurried away.

Chapter Eight

The private locker room, in which Ben would be waiting for the announcement of his match, was located on the ground floor near the back of the swording complex. It was situated so the top swords could gain entrance and avoid the masses of people waiting for autographs.

The athletic director was escorting Ben to the locker room when he said, "It's an honor to meet you, Grand Master Ben Hillar." He nodded his head as if showing respect. "I have followed your career since you became Grand Master of Cyton. I knew then that anybody winning that title at such a young age was bound for greater titles. I might add, I made quite a lot of money off my speculations; especially when you came in third at the Galactic Games," he suddenly paused, and then said, "but that's of the least importance," as if he realized he shouldn't be wasting Ben's time with such trivia, and then he said, "What you're going to find in the Outer City is that the Tarmorians give Grand Master's preferential treatment.

"When it's time for you to enter the arena we will send a herald. It is our custom, as a show of respect, that a Grand Master be announced before he or she enters." The director touched the palm lock to the locker room and the door slid open.

As he stepped through the doorway Ben turned his head from side to side looking at the room, then said, "Well, sir, I thank you for your compliments and your hospitality."

The director stepped into the room behind him. "Also," he continued. "during the tournament, the city council is happy to comp all your meals, and all your friends' and family's meals." He pointed at a table against the far wall. "There are three top quality swords for you to choose from."

Ben looked at the swords and nodded.

The director pointed at a console on the sidewall to the right. "If you need anything just contact us on the viewer."

Again Ben nodded.

The director looked around making sure everything was in order. "Well, I guess that's it. Good luck - I'm sure you won't need it. In fact I'm so sure that I've placed a large bet on you winning the tournament." He smiled as if there was no doubt he was going to win his wager. He turned and disappeared through the door.

Ben walked over to the juice bar and poured himself a cup of juice, then took a drink and set the cup on the table next to the bar. He scrutinized the swords on the other side of the room. *Here I am*, he thought. *It's funny how life can take a person in different directions—like a road with many turns going this way and that, sometimes fast and sometimes slow, sometimes with dead ends and sometimes infinitely straight.*

And now his road had brought him to the Outer City of Galactus VII. In spite of his busy work schedule over the years—training for the games, working for his PhD, working on archeological digs, deciphering ancient text, and avoiding, as much as possible, the politics of his job at the University, he was finally going to compete in a Tarmorian tournament.

Swording in one of these tournaments was a childhood dream come true, but Ben never thought he would be fulfilling it as a Grand Master, and especially not while he was in the middle of an expedition.

The dream had started with his father.

Henison Hillar, had originally come from a planet where swording was the main sport. He had competed for many years, but was only able to gain "B" status as a swordsman. Above that was "A" status, Expert status, Master status, and then Grand Master Status, and, of course, there was Grand Master of the Galaxy status which could only be gained by competing and placing in the top five at the Galactic Games. It had been Henison's goal to go higher than B status, but his talent was lacking.

Later, Henison, with his wife and two children, relocated to Cyton, and though swording was not the main planet sport, he encouraged both of his sons to become swordsmen.

As a child, and when he could barely walk, Ben had a sword put in his hand. At first it was just a toy—something to whip his teddy bear with, but as he got older, it became more of a study. By the time he reached nine, Ben was practicing two hours a day with one day off out of every six.

His brother lost interest at the age of ten, and wasn't forced to continue in the sport.

But Ben kept at it because he liked it, and finally came the day, at the age of 12, when he, the student, knew more than the teacher, his father. So began the tutors. By the time he was 18, they knew he had a special gift for swording.

In his nineteenth year he became the champion of Cyton, the youngest ever to accomplish this feat. And he had successfully defended his title every year since.

Ben walked over to the table and picked up a sword. He whipped it through the air a couple of times. It made a whistling noise.

The sword was three edged with a triangular shape to the shaft, about three quarters of an inch in diameter at the hilt. Each edge was dulled for tournament competition, and there was a little metal ball on the end where the point should have been.

He grabbed the end and flexed the shaft. It had a good feel. The director said they were top quality swords, and he was right.

He whipped it through the air a couple more times. Would this be a tough match? He didn't think so.

He had never heard of Xil, the man he would be dueling in a few minutes. He therefore didn't expect it would take him more than a minute or two to finish the match. It could last longer, but Xil hadn't had enough experience to gain a reputation. Still, Ben knew better than to underestimate an opponent.

He walked back and sat on a form-fitting couch in front of the viewer. He thought about watching a program, but quickly dismissed the idea with the thought that most dramas were boring and most comedies weren't funny.

Swording, Archaeology and the study of Earth, had been his whole life. It was interesting that the two, for

a short time, were about to become intertwined.

When he thought about it, he remembered he first became interested in Earth when he found out it was untouched territory, meaning that no other archaeologists or archaeohistorians had conducted any digs on this planet. As an undergrad Ben wondered why and asked one of his professors. It seems there are numerous lost civilizations and ruins of fallen empires throughout the Galaxy, enough to keep scientists busy for thousands of years. Many of them were untouched territory.

It occurred to Ben that he could head up his own dig, and because of the myth of the Aeolian Master he would have no trouble obtaining the necessary grants to pay for the expedition. After all not only scientists, but the lay people would be interested to know how the myth started and how much truth there was behind it.

After Ben finished the projects and research papers he needed for his PhD, and after he graduated, he started putting in the time and energy to organize the digs on Earth.

Is gaining a government grant a slow process? Hell yes. It took him three years to obtain the money from the committee for government sponsored programs, to purchase the equipment and the spaceship, and to recruit the personnel needed for the trip. Plus Ben this included three scientists—Dr. Mus Suzn an archaeologist with a minor in linguistics, Dr. May a structural engineer with a minor in climatology, and Dr. Jons an anthropologist with a minor in multicultural psychology. Ben chose Dr. Jons because, unlike the rest of them, he had been on three expeditions, and Ben was sure they would need his experience. There were thirty-three other men and women. These included pilots, navigators, electronic and computer technicians, cooks, laborers, and others.

Ben never realized it would take so much effort to get it together. But finally they were ready, and he could remember when they dropped out of hyperspace—always a queasy feeling, and not fun, to say the least. He made his way to the viewing room and sat down at the control station. He manipulated the necessary knobs and buttons and was suddenly looking down at earth in all its glory with blue oceans, white clouds, and brown continents. Even though the planet was beautiful, he knew it had never been repopulated because of the winds.

Mus Suzn and the other two scientists joined him and were watching as he increased the magnification of the telrom viewer. The image zoomed in and they were suddenly looking at a raging ocean. Waves taller than a ten story building were throwing mist high into the blue sky, and then crashing down as others rose up to take their place.

“Quite a storm,” said Dr. Suzn.

“Yeah,” agreed Ben. He turned a dial and moved the view in the screen to the right until he came to a land mass. The wind seemed to be moving across the plains with hurricane force. The dust was thick with debris.

“The weather on this planet seems to be quite severe,” said Dr. Suzn.

Without answering Ben pushed a button and zoomed out until the screen was filled with a picture of the earth. “Is that unusual?” asked Ben. “I count twenty-seven swirling cloud patterns.” He turned to Dr. May, “What do you make of it?”

“Hurricanes.”

“Is that possible?”

Dr. May stood up, walked a few feet closer to the viewing screen, and scrutinized the cloud patterns for a few moments, then he said, “No. I’ve never seen nor heard of any planets with this many hurricane formations existing simultaneously.” With a puzzled look on his face he returned to his chair and sat down.

Ben zoomed in on one of the continents and began a sweeping side to side search. After an hour and fifteen minutes Dr. Suzn said, “Not only are there no buildings standing anywhere on the planet, there are no trees.”

“We’ll have to cancel all plans for picnics,” said Ben. He continued to watch the hurricanes. “I see no foliage—anywhere. What could cause such a phenomenon?”

“Continual pounding of hurricanes could destroy the trees and keep them from growing back, but as I said before, I’ve never heard of nor seen so many hurricanes occurring at the same time.”

“Will it be safe to land?” Ben was beginning to think there would be no exploration of the Earth

But Dr. May thought it was still possible. “We can land in an area where there is no hurricane, and while performing our dig we’ll have several of the ship’s personnel monitoring the weather patterns. If they detect a hurricane coming our way, we’ll abandon the campsite, until it passes, then we’ll land and continue with our exploration.”

“We’ll be able to leave in time?” asked Ben.

“Yes. They don’t move that fast. If one turns and is headed our way, we’ll have plenty of time to load the equipment and vacate.”

After another hour the survey of Earth from space revealed several large mounds, two on one continent and

one on another. They appeared to be artificial. They were too symmetrical and had shapes which indicated they had once been buildings.

Ben pushed a button and the picture on the screen raced across the continent, across another raging ocean and to the middle of another continent. It zoomed in until a large mound filled the screen. "Does everyone agree this is where we should start our dig?"

"The symmetrical shape of it indicates there is an artificial structure beneath it—probably a building," said Dr. Suzn.

The other scientists nodded their heads.

"Good," said Ben. "We'll examine it with the planet analyzer, and if we find an artificial structure, then that's where we'll begin. Of course, we'll wait until that hurricane passes out of the region."

"Of course," said Dr. May.

A day and a half later the hurricane was gone, and they landed next to the mound. The ramp slid to the ground, and ship's personnel started unloading equipment.

The events of the expedition had gone smoothly to this point, and it seemed to Ben that success was imminent. He stood looking up at the mound. It was five stories high, but the analyzer showed that it had been taller before it collapsed. The top two stories of the building had been had been ripped off and crushed. They were lying in a smaller mound next to the larger one. There was no doubt that a hurricane had something to do with the destruction.

Dr. May was standing next to Ben. "We have three men watching the weather equipment," he said. "If there's any sign of a hurricane coming our way, they'll immediately notify us, and at the same time the ship's engines will be started and preparations to evacuate will begin."

"Good," said Ben.

Just then Dr. Suzn and Dr. Jons joined them.

They stood staring at the structure, then Dr. Suzn said, "It's rare that a planet will lose its entire intelligent population. The disaster or the holocaust would have to be so extreme and so complete as to leave no one living on the planet—either they're killed, or they flee for their lives. In the entire history of the Galactic Federation it has only happened once and now with Earth it has happened twice, but with Earth it has been very mysterious as to the manner in which the holocaust occurred. There was a nuclear war, yes, but that wasn't enough to destroy all human life. No. And now I'm beginning to think it was the winds of hurricane force that has decimated most of the life on this planet, and has sent the survivors racing to once again colonize Ar. I think we're seeing the origins of the Aeolian Master myth—he was, after all, the God of the winds."

"That's right," said Dr. Jons. "And now we know why the myth prevailed and became readily known throughout the Galaxy. It takes a horrendous event to continuously circulate the story to other cultures on other planets."

Ben started toward the mound. "The equipment is in place. Let's get started."

It took a day to burrow a hole through the dirt, and then to cut a hole through the bottom wall of the structure. Once they entered they found they had struck it rich. The building had once been a library.

"This couldn't have turned out better if we had planned it," said Dr. Suzn.

Ben and the other scientists spent nearly two months loading material from the building onto the spaceship. There was so much material it became a madhouse as loading machines constantly traveled back and forth from the ship to the library.

The archaeological finds included books, magazines, microfiche, computer discs and motion picture film. Much of the records had been destroyed with the decaying of time, but there was still enough intact that they would be busy for years deciphering and recording their findings.

They finally decided they had enough, and they were scheduled to leave the next day.

Ben was standing on the bridge watching the viewer screen. Dr. Suzn was standing beside him, and they could see Dr. Jons walking toward the ship. Dr. May was still in the building. At the last moment he decided to take some of the concrete and a section of the metal girding from the structure of the building back to the university so he could study the molecular configurations of the material.

Suddenly, Clifford, one of the men at the weather monitoring station, yelled out, "What the hell!?" He watched his screen for a moment, then yelled again, "A hurricane just came out of nowhere. It's a quarter of a mile away, and it's coming toward us—fast!"

"Computer," commanded Ben. "Open communications with Dr. May."

"Yes, Dr. Hillar," said the computer in a soft feminine voice.

"This is Dr. May."

"Get the hell out of there. A hurricane is coming."

"Just give me a moment. I'm almost finished."

"You don't have a moment! Get the hell out of there!"

"Just a couple of minutes," said Dr. May. "Hurricanes take at least two days," and he switched off before Ben had a chance to explain that this one originated no more than a quarter of a mile away.

"Damn," said Ben. He turned and ran for the door.

"Where are you going!?" Dr. Suzn yelled after Ben.

He was already to the doorway and the door was sliding open when he growled out, "I have to get May."

"You don't have time!" yelled Clifford. "It'll be here in less than five minutes."

Ben ignored him and ran through the doorway, down the passageway, through another doorway, down three flights of stairs, down another passageway, and finally made it to the ramp. He ran as fast as his legs would take him. He ran across the field and entered the building cursing May as he went, and not being kind to his mother's image either. He ran down a hallway turned left and ran another sixty feet, turned left again, and finally he could see Dr. May and three other men about twenty feet down the corridor.

A three foot length of the steel girder had been cut and was lying on floor. Dr. May had just finished cutting a piece of concrete out of the wall.

Ben ran down the hall, and with a grunt tried to pick up the steel girder. It never occurred to him it would be so heavy. He pointed at Jask, one of the laborers, and indicated the other end of the girder. When they had it lifted, he said, "Let's go!" The hurricane's coming, and it's only three minutes away."

"Three minutes. That's impossible," said Dr. May.

"I'm telling you it's three minutes away." Ben started down the hall carrying one end of the girder. Then he and the other man started trotting in rhythm. They exited the library and started across the field. Just then, Dr. May, holding a piece of concrete in his hand, and the other two laborers passed them running for the ship.

The wind was blowing and stirring up the dust. Ben had just decided to drop the girder and run for the ship when a gale-force wind struck. He quickly found out the heavy, steel girder was his friend. Dr. May and the other two men were swept off their feet and disappeared into a cloud of dust. Ben was sure they were screaming as they went, but he never heard it over the howling of the wind.

The storm was slapping furiously at Ben and Jask, but the girder was acting as an anchor.

"Let's go faster," yelled Ben over the noise of the wind. "The hurricane will be here in less than a minute.

They made it up the ramp and fell into the corridor dropping the steel girder to the floor.

"Computer!" yelled Ben. "Have the pilot lift off."

"Yes, Ben" said the soft, feminine voice.

The ramp slid into the ship, and then the ship rose quickly, and just in time to avoid the hurricane. They were tossed about for a few minutes, but the ship finally made it into the upper atmosphere without further incident.

Ben knew it wasn't uncommon for scientists, especially archaeologists, to be killed when working on a foreign planet, but the death of Dr. May and the other two men seemed totally unnecessary. Ben wanted to blame himself for their deaths, but Dr. Suzn wouldn't have it. She convinced him if Dr. May had run out of the library when they contacted him, everyone would have been safe.

Ben grumbled something about the responsibility of the team leader, which meant he still felt somewhat accountable.

After this incident all future expeditions to Earth were cancelled, except for two digs which were conducted from space. The problem with this type of exploration is the cost. Everything had to be done with robotics including the flight to the planet and the flight back. Finally there were no more digs.

But Ben had enough from these three digs to keep him and Dr. Suzn busy for a long time.

After deciphering a pamphlet they found near the front doors of the library they discovered that the library, which had managed to stand against the holocaust, or at least preserve a lot of the information, was located in a place once known as "Kansas City, Kansas, U.S.A."

Of the many books recovered from this library, Ben translated one that was entitled, "Webster's Intercollegiate Dictionary." Quite a bit of it had been destroyed through the ages of time, and a lot of the words were difficult to read, but while he was deciphering the "F's" he found the word "fencing." Most of the definition was missing, but when translating it he found the word "sport," which was confusing since the word above it, "fence" was defined as a vertical structure built to keep people or animals in or out of a particular

location. So, what did that have to do with a sport? It wasn't until he was translating an "Encyclopedia" that he discovered fencing meant the same as swording. (It would probably never be known why the English words "fence" and "fencing" defined totally different concepts.)

After translating and studying the "Encyclopedia" it became apparent to Ben that swording (fencing) on ancient Earth had defensive tactics, which made it somewhat different than present day swording in the Galactic Empire. On Earth many of the rounds of each match were very quick in duration, lasting oftentimes only a few seconds. But in the Empire, because of the defensive tactics developed through the centuries, matches would most often last all three rounds for the entire twenty-four minutes. The winner would be declared by the most points scored.

Ben wondered what it would be like to be transported back to Ancient Earth and to compete in one of their fencing tournaments; probably something like a jet versus a biplane, or like Ben squashing a bug under the heel of his boot.

He rose from the couch, walked back to the table and picked up a sword.

As he made a thrust with the sword the door slid open and an usher walked in. "Excuse me Grand Master." He said, and then waited for Ben to answer.

Ben straightened up. "What can I do for you?"

"There's a lady with some people sitting in your box. She says she's a friend."

"And her name?"

"Her name is Lyil Zornburst, and I can tell she's G-staff by the clothes she's wearing."

Ben needed no time to think it over, and he was happy to hear she had decided to come early. "Please inform her that she and her friends are welcome to watch from my box."

"Thank you Grand Master." The usher walked out.

Five minutes later the door slid open again and the Herald, in his lively, colored clothes, stepped into the room. "It's time for your match, Grand Master."

"Thank you," said Ben.

They exited with the Herald leading the way.

Ben was still wondering why there were so many hurricanes on Earth and how the atmospheric conditions could create them so quickly. The late Dr. May had said it was impossible.

Chapter Nine

It was close to start time and people were still filing in. The box seats had long since been occupied. The city council members and their families had taken up five sections of the box seating shortly after Rand's match ended, and other dignitaries and celebrities were seated in the remainder of them.

The crowd was becoming restless. The combined noise of loud talking, yelling, and laughter was beginning to sound like the roaring of a pride of Chaision lions smelling the blood and seeking the kill. It wasn't something Lyil had ever experienced in her new-found spectator sport, as she had never been to a match with this many spectators.

Rand finally returned. He handed a mead to Lyil and then one to Tam as he sat down. "You should see the lines out there. Horrendous is the only word I can think of." He leaned back in his seat and took a drink.

The names and scores on the scoreboard were cleared away leaving a blank array of red lights. "There goes my name," said Rand. The names of the next two contestants appeared: Ben Hillar vs. Xil Kilter.

"I've never seen so many people at one of these matches," said Lyil in a slightly awed voice. "There must be more than a hundred thousand spectators, and they all seem so anxious as if they were waiting for the match of the century."

Tam said, "That's because you weren't here last year when the man who placed number eleven in the Galactic Games was in the tournament."

"You know I had to work or I would have been here."

"I know, but it's always like this for those who place in the Galactic Games."

This pleased Lyil. "It'll be fun to watch Ben compete against a swordsman who has placed in the Galactic Games," she said. "I'm glad I took the time." Lyil figured it was likely Ben wouldn't win, but if he did or didn't, it would be exciting to watch.

The people kept filing in. And Lyil could see very few empty seats. The spectators were beginning to sit in the aisles or were standing behind the last row in each tier. The noise was becoming louder as the crowd grew.

Just then a man stepped into their box.

Rand looked up, and then stood up. "Dr. -ejjon," he said putting forth his hand to be shaken. "It's good to see you."

"Hello Rand," said the new comer as he grabbed the outstretched hand and shook it. He looked down at Tam. "Hello Tam," he said. He shook her hand. And then he looked at Lyil, smiled, but said nothing.

Rand came to his rescue. "Dr. -ejjon let me introduce you to Lyil Zornburst—a most trusted friend."

"Good to meet you," he said and bent over to shake her hand.

"A pleasure," responded Lyil. "It's always nice to meet a famous man." Lyil noticed that he was different from most Tarmorian men in that he was small and slender, other than that he was typical in that he had brown skin, black hair, brown eyes, and that deep Tarmorian voice. He was dressed in upper class attire.

Dr. -ejjon laughed amiably. "By famous, I hope you mean in a good way."

"Of course," said Lyil. "I love your comic books."

"That's wonderful," Ros said with an air of honest relief. "I was afraid you might be offended by them."

"Not at all. I find some of the episodes quite humorous, and well written with a plot that keeps me interested."

"Thank you. That is always my goal." He stepped back so as not to crowd them. "I noticed yours is the only box left with some empty seats, and since I volunteered to give up my seat for the Mayor's daughter—who rarely comes to a swording event, I . . ."

"My dear Dr. -ejjon," interrupted Rand. "Please say no more. Come and join us."

"Thank you. It's most kind of you." He walked down the row until he came to the next empty seat, which was next to Lyil's. He sat down. "How were you able to commandeer one of these boxes?" he asked.

Lyil swept her red hair off her shoulders with a dignified, graceful motion of her hands. "Dr. Hillar is a guest of the Galaef's, and I've been showing him around the city." She looked at Ben in her mind's eye. She had been telling herself that he was just a friend, but Mandril was probably right when she said Lyil was fooling herself. Even so, it didn't make sense that she could be attracted to a man she had met only three days ago?

"It's fortunate," said Ros, "that you've gotten to know Professor Hillar."

"Most fortunate," agreed Rand. "It's not that often we get to watch a Grand Master in one of our tournaments, let alone two of them."

Lyil started to ask about the two Grand Masters, when one of the competitors, in the upcoming match, emerged from the tunnel.

Tam pointed. "Look, is that Ben?" She asked in her husky voice.

"You're trying to be funny," said Lyil in an irritated tone. "But it's not working." Lyil, knowing that the top seeded swordsman always came in last, was quick to realize that Ben was the Grand Master.

Just then a herald appeared in the tunnel at the other end of the arena. "And now, Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you Grand Master of the Galaxy, Professor Ben Hillar." The microphone around his neck amplified his voice throughout the stadium echoing off the walls.

The entire audience rose in a standing ovation. They cheered, clapped, and stomped their feet as Ben walked out of the tunnel.

Not expecting this type of an ovation for a Grand Master, Lyil was probably the last one on her feet. "Why didn't you tell me he placed in the Galactic Games?" she shouted.

Tam shouted back. "Why don't you keep up with the results? Or why didn't you read his personal file? You're G-staff. You have access to that information."

"Since I was going out with him, I believed I'd be taking unfair advantage."

"Silly Girl."

Feeling silly was something Lyil hadn't experienced since she was a young girl in pre-college school on her home planet, and she certainly didn't feel silly now, however it suddenly occurred to her that in her sense of fairness toward Ben she had violated her job description. Being uniformed was not in the best interest of the Galaef. She was beginning to see that she had let her feelings for Ben, however slight they were, interfere with her duties as a personal interviewer and as a member of the "G Staff. She would never let it happen again.

After a minute of a standing ovation, the spectators started sitting down and the noise subsided.

Not looking at his files might not have been the right thing to do, nevertheless Lyil was glad she hadn't checked Ben's personal file. There was no question now that she liked him for who he was and not for his

fame.

She sat down as Ben stepped onto the swording platform. He whipped his sword in the air a couple of times, and then waited for the buzzer. He didn't appear nervous, but rather, confident.

His muscles rippled under the swording body suit, and his broad shoulders stood out in contrast to Xil's physique. Ben's build was not typical of the athletes in this sport. Because of his muscular build he appeared to lack the agility of the slender swordsman. This was another reason Lyil had not suspected Ben's status as a Grand Master Swordsman.

The buzzer sounded, and as the match began Lyil noted that Ben's quickness and finesse more than compensated for his broad shoulders and stout chest.

Xil had made it to the fourth round of this tournament, which meant he was no slouch, but against Ben he not only looked like a beginner, but also confused. All of Ben's feints, thrusts, and parries were deft and accurate. Xil was on the defensive immediately and was continually backing away with little in the way of offensive moves.

The match lasted less than a minute. Ben's point found Xil's chest and the electronic sensors in his body suit registered 'kill' on the scoreboard. A buzzer sounded and the match was over.

It appeared there were very few who thought it would last longer than the first round, or even longer than one minute. The crowd jumped up and started cheering. Some of them were waving tickets in the air. They had obviously wagered on a short match, and now, those who wagered most accurately, within the fifteen-second window, and on the number of thrusts, feints, parries, and rare maneuvers would be the big winners. It was a good time for the Tarmorians. They got to watch a Grand Master and win money too.

After the cheering died down, the audience started filing out, hurrying off to the wagering booths. The stadium was emptying quickly.

Still thinking about the match, which had just ended, Lyil sat down and looked at Tam. "In the two nights that I've been out with Ben I hadn't noticed that he was left handed."

Rand leaned forward. "He's not," he said. "He's right handed, but when it comes to swording he's ambidextrous. He uses either hand equally well. Not even the number one Grand Master can use both hands as well as Ben Hillar. The odds makers are saying, in two years, when the Galactic Games are once again conducted, Ben Hillar will become the next number one Grand Master."

"What is he now?" asked Lyil. She didn't want to keep showing her ignorance, but curiosity got the best of her.

Rand stood up indicating that he was ready to leave. "He placed number three in the games," he said looking down at Lyil. "And I'm sure that he will eventually be known as the greatest swordsman of all time."

Lyil started musing. "If he's that good, then he'll probably win the tournament."

"I'm sure he will," said Rand. He looked thoughtful for a moment. "The odds makers are saying he will, but the number two Grand Master is also in the tournament."

"The man who placed second in the Galactic Games? And you think Ben will win?"

"Yes," said Rand. "But . . . , well, you would have to have seen the match Ben Hillar lost to him at the Galactic Games. Ben won the first two rounds, and it looked like he was going to win the match easily. Then Zirnen pulled a trick out of the books which Ben Hillar had never seen. From the ground, lying on his back, he thrust his sword up under Ben Hillar's left arm and into the ribcage. He had obviously been saving this trick for a time when he was desperate—about to lose the match.

"Now the odds makers assume he's out of tricks and won't beat Ben again."

Tam tapped her foot a couple of times. "Excuse me for changing the subject, but don't you think Ben will want to get together with you?"

"Of course," replied Lyil. "He knows I'm here, since the usher told him I was using his box seats."

"It doesn't matter that he knows you're here. You better get down to his locker room. If he comes up here he'll be mobbed by the throngs."

"I didn't know we were allowed in the back."

"Of course you are. He's a friend of yours."

"What about you?"

"We'll have a bite of lunch and meet you back here about 5:30 for Ben's next match."

Lyil asked an usher for directions.

Chapter Ten

The balled point of Len's sword was quickly piercing the air on its way to Ben's chest, which, if it found its mark would end the match, but Ben easily stepped back and parried the thrust. Ben feinted with his sword moving forward with his right hand, but then quickly changed the sword from his right hand to his left and thrust toward Len's chest. Len parried the thrust but the sudden changing of hands threw him off balance, which gave Ben the opening he was looking for. He changed the sword back into his right hand and made a thrust, which Len could not defend. The balled point of Ben's sword was rammed into Len's chest and the kill buzzer sang out for all the audience to hear.

The match was over in two minutes and thirty-two seconds.

Again the Tarmorian crowd was appreciative of watching Grand Master Ben Hillar perform feats with the sword that few men in the galaxy could do. They applauded for several minutes before leaving to go to the wagering booths or to go about their business.

Ben's opponent, the young Tarmorian, Len, was sitting on his stool in a slouched position on the other side of the sparring mat. Obviously he was dejected over the loss of the match, but Ben could tell he had a natural talent, which would eventually win tournaments.

Ben walked over to him. "You gave a fine performance," he said. "I can tell you're going to go a long way in the art of swording."

Len looked up and smiled. "Thank you," he said.

"I look forward to seeing you again," said Ben. He wished him luck in the next tournament, and then headed for the private locker room.

Later, after Ben had showered, he met Lyil, Tam, and Rand in the outside lobby, and the four of them went to an elegant restaurant at one of the luxury hotels. Seven armed guards ushered them through the main area of the hotel keeping the patrons at a distance as they made their way to the elevators. Many of the Tarmorians, seeing who it was, stopped what they were doing and applauded, even some of the tourists, who recognized Ben, applauded.

Because of Ben's celebrity status, a private, upstairs dining room with a balcony overlooking a colorful fountain and a green plush garden had been reserved for him and his guests. Little birds flitted from tree to tree singing melodious songs. Glow flies winked their lights off and on giving the appearance of twinkling stars inside the lush green. Misters periodically sent a fine spray of moisture giving a coolness to the air.

As the four of them sat down Ben noticed there were five settings, and wondered if he had missed something. He looked at Lyil and nodded his head toward the extra plate.

"Very shortly there'll be one more joining us," she said answering his look of inquiry. "Like you, he's well known among the Tarmorians and on other planets as well. We invited him because he said he would very much like to meet you. And I was sure you wouldn't mind."

"Of course not," said Ben.

Tam tapped her spoon on the table. "He better get here soon. I'm hungry. And I hear the food in this place is great."

Rand unfolded his napkin and neatly laid it on his lap. "My dear," he said looking at Tam, "if you were not hungry, I would be surprised."

Just then the door opened and a small Tarmorian man walked into the room. Ben and Rand stood up. "This is Dr. Ros-ejjon," said Rand introducing them.

Ben shook his hand, and they sat down.

"Now this is ironic," said Ben thinking it might be an understatement. "Dr. Ros-ejjon, the extremely successful writer and publisher of the satirical and political comic book, The 'Adventures of Em and Nebbie,—distributed and sold on many of the planets throughout the Galaxy. It's partly because of this comic book that I've had such a hard time convincing people my research is worthwhile."

"My apologies," said Dr. -ejjon. "But on the other hand and quite to the contrary it's because of your research and the Galaef's interest in it that the sale of my comic book has nearly doubled in the last month."

"You're welcome," said Ben with a smile. And I must admit, it appears the comic books haven't had a negative impact on the Galaef, because here I am about to embark on an archaeological dig looking for the Aeolian Master, the God of the winds—better known as 'Em.'" "And since we're both happy with the outcome, then tonight should be a night of celebration." Ben motioned for the waiter.

"Yes sir?"

"Your best wine - all around."

"Yes sir." The waiter hurried away.

"So tell me Dr. -ejjon, how is it you get away with such slanderous political satire?" But before Dr. -ejjon could answer, Ben continued with, "In the last issue I remember Em was talking to Nebbie and said something like, 'We must act quickly, Nebbie.'" Ben was mimicking the voice of a hero. "'The Galaef has gotten us into a terrible mess, and if we don't do something quickly, the Galaxy will be doomed!'"

"Please," said Dr. -ejjon, "call me Ros." And then while looking at Ben he nodded toward Lyil. "And if you want to know why the Galaef hasn't shut me down, Ms. Zornburst would know better than me."

"Let's all go on a first name basis," said Lyil smiling pleasantly. "And as far as your comic book goes, my source at the top says the Galaef has decided to turn a blind eye and a deaf ear because he sees no danger in your books."

The waiter came with several bottles of wine and started pouring. After getting their dinner orders he hurried away.

While the waiter had been pouring, Ros said, "And it's lucky for me the Galaef sees no harm in my comic books. My bank account is nothing but several figures and a long line of zeros. And I love it."

Ben couldn't tell if Tam giggled and Rand laughed because of envy or jealousy.

"We read every new issue," said Tam. "Don't we honey?"

"Yes we do, and it's obvious that Ben does too. But maybe not with as much enthusiasm."

"Since my research deals in the myth of the Aeolian Master, I feel a need to keep abreast of what others are saying and thinking about him, even if it's in a comic book."

Under the table where no one could see, Lyil put her hand on Ben's leg. "Isn't it nice that you get to go on a dig looking for Em?" she asked.

"I think so," said Ros. "As long as we keep it in the news my comic books are going to sell like hotcakes."

Ben put his hand on Lyil's under the table and raised an eyebrow toward Ros. "Where did you learn that little piece of phraseology?"

"What? . . . 'sell like hotcakes?'" Ros looked serious. "I make monthly trips to the library and pay good sums of money for long range communications just so I can keep up on everything you translate from the Earth digs. One of the reasons I started the Em comics is because I have always had a fascination with the Aeolian Master myth. And I, like you, have always thought there was more to it than just an ancient Earth fairytale." He paused and then said, "Have you ever thought that it might partially be because of my comic book that the Galaef took an interest in your research?"

Ben nodded slightly. "It crossed my mind."

This wasn't enough for Ros. "You remember in the last issue when Em says to Nebbie, 'And the Galaef used to think I was just a myth. So much for that. Now, here I am to save the Universe?'"

"I remember that," said Tam.

But Ros was still looking at Ben. "I've been making these subtle comments in my comic books for years, and it's these phrases that get into people's subconscious minds. It's possible that this is one of the reasons people are hoping your research will be successful—even though we know you will never find an actual man. And that's why my comic books are selling through the roof."

"Like I said, 'It crossed my mind.'"

Two waiters came in with trays of food and started setting plates before Ben and his guests. When they finished, as was customary for waiters waiting on dignitaries, they stepped to the corners of the room to await further requests.

An awkward silence started to fall over the group, but Tam, being an outgoing Tarmorian, who had just finished her third glass of wine, would have none of that. She bit into a most scrumptious bite of fish brought in fresh from the Gorian Sea and said to Ros, "Lyil is G-staff."

"Which is quite obvious," replied Ros who was a typical Tarmorian - oftentimes lacking politeness.

"Obvious?"

"Of course. She has a phasor strapped to her hip, and since only G-staff are allowed to wear phasors on Galactus, I knew instantly she was G-staff."

Tam giggled in her deep Tarmorian voice, which made it sound more like the intermittent hiccups of a Chaision lion. "That may be true, but did you know that she is the personal interviewer for Thorne?"

Since coming to Galactus and intermingling with the Tarmorians Ben came to realize that the Tarmorians, at

least all the Tarmorians he had met so far, didn't put a lot of effort into learning Komotu. They spoke very guttural and with a thick tongue. They left out words or pronounced words wrong and because of this it was sometimes difficult to understand what they were saying. Now that Tam had consumed nearly a full bottle of wine it was becoming even more difficult to understand what she was saying.

But Ros understood what she said. His merriment turned into a frown, and then he seemingly changed the subject. "Have you heard of the Himmian House?" he asked looking at Ben.

"Now who's obvious?" asked Tam getting her logic turned around. "Everyone knows about the Himmian House," she slurred.

Because Ros was the exception and spoke the most articulate Komotu Ben had ever heard, he got the gist of Tam's reply. "Not everyone," Ben returned.

She took another bite of fish and between munches she said, "Well, everyone except you off-worlders."

Ben didn't appreciate nor did he understand her munching, slurring, broken Komotu. "Would you mind repeating that?" he asked.

"What she's saying," said Rand coming to his wife's defense, "is that all the Tarmorians know about the Himmian House. But it's not something we usually discuss with off-worlders."

"That's true," continued Ros, "but under these circumstances I feel it's not only 'okay,' but also necessary that we talk about it tonight." He paused and looked at Ben and Lyil. "But I must swear you to secrecy."

Ben kept eating, and Lyil was confused about this sudden talk of the Himmian House. Neither of them said anything.

"Well?" asked Ros, "will you promise not to talk about this to anyone?"

"I promise," said Lyil.

Ben thought the secrecy thing sounded a bit childish, but he said, "Sure, why not?"

"We don't discuss this with off-worlders because we don't know who we can trust. The entire situation smacks of political intrigue, and we're not sure how far up it goes, meaning we don't know if the Galaef is involved."

Lyil was immediately skeptical. "Let me assure you, the Galaef is not involved in any political intrigue. My best friend is his personal interviewer, and we know everything that goes on with the Galaef, and even if we didn't, he would not be part of any subterfuge. Why should he when he's already at the top?"

"That may be true," replied Ros. "But before you make up your mind, let me tell you about the Himmian House."

"Okay," said Lyil, "tell us."

"It was about five years ago when a family bought and moved into a house in the Himmian section of town—that's a middle class tract on the western edge. When they moved in we immediately knew they weren't Tarmorians, even though they pretended to be."

"Pretending? How do you know they were pretending?" asked Lyil.

"To this day, they're still pretending. A Tarmorian always knows another Tarmorian. It's like a sixth sense. Or maybe it's because our mannerisms cannot be skillfully duplicated."

"That is, indeed, a fact," said Rand. "These people look like us with their black hair, brown eyes, brown skin, even their facial features, but in spite of their elaborate disguises we can tell they aren't Tarmorians. And what's insidious about the whole affair is they don't know that we know it's all a farce."

Ros gave Rand a strange look, started to say something and then changed his mind.

"So now you're going to tell us what's behind the pretense—what they have to gain," said Ben.

"That's not quite accurate," said Rand drawing it out. "We have yet to discover why they're doing it."

"Our secret police have been keeping them under surveillance for the past five years," said Ros. "In addition to that a group of private citizens have been keeping an eye on them, also, but to no avail. The Himmian House remains a mystery."

"Why haven't I heard of this before?" asked Lyil.

"We've already told you," replied Tam with a proud tone in her voice. "Tarmorians know how to keep a secret,"

"So why tell us now?"

Tam looked at Ros and said, "I don't know." And then, "Why are we telling them, Dr. -ejjon?"

"It was three years ago when I was informed that another family of fake Tarmorians had landed at the space port. So I decided to watch the Himmian House. I staked it out from midnight to six in the morning. And lo and behold, at 2:30 a.m. on the fourth morning, a large land transport pulled up in front of the house. The faux

Tarmorians, who dwelled in the house, and three new ones used a fork lift and unloaded four, large boxes and took them inside.

"I was curious about the event so I hired a private investigator to follow the pretenders wherever they went and to report back to me.

"Over a period of two years, with his help and the help of some of my friends, we were able to establish an intricate connection between the pretenders and personnel inside the Galactic Federation Headquarters."

Lylil let out a slight gasp. "This has to be reported at once," she exclaimed.

"No!" retorted Ros. And then more calmly, "There are several reasons why we have decided to keep it amongst ourselves. First, we don't know what they're doing. It might be something completely harmless or maybe not. Thus far, nothing untoward has happened. Secondly, we don't know who is involved or how many. And thirdly, if they are up to something sinister, and they find out that we know, some of us might start disappearing." He looked at Lylil the way a confidant might look at his partner in crime. "Now you wouldn't want that on your conscience, would you?"

"Of course not," responded Lylil, "But if you're so afraid of terrible consequences, then why are you telling us?"

Ros didn't hesitate. "When I found out Dr. Hillar was coming to town and the purpose of his visit, I mulled it over and decided to confide in him because he is an outsider with no connection to the politics of the planet, and because he will be spending time inside the political structure of the Federation.

"By telling you this now, you can be wary of any suspicious actions and perhaps give us a clue," he looked at Ben.

"Okay, so why me?" asked Lylil.

Ros met her eyes with his. "Because you're here, because you're G-staff and because you're with Dr. Hillar I've decided to take a chance on you because this may be the last chance I get to talk to him."

"That's a lot of 'because's,' said Lylil with a serious tone in her voice, "and I would like to be able to conform to your wishes, but the fact is, I AM G-Staff, and that means it's my duty to act on any information which may be a threat to the Galaef or to the Galactic Empire." Dr. -ejjon started to say something, but Lylil held up her hand, and with a sour look on her pretty face she said, "Since I can sympathize with your position, I will keep it low key by starting a low level investigation. In the beginning there will be no need to make this information public nor to bring attention to the fake Tarmorians. If, however, I find anything to be of a serious nature, which might be any kind of a threat to the Galaef or the Galactic Empire, then I will not hold back, indeed, I will call out the troops and take serious action."

Ben noticed Lylil tapping her fingers on the butt of her phasor as if her subconscious was getting ready for war.

"Well?" she asked, staring Dr. -ejjon in the face.

Doctor -ejjon appeared to be a bit nervous, which surprised Ben considering that most Tarmorians were tougher than hell. Dr. -ejjon said, "I'm sorry I brought it up, but since I did, and since you're not going to go public with the information, then I say, it is a compromise I can live with.

"Good," said Lylil. She turned to Ben. "What do you think about all this? Do you have any inclinations to be a part of the investigation?"

Ben frowned while looking at Dr. -ejjon. He didn't like it, and he didn't want anything to do with it. "For the moment my interests are solely in my research," he growled. "And I don't see any reason to get caught up in any political stratagem."

"It was just an idea," said Ros. "We don't like people living amongst us pretending to be what they are not. We just thought you could keep an eye out."

"I see no reason for my involvement," repeated Ben. "Besides from what you've told me it seems you'll be finding the answer to this in the house with the fake Tarmorians. From what I've read," said Ben leaning back in his chair still scowling, "the Tarmorians, among other skills, are very good at stealth and sneakiness. They say you people make the best cat burglars in the Galaxy."

"What?" Ros looked confused.

"I'm just thinking you should have someone sneak into the Himmian House and find out what the fake Tarmorians are doing?"

The three Tarmorians sat looking at each other in silence. Finally Ros said, "Some of our people may be good at burglary, but most are not of the criminal mind, and we're not going to break the law by sneaking into private property. There are proper channels to follow; including a reason to search, then obtaining a warrant."

Ben wasn't persuaded, he said, "For a long time now I've realized that there can be circumstances which necessitate side-stepping the law, especially when it might save lives in the future. I believe you should use your influence to have a private investigator hire a cat burglar to sneak in and find out what the hell is going on. "Something has to be amiss, and you know it."

Even though Ros sat quietly pondering Ben's last statement, Ben was sure he hadn't convinced him to break the law.

Tam changed the subject by asking a question about swording, and the remainder of the dinner, although short, was talking about more pleasant subjects. Finally, as they stood up from the table Ros said to Ben, "I'll keep in mind what you've said, that is, about sneaking into the house." Then he said to Lyil, "You can contact me at my office during the day if you find out anything or if you need my help. My address is on the C-net."

Chapter Eleven

The computer planet had no moons, but the stars were quite numerous, and in all their glory they were sending forth their twinkling light to give the trees and the plants in the park a look of reflective silvery sparkles. In the distance they could see the lights around the palace lighting the surrounding area. Some of the offices in the palace were lit up indicating G-staff working late. To the right, about two hundred meters, were the officer's barracks, which were more like luxury apartments. They were lit up by the outside lights.

Ben and Lyil were walking on a black, artificial walkway taking the long route back to her living quarters. The pathway was well lit with lamps about every fifty feet.

Ben was not in a good mood. He knew he should have been—he was dating one of the most beautiful women in the galaxy, and the odds were he was about to win the prestigious Tarmorian tournament, but he couldn't get the idea of the Himmian House out of his mind. He was getting too close to the politics of the Federation, and it was starting to rankle his ire. Why was he even here? All he wanted to do was his research. "It seems to me," said Ben, "that you might have a serious problem on your hands. And I'm speaking of the Himmian House. If it was merely a family pretending to be Tarmorians, then it would appear to be nothing, but the fact that Federation personnel are involved makes me think you better do your investigation quick, and maybe not so low level."

"It's possible that there isn't any Federation involvement," said Lyil. "It could be and probably is an erroneous conclusion."

Ben started to ask, "Can you take that chance?" but Lyil said first, "Nevertheless, I'm going to put two non-coms on the case, and if they don't reveal anything in the next four weeks, then I'm going to report it to my commander and let him deal with it."

"Four weeks?"

"Yes. Since they've been there for five years I don't think another four weeks will turn out to be a problem. And I promised Dr. -ejjon I would look into it first."

"If he's that paranoid, I still believe he should hire a cat burglar to sneak in and look around?"

Lyil whisked her pretty red hair off her shoulders. "It seems they have a stricter code of ethics than you." She was quick to add, "I'm not saying that is the best course of action. In this case it might be better to sidestep the law. They would get some answers, and no one would care, except maybe the people living in the house." Just in case Ben was going to suggest that she do it, she continued, "Since I'm in the military, I can't even consider ordering someone break in. If I were party to such a thing and my superiors found out, I would be court martialed and maybe end up in prison, at the very least, they would drum me out the G-staff and send me home in disgrace."

"I wouldn't suggest that you do it," said Ben. "However, I'm not you, and by that I mean, if I were in your position I would make it happen without anyone knowing I was involved. Find a thief. Use a communicator with a voice distorter. Deposit money in a bank under his name and tell him when the job was done the amount would be doubled."

Lyil started to object, but just then someone stepped out from behind one of the bushes and startled her.

She jumped back and grabbed Ben's arm in a tight grip. "Damn!" she yelled. "What are you doing here!?"

"I'm sorry," said the man. "I saw you walking along, and I thought I would say 'hello.'"

Lyil let go of Ben's arm. "This is Hast," she said in a disgruntled voice. "And this is Dr. Benjamin Hillar."

Ben shook the man's hand and let go. "So," he said, "you're Lyil's sparing partner."

"That's right," said Hast with a smile. It was obvious he was pleased that Lyil had been talking about him.

"And you just happened to be hiding behind that bush."

The smile quickly left his face. "I wasn't hiding," he said. "I was lying down enjoying the night air and looking at the stars—how beautiful they are."

Ben was thinking about pointing out that if he was lying down looking at the stars, then how could he see Lyil coming down the path,—but why push it? He didn't need to make enemies with any of the G-staff.

"So how are things?" asked Hast looking at Lyil.

"No different than they were this morning when we worked out."

"Right," said Hast. He looked Ben up and down. "I understand you're going on an expedition to find a living myth."

"I don't know where you got that idea, but it's light years past the boundary of truth," replied Ben. Hast was beginning to annoy him—and he had only known him for a few minutes. "We're doing an archaeological dig. When we're looking for artifacts, which are more than six hundred years old, we don't expect to find anyone living from that time. In fact, throughout the recorded history of the Galactic Empire it has never happened."

"Right," said Hast. "What are you going to do if you find a dead man in your dig?"

"Shake his hand," quipped Ben. "What the hell do you think!?" Ben was starting to wonder how this man ever made it into G-staff.

It was obvious Hast was irritating Ben, so Lyil intervened. "It's getting late," she said, "and you have to get up early."

"Right," said Hast. "Well, you two have a good evening, and I'll see you in the morning, Lyil." He turned and walked down the artificial path.

"That was weird," said Ben. "The way he popped up and asked those questions."

"I believe he's jealous. He keeps asking me to go on a date with him."

"That's not it," said Ben. "For some reason he was feeling me out, and it had nothing to do with you. The whole time he was talking to me he never looked at you." Ben was quick to add, "That doesn't mean he's not interested in you. I'm sure he is, but now I'm wondering if he's in some way involved with these fake Tarmorians."

Ben and Lyil started down the walkway toward her apartment.

"I'm sure he has nothing to do with anything. He doesn't have a bad bone in his body."

Ben wasn't convinced, but he was sure it didn't matter, so he dropped it.

Lyil's apartment was on the third floor of a twenty-story building, which had been built for the upper echelon G-staff, the best of the best.

She touched the palm lock and the door slid open, then she reached out and grabbed Ben's hand, and for the third time in the last four days she asked him to come in.

Considering the time, Ben was surprised, but again, he didn't hesitate to say, "Yes." And since she asked him in for the third time, he was hoping that this time they would break the routine. He couldn't help it, he was starting to like her more than he wanted, which he felt was most unfortunate considering the circumstances. He walked into the living room and, instead of sitting in the chair, he sat on the couch, which would give her plenty of room to sit next to him.

But she continued as usual.

She went to the bar and poured him a non-alcoholic drink without asking him what he wanted. She handed it to him and sat down in a chair across from the couch. "Why didn't you tell me you placed number three in the Galactic Games?"

He swirled his drink with a little plastic stick. "I started to, but . . ."

"But I interrupted you."

"That sounds about right," said Ben, "however, we could be nice and say you changed the subject."

"Yes," agreed Lyil, "That would be kind, but I've known for a long time, since I was a little girl, that I have a bad habit of interrupting when others are talking. My friends and family, especially my mother, would tell me I never let anybody finish a sentence. Of course, that was an exaggeration, and I'm not as bad now as I was then, but still I . . ."

"Well don't let it happen again," interrupted Ben.

Lyil laughed momentarily, then she took a sip of her drink. She set her glass on the coffee table and an awkward silence fell over them like a fog covering an unknown territory in the fields of expectations. Ben was

wondering why a beautiful, classy, intelligent, upper echelon G-staff woman would be going out with him. Probably nothing more than being a good host while he was on Galactus or maybe the Galaef wanted her to keep an eye on Ben. No. That thought didn't please him. He knew how he was starting to feel about her.

Lyil said, "Since I've met you, you haven't talked much about your expedition."

"Since I've met you," replied Ben, "I started losing interest in it."

Lyil, in her ever-calm manner, permitted herself a small laugh. "What a nice thing to say," she said and paused. "Still I am interested. The myth of the Aeolian Master has been around for hundreds of years, and there have been times when I wondered why a myth from an insignificant planet on the edge of the galaxy could have endured for such a long time, or why it would become popular in the first place."

"That's a point which most people never consider," said Ben. "If a myth can become this well known throughout the Galaxy and retold for hundreds of years by civilizations who have forgotten where the myth originated, or the name of a planet which they have never known, then there must have been something very significant at the core of its conception. I believe that what we will find on this expedition will have a bearing on the future of our technology."

Lyil slowly nodded her head. "So here you are, about to find out, about to travel to the edge of the galaxy to explore a famous myth to see if there is really something worth exploring."

"I'm sure we will find a computer complex beneath the surface of Ar, one which was built by the Ancient Earthians, and it's also possible there's a dead man in a suspended animation chamber."

"One of the documents which we retrieved from a dig discusses briefly the advent of suspended animation, and how they were experimenting with it. There isn't a lot of detail, but from what I could make out, they were studying it before the colonization of Ar. And later, there was mention of a computer complex on Ar with a suspended animation chamber."

"So," said Lyil. "if you find it, what a great discovery that will be. You'll be able to get a better look at what Earth was like, especially if the computer still holds information."

"That's right," said Ben. He paused, "that is if . . ." Ben paused. He was thinking about the Galaef. He didn't know him very well—only what he had read about him in the media, and then the meeting which only lasted a short time in his office. Was he the rock that he appeared to be, or could those around him sway his opinion?

"If what?" asked Lyil.

"If the Galaef doesn't change his mind and bring back the survey crew."

"Preposterous. What would motivate you to think such a thought?" Without waiting for an answer, she added. "He has already put a lot of money into this project. I assure you he's not going to back out now."

"How much influence does Thorne have over the Galaef?"

"Very little. Why?"

"Because Thorne was dead set against this project. He basically told the Galaef it was beneath his station to get involved. And I wonder about his reasons. Has Thorne always been against these kinds of projects?"

Lyil grimaced, "No," she said. "And, in fact, he even headed up an archaeological project of his own on one of the old computer planets."

"So," said Ben, "you're telling me he does have a personal motive for the Galaef not becoming involved in my project."

Lyil contemplated and then said, "I don't know."

Ben shrugged. "I don't either, but it looks that way."

"I don't know why he would care." Lyil looked at her watch and then stood up. "It's really late," she said.

"Yeah, I guess it is." He knew she had to go to work in the morning.

He stood up and moved close enough to give her a good night kiss. Impulsively he pulled her close, until he could feel the warmth from her body as it was pressed close to his. He let go of her hands and slipped his arms around her. And with one hand sliding through the wavy red hair to the back of her head, he held her gently as he pushed his lips to hers and kissed her deeply. His other hand moved slowly down her back, until it was in the concavity above her hips, then he pulled gently until her hips were pressed firmly against his.

She opened her mouth and accepted his kiss. She put her arms around his back and stroked and kneaded his muscles, then she held him tight as if she never wanted to let go. Her breathing quickened and her chest heaved in and out.

She put her hand on his check, then, without warning, she stepped back breaking the engagement with a look of distress.

The sudden disengagement was like a dowse of ice-cold water.

Again Lyil looked at her watch. "Time really flies," she said.

Ben knew what was coming. "Yeah, it does." He knew she had to get up early. "Well, I better . . ."

She stepped closer and took his hand. She leaned forward. "No," she whispered. "Don't leave." She led him toward the bedroom. "I'll probably have to skip my workout tomorrow morning," she added. "And besides, I'm on vacation."

This time he didn't mind that she had interrupted.

Chapter Twelve

Ben stood on the swording platform thinking about Lyil. It was nine days ago that she had asked him to spend the night, and he hadn't spent another night in his guest quarters since. He only went back to get his things and to check out.

Ben's relationships with women in the past had always been fleeting and noncommittal. Considering his age, this didn't bother him, and in his mind he had reasons why he never formed a permanent relationship—such as, he was too busy with swording or he was too busy with his professional life as an Archaeologist, but now he was beginning to think that they had just been excuses while he was waiting for someone like Lyil. For the first time in his life he was forming a solid relationship, and it was at the worst possible time. *Crap*, he thought as he flexed his sword. He was on a planet far from his home planet, and he was busier now with swording and Archaeology than he had been during the past.

Ben looked to his left at the ringside box seats, which were designated for his friends and family and saw Lyil sitting with Tam and Rand. Her long red hair was a sharp contrast amongst all the Tarmorians throughout the stadium with their heads of black hair. He nodded in her direction, and she smiled back.

He whipped his sword through the air a couple of times. It whistled, sharply. Then he turned and looked at his opponent.

Doog was a man who looked darker than any of the other Tarmorians Ben had seen. It wasn't so much his brown skin nor his black hair, which made him look dark, but rather his deep set, penetrating, black eyes, which lurked behind a long, sleek nose. As a result he had an almost sinister look about him.

Ben noticed that Doog seemed fidgety and anxious. Perhaps he was nervous, after all there was only one match remaining after this one. And whoever won this one would be going to the finals.

This was the tenth round, the semifinals. Everyone had been knocked out of the tournament except for four—Ben, Doog, Zirnen, and Julian (an offworlder whom Ben had beaten in the Galactic Games). The odds-on-favorite to win the semi-final matches and advance to the finals were Ben and Zirnen. In fact the odds were overwhelmingly in favor of Ben and Zirnen at ninety-five to one.

Ben looked at one of the four clocks, which was located on one of the walls above the spectators. There was a little more than two and a half minutes before the match would begin. It wasn't customary for Ben to be looking at the clock like a nervous novice anticipating the beginning of the match, but today he realized he was anxious to get started. He didn't care about winning as much as he was looking forward to having dinner with Lyil and her friends. He wanted to finish this match quickly.

He glanced at the stands, and what he saw was a crowd of people composed mostly of Tarmorians, some G-staff, and some offworlders dressed in brightly colored, vacationers' clothing. The stadium was packed to capacity. Excitement permeated the air. The spectators were anxious, and so was Ben.

He did some stretching motions to limber his muscles. And while he was doing them he decided to take his mind off Lyil and concentrate on Doog. He was, after all, close to winning a Tarmorian tournament.

Ben was waiting for the buzzer, when Doog suddenly did the unexpected. He put his sword on the mat and walked toward Ben until he was but a few feet away. "I just wanted to shake your hand before the match begins." He stuck out his hand and grasped a hold as Ben extended his. "Swording is my life," he said. He let go of Ben's hand. "And I've never crossed swords with anybody as high up in the ranks as you. This is a great honor. And believe me I want to beat you, and I'm going to do my best."

"I would expect nothing less," said Ben.

Doog smiled. "Yes, but I've seen you perform. So, in the event that I should win I just wanted to say I'm sorry, because it'll have to be a lucky strike."

Over the years Ben had heard some great psychological ploys, but this ranked among the best. Doog was obviously trying to get an edge by making Ben overconfident, by making him think Doog was not nearly as skilled as Ben. Oftentimes swordsmen would talk to their opponents during a match, trying to psych them out, but this was the first time he had experienced it before the match was about to start.

Ben replied in a calm manner. "I accept your apology and your compliment, but I'm sure it wouldn't be luck. I've been told your sword play is very good." He paused, and then said, "Nevertheless, I'll do my best to live up to your expectations."

Doog bowed his head and walked back to his side of the platform. He picked up his sword and waited for the match to begin.

The buzzer sounded.

Ben walked to the center of the platform and crossed his sword with Doog's above their heads. He was ready.

The buzzer stopped and Ben jumped back. But instead of following the normal swording attacks he decided to resort to a trick. It wasn't an unusual or rarely seen trick, but it was used by only those adept with either hand. If it didn't work, the swordsman would merely continue swording with the other hand.

Against another Grand-Master Swordsman the trick would have been useless, but Doog was nervous and was quickly reacting to Ben's moves—too quickly. Ben feinted twice, moved his body to the left, and started his right hand, with the sword in it, to the right. This maneuver would leave Ben exposed for a fraction of a second. His right hand continued to the right, but the sword was no longer in it. It was suspended in mid air.

Doog continued to follow Ben's right hand with his own sword, and by the time he realized what was happening, it was too late.

Ben plucked his sword out of the air with his left hand and thrust the balled point against Doog's chest.

The kill buzzer sounded and the match was over.

It was the shortest match in Tarmorian recorded history lasting only fourteen seconds, and it tied the all time Galactic record. Previously the shortest match in Tarmorian swording had been twenty-three seconds—a record which was set when a Galactic Grand Master sworded in the third round against a novice who had made it that far because the swordsmen in his two scheduled bouts had unexpectedly withdrawn.

Today's new record would probably never be broken.

Most of the crowd was not happy since they had not bet on the first fifteen-second window. On the other hand, even though they had lost money, they loved to see new records being set. And now they could say they were there when it happened.

A great roaring of the crowd and stomping of their feet shook the arena as they showed their appreciation for the match.

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

Since Ben was on vacation—almost, and since there was nothing that necessitated his early departure from bed heaven, he decided to sleep in. It was late when he rose—and he greatly appreciated the rest. He slung his body suit over his shoulder and stepped into the bathroom—still stretching and yawning.

After finishing his morning quotidian, and still drying his hair, he walked into the main living area.

Lyil was sitting on the form-fitting couch reading a book. She looked up as Ben entered. In a light humored manner she said, "Late as usual, I see."

"Yeah," said Ben. He had heard too many times how 'the early bird gets the worm.' (Not exactly in those words, since that was an ancient Earth saying.) And then he thought of a couple of other ancient Earth sayings and replied, "But I'm just as healthy, wealthy, and wise as the early guys."

Obviously ignoring Ben's strange, off-world quote, Lyil said, "I have some news." She paused, waiting for Ben to reply with the customary "What?" But it didn't come.

"Aren't you curious?" she asked.

Ben was busy pushing buttons and deciding which breakfast he wanted. "Yeah, . . . absolutely," he said in a distant voice.

She waited until he finished fiddling with the buttons. "Mandrill called on the viewer this morning. She said the search was successful. They found a large complex beneath the city of Newusa."

Ben gulped and had to swallow quickly to keep from choking on his late morning coffee. "Great," he sputtered thinking this was the appropriate response, but at the same time realizing he didn't mean it. The news made him glad and sad at the same time. It would probably be one of the great archaeological finds of the century bringing with it a lot of unanswered questions about Earth, but now he would have to leave Lyil, the woman he had been secretly looking for his entire life. When he was a young man working hard on the swording mat everyday, he would sometimes think about finding the right woman and having a good marriage like his mother and father. Even though he was young he was smart enough to know there is no such thing as a perfect marriage, there will always be disagreements between two people who love and respect each other, but arguments between his parents were rare, and they always supported each other when it counted, and more importantly there was a lot of love. As he looked at Lyil he realized he would have been happier if they hadn't found the complex. "So when will I be leaving?" he asked.

Lyil drew in a deep breath and said, "The Galaef is aware of your championship match tonight. He keeps informed of the people who work for him, and he won't be calling to give you the news until tomorrow.

"But the rumor is, you'll be leaving in two days."

Ben looked at Lyil's beautiful, red hair falling upon her shoulders and down her back. He set his coffee on the bar, stepped forward and ran his fingers through it, then he bent over and kissed her, sweet and long. When they finished, he stepped back and frowned. It occurred to him that once he boarded the spaceship it would be a long time before he would be able to kiss her again.

It was a look which Lyil didn't miss. "It's okay," she said with an air of resignation. "We'll keep busy with our work and when your mission is finished, we'll figure out how we're going to spend the rest of our lives together."

This was the first time either of them had mentioned a serious commitment. But time was running out, and the subject had to be broached. Otherwise it would turn out to be just another fleeting relationship.

Ben nodded. "Why wait for the mission to be over? We can discuss it now." He picked up his coffee cup and took an uncomfortable swallow. "I think we should make the necessary arrangements so we can spend time together."

Lyil looked thoughtfully discontented. "We're going to have some problems figuring it out, since I don't want to quit my job, and I'm sure you won't want to quit yours either."

Ben set his coffee on the table in front of the couch and sat down next to Lyil. "Actually I have been giving it some thought, and it has occurred to me that I could take a sabbatical from teaching for a year, and move to the Outer City. I could do work on translating more of the ancient Earth records. Or if we find something on Ar I could work on that."

A pleased smile crossed Lyil's sensuous lips. "Don't be silly," she said. "You could move in with me and do your work here."

"Or, I could move in with you," said Ben. "After a year I'm sure we'll know just how serious we are and, at that time, we can come up with a more permanent solution."

"Sounds good to me," said Lyil. She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him as though they were making love.

And then, they did.

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

With a sullen look and slightly hunched shoulders Zirnen, the number two sword in the Galaxy, stood on the other side of the platform from Ben. He waited for the buzzer, which would start the championship match. His slight build and short stature, about five foot seven, along with his experience, gave him speed and agility not seen in most swordsmen. The only reason Ben was able to score so many points against him, in the Galactic Games, lie in the fact that Ben had a keen sense of swording presence. He could concentrate and predict very accurately his opponent's next move. Plus, Ben had an edge in reach, which increased the effectiveness of his snake-like thrust.

He's not happy, thought Ben. *Probably wasn't expecting to meet me in the championship match when he left his home planet bound for a Tarmorian tournament.* Because of the expense most swordsmen, even the top swordsmen, only traveled to off-world tournaments once every two or three years. Zirnen had come

anticipating a win, but now his chances were less than even as Ben was considered the favorite.

The last time they met in competition, two years earlier in the Galactic Games, Zirnen had won the match by using a maneuver which had been out of use for thousands of years. But this time Ben was ready.

He had researched the move, and had practiced against it a number of times. Now it was easily thwarted, and anyone who tried this trick against him would certainly lose.

It wasn't the trick that concerned Ben, for he had practiced against it many times having his sparring partner maneuver to both sides with the roll and the attempted thrust into Ben's ribcage, instead it was Zirnen's improvement over the last couple of years that made Ben a little anxious about this match. Like all good swordsmen, Ben kept up on the swording news by reading the Quarterly Galactic Swording Magazine, "Sword Times." Since the last Galactic Games, two years previous, Zirnen had successfully defended his title as champion of Lomar, his home planet, each year and had done so in a commanding fashion. He had also won a Tarmorian tournament, which included beating the number four sword of the Galactic Games. There was no doubt that his swording had greatly improved since Ben had last sworded against him. Ben shrugged it off. He was still better than Zirnen.

The warning light flashed on the scoreboard as the clock counted down to zero. The buzzer sounded, indicating the start of the match.

The Tarmorians were excited, but during a match they became very quiet. They stopped stomping their feet, stopped whistling and clapping, and stopped shouting and talking. They waited and watched in silence.

Ben and Zirnen stepped to the center of the platform and crossed their swords making a slight clanging sound.

The buzzer stopped and both men jumped back with their swords at the ready position. Zirnen moved forward and immediately took the offensive with a thrust, thrust, parry, thrust. Then he surprised Ben with a relentless attack—almost a brawling, hacking attack with his sword as he kept lunging forward.

Ben kept moving back, skillfully avoiding a hit by Zirnen's unexpected frenzied attack. Flurry after flurry of offensive sword maneuvers came at Ben and it backed him up to the edge of the mat. Ben turned to his right and kept countering with defensive moves. An attack like this from most swordsmen would end with a quick kill by Ben, but Zirnen's skill had increased even more than Ben had anticipated with his accurate and expertly timed offensive moves. Ben had to clear his mind, put everything aside, especially Lyil and the upcoming archaeological expedition, and concentrate solely on this match.

He stopped Zirnen's vicious advance by defending a thrust then stepping forward. He thrust, thrust, then parried. By his movements Ben knew Zirnen was coming for the kill. He watched Zirnen's sword closely for the sign that he was going to make a thrust toward Ben's chest. And then it came, but Ben parried it easily and made a thrust of his own—one which would have scored on most swordsmen, but Zirnen parried it, and then made another thrust. Ben jumped back and parried.

Finally Ben saw a slight opening and was able to counterattack. Thrust, thrust, parry, thrust, thrust, and then the tip of Ben's sword hit Zirnen's sword hand.

The buzzer sounded and the match stopped while a point was put on the scoreboard under Ben's name. The buzzer sounded again and the two men crossed swords waiting for the buzzer to stop. When it did they jumped back with their swords going to the ready position.

Two minutes and fourteen seconds from the end of the round, Ben parried, thrust, switched hands in mid air and thrust toward Zirnen's chest. Zirnen parried in time to keep from being hit in the chest and thereby losing the match, then with the sinuosity of a striking snake he lunged at Ben's stomach. Ben countered in time to keep from losing the match, but his parry wasn't enough to keep Zirnen's sword from hitting his shoulder.

The buzzer sounded and the men stopped swording. A point was put under Zirnen's name on the scoreboard. After another two minutes of swording the round ended in a one to one tie.

The crowd cheered.

The second round went better for Ben as he began to adjust to Zirnen's style of swording. Ben won two points to Zirnen's zero and the third round would begin with the score three to one in Ben's favor.

Before the start of the third round and as Ben waited on his side of the platform sitting on his stool, it occurred to him that Zirnen might try the roll trick again. He quickly dismissed this idea. Zirnen would have to assume, and correctly so, that Ben had practiced against and was now ready for it. With only a two-point deficit it was still possible for Zirnen to win the match and the tournament.

The buzzer sounded, Ben whipped his sword through the air once and moved forward toward Zirnen in the middle of the platform. They crossed their swords and waited.

When the buzzer stopped Ben jumped back, quickly faked a parry of Zirnen's first thrust, stepped to the right, and scored another point with a thrust of his own to Zirnen's left biceps.

Zirnen jumped back a little dismayed. A look of chagrin crossed his face as he realized he now had a three-point deficit. The points lit up on the scoreboard.

When they started again Ben held his sword in his right hand and put his left hand on his hip. This was a stance Ben employed because it would give him better balance, and when he took his hand off his hip oftentimes it would confuse his opponent because he didn't know if he was taking it off his hip to use it, if he was faking, or if he was moving into a different pose of balance.

Ben brought his left hand off his hip, switched sword hands and made a thrust. Then the unexpected happened. Zirnen successfully defended the thrust, fell to the floor, and rolled, but this time he went the other direction. With the sword in his left hand he stepped to his right, switched his sword to the right hand, and did an acrobatic roll in front of Ben, rolling to the left. With the sword in his right hand he thrust from out to in and from down to up, aiming for Ben's ribcage just under the right armpit.

It startled Ben. Why would Zirnen take this chance when it was still possible for him to win? Later he told Ben that he had become frustrated, and felt this was his only chance.

But Ben was ready. He stepped back, parried the thrust with a counter thrust and ended the match. The ball of his point struck the chest of Zirnen Lying on his back.

Ben yelled out, "Take that you dastardly trickster!" He grinned down at Zirnen. A wave of exhilaration swept over Ben. Part of it was the clamorous applauding by the enthusiastic Tarmorian spectators, and the other part was beating Zirnen in a championship match.

When the kill buzzer sang out, it was the culmination of winning the match and the championship, and successfully defending against the trick, that made Ben perform a victory whip with his sword—something he had never previously done.

Chapter Fifteen

The ceiling was designed in small white ripples extending from one end of the room to the other with well concealed vitalites, illuminating and casting soft shadows from the surfaces below. The walls, which were a light blue in color matching the varying shades of blue throughout the room, seemed to move in various patterns as the vitalites reflected shimmering rays from their shiny surfaces. The walls of the room were concave in structure giving the room a quality of vastness as if a person was looking into the distance. Located in random positions throughout the room were form-fitting chairs designed for easy lounging. Their color was a lighter shade of blue than that of the walls. Next to the chairs, or perhaps an extension of them, were keyboards fixed for easy manipulation. They were simple in comparison to the high level keyboards of complex function and technical computers. Their only purpose was that of ordering various pleasures including a large range of viewing and reading media, food or drink, or music for listening. The floor was covered by deep blue El carpet creating a thick, spongy foundation, which made walking a source of relaxation. Indeed, the room had been designed for the VIP, with comfort as the primary objective.

Ben sat in one of the chairs sipping a drink and listening to ancient classical music of the three hundred and thirty second Federation century. In his mind he was going over the events which had led up to his present situation. If he had been granted the two thousand tal, it would have taken him months to locate the computer complex. As it was it had take the Galaef, with his large resource of manpower, only thirteen days.

Ben took another sip of his drink.

The complex had been located fifty feet beneath the planet surface. It rested like a babe in its womb. A large city, Newusa had, long since, been built over the top.

"There will be no complications," assured the Galaef, "in sinking the shafts."

Ben considered for a moment, then said, "If they have to go fifty feet, it'll probably take some time."

"It might for a normal construction crew," said the Galaef, "but with my crew and our technology it won't take more than three days." He paused. "And then we're in." It appeared the Galaef was excited about the find.

"Well then," said Ben, "this should yield artifacts which will tell us more about ancient Earth." He smiled at the idea that many of his colleagues would have to eat their words. His theory had brought about a discovery which no one believed existed, that is, with the exception of Mus, his 'partner in artifaction,' (as he liked to call

her) and the Galaef. No matter what they found, now, there was enough, without a doubt, to keep the archaeologists and archaeohistorians busy for years.

At that moment a red light began flashing over the distant doorway. A sign suddenly appeared on a large readout screen in bright red letters—an awkward contrast in the blue room.

Ben knew what it said without reading it. "Sixty seconds to the end of hyperspace," he muttered to himself. He had seen the sign many times in the past.

Mentally he began preparing himself for the feeling of nausea, which accompanied moving into or out of hyperspace. It wasn't a pleasant feeling, but at least he wasn't among the many who had to take tranquilizers to keep from going into convulsions.

The sign flashed again, "fifty seconds to the end of hyperspace."

Most psychiatrists agreed that part of it was a subconscious fear that caused the convulsions. The other part was the momentary effect of weight loss on the fluid in the inner ear. The equilibrium didn't know which way was up or down.

"Forty seconds to the end of hyperspace."

But the subconscious fear had to do with the number of ships which collided with another ship or with an object in the path of the ship coming out of hyperspace. If another ship were in the outspace at the position that they were coming out of hyperspace, if the pilot's sensitivity acuteness were dulled for some reason, if he was not quick enough on the hyperspace switch, then the fatal explosion would occur killing everybody on board both ships, no exceptions.

"Thirty seconds to the end of hyperspace."

It was for this reason that young adults from around the empire were carefully computer chosen to become pilots. There is a certain quality of sensitivity needed to be a good pilot.

"Twenty seconds to the end of hyperspace."

If a pilot, using sound systems and direality screens, could detect that other ship, or any object in space, then he would be able to switch back into hyperspace without a mishap.

"Ten seconds to the end of hyperspace."

Ben slipped a little white disnausia pill out of a pocket in his body suit. He put it in his mouth and took a big slug of his drink.

The ship left hyperspace.

The feeling was upon him, like falling through space, spinning, reeling, turning. His stomach was floating. He wanted to gag, but couldn't.

A moment later it was over.

For passengers like Ben the feeling of nausea lasted only a few moments, but for the chronics it could last up to several hours.

He shifted his body in the chair finding a more comfortable position. He closed his eyes and let the music seep through the little bit of remaining nausea.

He wondered what Lyil was doing. She was probably at her desk working, getting ready for more Thorne interviews, which had become an inordinate amount lately. There were so many people from various planets coming to see Thorne, it was as if he were having a convention of Thorne supporters. Both Mandril and Lyil had expressed their concern, not only did it increase their workload considerably; it made them think that Thorne was up to something. Keeping it a mystery he never told anyone why all these people were showing up. And then there was the house in the Outer City occupied by people pretending to be Tarmorians, which had been linked to Thorne.

If it weren't for all the failsafe systems guarding the Galaef to keep him from being dethroned, Ben would have believed that Thorne was going to attempt to take over the Galactic Federation. But that was unthinkable. Over the last one hundred thousand years voice recognition had been perfected, making it impossible for someone to duplicate another person's voice, not even with a recording device. Among other failsafe systems, if someone were to take over as the ruler they would have to convince the computer that they were the Galaef and then . . . No, that wouldn't work either. It was simply impossible.

Ben started thinking about Lyil again. When this expedition was finished, . . .

"Professor Hillar?"

Ben opened his eyes and looked up. He saw a beautiful brunette standing over him. She had the largest breasts on a slim, hard body that he had ever seen. He also noted the lieutenant's stripes on her sleeve.

"Yes?" he asked.

"My name is Lieutenant Largonese Reflen, but every since I was a little girl my family and friends have called me 'Large—short for Largonese.'"

It seemed to Ben she was boasting. *A most appropriate name and a damned huge coincidence*, he thought, and then he said, "It's nice to meet you, Large."

A very pretty smile crossed her face. "I am here to escort you to the Galaef. If you would follow me, please."

"Thank-you," he said as he rose from his chair.

He followed her out of the guest lounge and down a long corridor. If the Galaef wanted to see him it probably meant he had more news from Ar concerning the find. Perhaps he wanted to discuss the means of excavation, or the time involved, which, in this case, is much shorter when you have a lot of manpower at your disposal.

The Galaef had organized the trip within three days after the discovery of the computer complex beneath the city of Newusa. His personal ship, the Commander which was always manned and prepared for action, had been alerted to make ready for the trip to Ar. The Commander was the largest ship in the Federation Armada. It was forty miles in diameter in the shape of a disc, and ten miles deep from top to bottom. It carried two hundred thousand men and women, and provided enough space in its hull for fifteen battleships, thirty full destroyers, five hundred short destroyers, two thousand G15 destroyers, and twenty thousand shuttles (which were also life rafts). The ship, of course, could never land on a planet, and instead, was moored in space in an orbit mode. Supplies and passengers were loaded on and off the ship by means of supply ships.

Ben thought, *During the three days it took to organize the trip to Ar it was possible they have completed the sinking of the shafts.*

"Step this way, please," said the Lieutenant as a door slid open.

Ben stepped onto an etron transporter. The Lieutenant stepped on behind him and pushed a button. The transporter moved in an upward direction.

"Where is your home planet?" asked Ben.

"I don't have a home planet," she replied. "The Commander is my home."

"So you live here permanently?" Ben had heard of people living on spaceships.

"Yes. My husband and I both live here. It has been nearly eleven years since we came on board."

"It must be quite a different lifestyle from living on a planet." Ben thought for a moment and then asked, "Don't you ever feel closed in?"

"No," she replied, "we really don't. We love our home. We get a month vacation every year. And we spend it with our parents on their home planet, but it seems we are always happy to get back to our ship. We were computer chosen for the job. And having decided to accept it we have never been sorry."

"That's good," said Ben not too enthusiastically.

"We're saving money for our day of retirement, but until that day we have everything we could want right here."

It was true that the ship was like a small city built inside a mountain. It had thousands of corridors, all leading to rooms that would best fit the functioning of the ship. This, of course, included rooms of comfort and recreation, including restaurants, movie theatres, classical dance theatres, sports arenas, libraries and others for the ship's crew.

It was the part about being inside a mountain that didn't appeal to Ben. It was a bit too restrictive for his taste.

"By the way," said the Lieutenant, breaking his train of thought, "I've viewed your works on ancient Earth myths, and I think they are absolutely marvelous."

"Thank you," replied Ben.

"Myths are so interesting to view." Her eyes sparkled a little as she smiled. "It seems like only yesterday—I was a little girl and my mother was telling me about the myth of the Aeolian Master. 'He always did good for the people,' she said, 'and never any harm. But lo it was the evil of war that drove him from mankind.' After my mother told me of all his great adventures and his great deeds for the common people, he became my idol."

She continued to smile as she looked into Ben's eyes. "And now, after all these years, you're going to try to prove the myth to be a fact." She paused. "I hope you succeed."

The mover came to a slow stop, and after the door opened they started down another long corridor.

Ben was a little surprised by the Lieutenant's last statement. "I didn't realize that any of the crew knew the purpose of this trip," he said.

The corners of her mouth turned up in a foxy smile. "My husband's best friend works in communications," she replied.

Ben smiled with her. It amused him to think that classified information wasn't so classified on the Commander. "So, I imagine word gets around quickly," he said with an insidious look on his face.

"Oh yes. I'm sure that the entire crew knows about it by now."

"Has anything new come in?" He realized she might already know what the Galaef was about to tell him.

"Yes. A message came in right after we dropped out of hyperspace."

"Really?" asked Ben raising his eyebrows in an inquisitive manner. There was no doubt that he was probing for news, but the Lieutenant didn't seem to mind.

"Because of the political unrest in the city of Newusa, they would have rather sunk the shafts on the outside of the city's hemi dome, but because of the Toral, they couldn't."

She paused, and then said, "I think they should exterminate those beasts."

"But that would upset the balance of Nature," replied Ben voicing the concern of true scientists everywhere. "Nature has a difficult time on Ar without eliminating part of the system."

Ben had used Lyil's C-net to study the terrain and life forms on planet Ar. During his studies he came across a description of the toral. They were ferocious animals, and they would never hesitate to attack humans.

The Toral was a huge beast standing sometimes seven feet from the ground to the top of his head. He was a four-legged animal with a bobbed tail. His back legs were a foot shorter than his front legs. This gave him a sloping appearance and a loping run, which looked awkward, but indeed the Toral was very swift. His short fur was dull brown in color, all except his large white chest. His paws had long sharp claws and his mouth had long sharp teeth, two of which protruded from his upper jaw and curved slightly over his lower lip.

The Toral lived in small colonies, ten to fifteen to a group. The largest and most aggressive was always the leader of the pack. Oftentimes the leader was a female. She could growl the loudest and throw dirt into the air with her claws higher than the rest, and, when needed, she could give the nastiest bite.

At night, the Toral slept under the fruit trees, and during the day they roamed the boundaries of their marked territory. Once in awhile they would wander into the territory of another pride causing bloody battles, and sometimes three or four Toral would be killed before the fight ended.

Within the pack, the Toral were easy-going creatures, enjoying a laid back life. Seldom did they anger, and they enjoyed sleeping seventy percent of the time beneath the limbs of the fruit tree. It was only when they scented a human that they became outrageously ferocious.

From the literature Ben knew that the history of the Toral had a tremendous impact on the colonization of Ar. The animal was found living on all the plains on the surface of Ar, and for this reason the city people feared the plains, and they taught their children to fear them as well. Behind the city walls was safety, on the other side, was death.

"I suppose," said the Lieutenant answering Ben's comment on Nature. "Anyway, they successfully sunk the shafts in the city park. They have domes covering them, and armed guards are posted on the entrances."

"Is the trouble that bad?"

"The rebels probably don't care about the shafts, but you know how curious other people can be. I'm sure they don't want to take any chances that anybody will disturb anything."

Ben nodded in agreement with her logic.

"What about the shafts?" he asked.

"They're both the same—they each contain a stairwell in case of an emergency, and they each contain an etron mover." She paused as if trying to remember. "They had to dig down about fifty feet before they reached the top of the computer complex. At that point they cut holes in the top and ended the shafts on the top floor."

"Now they're waiting for further orders."

The Lieutenant stopped in front of a door with two armed guards on either side. "He's cleared to enter," she said to the guards, and then to Ben, she said, "Right through here. I really wish you the best of luck." She turned and started back the way she had come. "Good-bye." She called over her shoulder.

"Yeah, Large," muttered Ben. The door slid into its recess, and Ben started to enter when he noticed the guard on the right was the same guard he had talked to in the Center Tower before entering the Galaef's private office. What did he say his name was? It was It was Oh, yeah, Frostadeem.

"Hello Frostadeem. Here we are again."

The guard's eyes met Ben's, but he looked ahead and remained silent. There seemed to be a scowl on his face.

He must be having an off day, thought Ben as he passed the two guards and entered the room.

An Ensign looked up from behind a desk. "Professor Hillar?" she asked.

"Yes."

"You may go right in."

Ben stepped through the doorway on the far side of the room and into the Galaef's office, which was identical to his office in the Galactic Federation castle, with the exception of no window overlooking the Inner or Outer City. The Galaef was sitting in a chair behind a large desk. Again, readout screens and keyboards were to his immediate left and right.

Thorne was standing near the right wall. His shoulders were straight, his demeanor was one of indifference, and his eyes were cold, as they seemed to stare right through Ben's heart.

Jordan was sitting at a desk ten feet behind Thorne, and Mordrous was, again, to the Galaef's left and five meters in front of him.

Myra was sitting to the Galaef's right. She was holding a recording device.

Ben looked at her and realized she was too beautiful and too magnetic to be real. She was like the reborn Phoenix—beautiful in all its splendor, but real only in mythology.

The Galaef turned as Ben came to a stop and said, "We have access to the computer complex," he gave Ben a hearty smile. "I have decided," he continued, "that instead of having yourself and a team of scientists searching for months, in that very large complex, it will be much more expedient for a large number of men to start at the top and work toward the bottom."

Ben frowned slightly, but almost as if the Galaef were reading his mind, he said, "However, for the sake of science, the men will be ordered to touch nothing except that which is necessary."

Ben nodded his approval.

As he watched the Galaef he noticed, through his peripheral vision, a look of contempt come over Thorne's face. It seemed to be directed toward the Galaef.

He wondered how he could be the only one to notice Thorne's attitude.

"They will be looking for two things, the power supply room and a man in a suspended animation chamber.

"I would like to know if you have any suggestions that may help in this search."

Ben considered the situation. "How many men will be searching?" he asked.

"Two thousand men will be shuttled to the complex. We have a systematic, computer-planned search that they'll be following."

"Since you have that many men, I would start half of them searching from the top down and the other half from the bottom up. If there is a man in a suspended animation chamber, they probably placed him deep in the complex." He paused. "As far as the power supply room is concerned I could do no more than make a guess."

The Galaef looked pleased. "Thank you Professor. We'll let you know as soon as we find anything."

Assuming formality was still not a consideration, Ben turned and left without first bowing.

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

The lid was transparent.

The three men stood looking down at the man floating in some kind of liquid inside a coffin shaped chamber. Hundreds of little black tubes protruding from the chamber pedestal, entered through the lid and attached to the man's skin one per every square inch. There were so many of them, it was difficult to discern his features.

"It's not possible," whispered the doctor.

"Yeah, it surprises the hell out of me, too," said Ben looking at the man in awe. And then he added in thought, *to say the least*.

The man was totally nude, except for the black tubes, and his muscular frame measured close to six feet three inches in length. The long, black hair, from his face and head, floated freely in the fluid, like strings of black algae in a tropical fish tank.

"Of course it's possible," said the Galaef. "There he is." He spoke in such a loud voice, it seemed as though he were being irreverent in a holy place.

"It's just hard to believe," said the doctor quietly. "I knew what we would be looking for when we left Galactus VII, but I never expected to find a living being in a suspended animation chamber. Usually there is

some truth to a myth, but scientists have realized for a long time that suspended animation is virtually impossible.”

Doctor Riker was in charge of the medical staff aboard the Commander and had a list of credentials as long as his arm. He knew as much as anyone could possibly know about the human body. "This man hasn't been in this chamber more than two years," he said. "Notice the length of his hair."

"That's not possible," said Ben. "This chamber has been hidden for at least six hundred years."

"Why are those little black tubes attached to his skin?" asked the Galaef. At the moment it appeared he wasn't interested in the man's age.

Dr. Riker contemplated for a few seconds. "They're insulators for electrical conductors. Periodically small electrical voltages are applied to the skin, keeping the cell groups or tissues from dying. The voltage acts as an energy source and a stimulator."

Ben continued to look at the man in the chamber for another few seconds, then for the first time since entering the room, he looked around. By suggestion of Dr. Riker the lights in the room had been kept dim. It was a safety precaution to prevent possible blinding of the man in suspended animation.

The chamber was in the center of the room on a small raised platform. The two sidewalls were smooth, except for a door in the middle of the wall to the left. The far wall had numerous control panels, key boards, TV screens, and computer screens. Three of the screens were functioning. *Obviously relaying information about the man in the chamber*, thought Ben.

The Galaef, Ben, and Dr. Riker were the first to enter the room, that is, with the exception of the crew member who made the discovery.

Due to his location, only fourteen floors from the bottom, it had been a short search.

The power supply center, on the other hand, taking up an entire floor near the center of the complex, had taken longer to find. Since then the technicians were able to make a complete power hook up. It involved another few days of patient waiting by Ben, but the day finally came. And now he was standing in a room where a myth had become reality.

Ben thought it was strange that Thorne and Myra hadn't come along. Thorne may have been against the project from the beginning, but in the end this discovery would surely go down as one of the greatest archaeological discoveries of all time. And who wouldn't be curious to look upon a legend, to look upon a myth come true. The curiosity alone would be enough to make anyone who had the clearance to come charging in to look at the man who had been living for six hundred years in suspended animation.

Ben continued to scrutinize the control panel, and then something caught his eye. He walked toward the right side of the flashing panels, which were relaying information, and as he got closer he realized what it was. "Come look at this," he said.

The Galaef and Dr. Riker came around the chamber and looked over Ben's shoulder. "What is it?" asked the Galaef.

Ben pointed at a digital display. "Look," he said, "a year counter."

The Galaef and Dr. Riker, looked at the readout with puzzled looks. The Galaef stood shaking his head. He finally asked, "What does it say?"

"Yeah," asked Dr. Riker repeating the question, "What does it say?"

Ben looked at Dr. Riker who was still looking at the counter. "You're not going to agree with this," he said. "It reads six hundred fifty-three years, six months, ten days."

Dr. Riker's face turned red. "You're right," he blurted out. "I don't agree. And I don't agree because it's not possible. The cells of the human body begin to disintegrate after 40 years causing the major organs, including the brain to stop functioning. And this leads to death."

"But maybe they had perfected a technique that we know nothing about," replied Ben. Dr. Riker was beginning to irritate him. He had seen these scientific types before who, when they had their minds made up, wouldn't believe it even when overwhelming evidence was clearly in front of them.

"The chamber doesn't appear to be any different from the ones we've made in the past." He paused, and then said, "With the possible exception of the liquid. It appears to have a slight yellow cast to it." The doctor wiped his hand across his forehead. It was a trifle warm in the small, dark room, and perspiration was forming on his brow. But maybe it wasn't just the heat that was making him sweat. He continued to stare at the man, and then he said, "It's as if someone knew we were coming, and they put this man here for us to find."

"You mean this might be a hoax?" Ben asked, dubiously.

"No," said Dr. Riker, "not a hoax, but a carefully conceived plan. There is, after all, a revolution afoot, and

maybe they've known about this complex all along."

"Nonsense." stated the Galaef in a low voice. "There are only two ways into this complex, and they've been guarded from the moment they were constructed." A flush of anger left his face. "You better think of something more reasonable," he said in a quieter tone.

The three of them stood staring for a moment at the indicator. They were each lost in a different reality, thoughts in space and imagination turning slowly searching for answers.

Finally, Dr. Riker turned and walked back to the chamber. "There is another possibility," he said. "It may be that there is more truth to the myth than we realize. There is something about this man," he continued as he looked into the chamber. "I'm not much for intuitiveness, but every time I gaze at this man I want to shudder."

The Galaef walked over to the chamber. "You're making too much out of this." He looked into the chamber. "This man is certainly not . . ." The Galaef stopped talking and looked as if he were forcing himself not to shudder. "He is certainly not a God," he finally managed to say.

Ben joined the other two men by the chamber. "There's one way to find out."

The Galaef exploded out of his stupor. "That's right." He looked at Dr. Riker. "How long will it take to bring him back to consciousness?" he asked with an authoritative tone.

The doctor thought a moment. "If we treat this man as if he has been under for over six hundred years, then it will probably take in excess of two months." The doctor drifted off as if he were talking to himself. "We will have to slowly increase the magnitude and frequency of voltage potentials. As this is done we will substitute air for the suspending liquid, and at the same time increase his heart beat. This will create a demand for ATP. A low concentration of glucose will then be injected into his circulatory system. If the concentration is too high the shock could halt all life functions," he paused for a moment. "The entire operation will be controlled by computers, of course."

"Of course," repeated the Galaef. He looked down at the man in the chamber. "I'm putting you in charge, Dr. Riker. You will have full authorization to acquire all the manpower and equipment you will need. Professor Hillar will act as your assistant and advisor as you bring this man back to consciousness." There seemed to be a hint of excitement in his voice. "And then we can ask him the appropriate questions." He looked at Dr. Riker. "Begin the operation right away, and keep me informed."

Ben glanced down at the man in the chamber. "You know," he started, before the Galaef could leave the room, "the myth states that the Aeolian Master destroyed the inhabitants of Earth by the billions." Ben raised his head and looked at the Galaef, "You don't suppose we're bringing a monster back to life?"

"Ridiculous," replied the Galaef with a barely detectable nervousness in his voice. He turned and walked out of the room.

Chapter Seventeen

The dim, white light from the handbeams cast eerie shadows from the debris lying about the large tunnel, creating black, irregular figures on the walls and conjuring up vile monstrosities ready to pounce upon the unsuspecting. The imaginary figures of the unknown extended past the lights and danced into the darkness of the night.

The stench of rat droppings, decaying railroad ties, and orange fungus wafted on the stale air and filled their nostrils with an unpleasant sewer-like odor. A long time ago, the walkway beneath their feet, being made of CPT plastic, had been bright and shiny. Now there were several inches of dirt packed onto its surface with clumps of slimy fungus growing here and there. Cracks could be seen in the walls. Broken lights and their fixtures, no longer working, protruded from the ceiling. The three sets of tracks, five feet below the walkway, which once carried subway trains into and under the city, were eroded and rusty with some of the rails being askew on the ties.

The two figures, in a stealthy motion, moved cautiously, but hurriedly along the left side of the tunnel. The faint echoes from their footsteps ricocheted off the walls—they quickly diminished and were lost in the distance. Once the woman thought she heard a noise from behind. She grasped her brother's arm and voiced her concern. They stopped to listen, but they heard nothing, so they moved on.

After awhile her brother halted their progress, took the cigar out of his mouth, and said in a whispered voice, "He should be just ahead."

They rested for a few minutes in silence. For a moment the young woman became lost in thought while secretly hoping things would go well that night. She strained to see further down the tunnel. "I hope he's here," she said as she felt the confines of the tunnel crowding in upon her. She pulled her coat tight around her upper torso to block out the cold air. "I don't like the idea of being out after curfew in a dark, smelly tunnel for nothing." She was a small woman all dressed in black—matching the shadows of the night.

The man was also small in stature being merely five feet eight inches tall, but his sister knew that what he lacked for in height he made up for in his expertise in martial arts and small arms—most suitable qualities when being part of a revolution.

Again they started forward and continued to hurry.

"We should have made contact with him by now. What if he didn't come?" she asked in a quiet voice.

"I'm sure he's just ahead," he replied adamantly, chewing on the end of his cigar. "If he isn't, the next time I see him I'm going to kick his ass. Besides he wants this revolution as much as we do. After the way they killed his brother, I can't blame him."

"But he might have run into unexpected trouble." She paused, "Maybe one of those vicious toral."

"Not a chance. He knows the country out there like a mama knows her baby's cry."

The young woman peered hesitantly down the tunnel. She was ten years younger than her brother, but it wasn't her age, or her lack of experience and her lack of training in weaponry that was starting to make her feel uneasy. And it wasn't because they were walking down a black, gloomy, smelly underground tunnel. She wasn't sure if she believed in intuition, but right then she was having a hellacious, nagging feeling that things weren't right.

Obviously her apprehension was starting to have an affect on her brother, causing him to have doubts, too. He said, "We'll go to the ladder of the last manhole, and if he's not there, we'll wait a while to see if he shows, and if not, then we'll go home. Okay?"

"Yes."

They continued into the darkness, shining the light ahead to keep from tripping over pieces of cement, which had fallen from the walls onto the walkway.

After another ten minutes the man said, "We nearing the end. This particular tunnel extends two miles from the terminal, and then dead ends into a cave-in, and the ladder is just before the end, which means we won't be going much further."

It was her first time in this tunnel. But she had studied the layout before they left, and she had seen the cave-in. She had also seen a diagram of the small access tunnels located on the other side of the tracks, which led away at right angles from the main tunnel and finally joined the workman's tunnel, which ran parallel to the main.

During the days of their operation, a little more than two hundred and fifty years ago, the mains were used for transporting products from the outlying farms. When Ar became a member of the Galactic Federation it became cheaper to import food products, along with other commodities, from other planets. Over a period of time most of the farms and tunnels became abandoned. Only a few still remained in use for the dairy farms.

More recently, the unused mains, as well as the access and workman's tunnels, were being put to use by the revolutionaries. Arms, ammunition, and other supplies were being smuggled into the city.

For the sake of the people, and especially the children and the babies, it was the young woman's hope that the revolution would start soon, bringing an end to the horrible living conditions.

They walked for several more minutes when suddenly a light from ahead flashed three shorts and a long.

"There he is—that damn son-of-a-bitch," exclaimed her brother with a hardy laugh. "I knew he'd be here." He flashed his handbeam, two longs and one short. Then they stepped up their pace and hurried to meet their contact.

"Everette, is that you?" asked the small man.

Everette stepped out of the shadows and into the light shining from the handbeams. He was a giant of a man, even big for a mountain man at nearly seven feet tall with broad shoulders and a big round face. His little eyes, compared to his large face, peered from behind a long, bulbous nose, and his frown, which puzzled the man and the young woman, was formed by a wide mouth and thick lips. He had a power pack strapped to his back, which was connected to a long barreled phasor hanging from his right shoulder. "Hello, Sam." It was apparent Everette wasn't happy.

They shook hands in a formal Arian grip.

"This is my sister, Viella," said Sam.

It seemed to Viella that Everette's frown deepened in the furrows of his face as he reached down in an effort to shake her hand. "Hello," he said unenthusiastically.

He was the biggest man she had ever seen, and then she laughed inwardly when she remembered her brother saying he was going to kick Everette's ass. "Hi," she responded.

Everette turned and looked down at Sam. "I didn't know you were bringing your sister. If I had been informed I would have told you my feelings on the idea."

"Ah," said Sam, "now I understand why you're acting funny. It's nice to see that you have my sister's interest at heart, but the fact is, she insisted. She says she has a right to be a part of this revolution and wants to help in any way she can."

"That's right," said Viella. "I feel I need to help the cause. How can I just sit around when so many people are suffering?"

"Yeah, okay," said Everette with a grunt. "It just seems an unnecessary risk when Sam and I could have handled this."

Sam ignored his statement and asked him if he brought the weapons.

"Yeah," he answered. "We brought forty hand-phasors and thirty high-powered shoulder phasors."

"Good," said Sam. He paused and looked around. "So where are they?"

Everette pointed a huge finger toward the ceiling. "Top-side near the entrance," he said. "I wanted to be sure you were coming before we hauled them down."

"We?"

Everette nodded his large head. "Yeah, one of the clan members came along to help."

"Okay," said Sam. He pulled on the right side of his red, bushy mustache. "Let's get the guns."

Everette's voice boomed even when he was trying to whisper. "Just one thing," he said. "The man that came with me is from Newnippon, and I'm not sure if you're acquainted with their customs, so I have to tell you—his name is Yakao Samsung Yoshimoto. He goes by Samsung in honor of his father's heritage, so don't call him Sam or Sammie or anything other than Samsung. It's considered to be disrespectful. Okay?"

"Samsung," said Sam. "I got it." He threw his half-smoked cigar on the dirt and ground it in with the heel of his shoe.

The three of them walked down the tunnel another fifty yards until they came to a steel-runged ladder, then one by one they started up and climbed into the cold, summer night air.

"One more shipment like this and we'll have enough arms for the entire underground," said Sam.

But that won't be enough, thought Viella. She knew they would need more than phasors and phasor-rifles. They needed undercover agents to infiltrate key positions in the elite guard of the tower, and they needed to disable the scents. Otherwise, there would never be a revolution.

A few feet away stood Everette's train of pack horses tied together from bridle to tail, and huddled together in the cold night air. Next to them, on the ground, lay several boxes and leather bags. More packs could be seen on the backs of the animals.

Just then a man stepped out of the moon-shadow cast from the horses and started walking toward them. He was short, about Sam's height at five foot eight. In the moonlight Viella could tell his skin was a golden color and his hair was black. He was wearing a long, black woolen coat and black boots. There was a black leather belt around his waist with two black sword cases, with swords on each side of his waist. They were placed between the leather belt and his coat. The handles of the swords crossed in front of his stomach. Viella had never seen such strange looking weapons.

When he got closer she could see that his eyes were brown, and the corners of his eyes were slanted in an upward direction. She had studied the cultures of the other three cities on Ar and from what she could remember Newnippon had been colonized by a people most of whom looked like Samsung. Unlike the people who had colonized Newusa, there was very little variation in physical features among the people of Newnippon.

Everette stepped forward. "Samsung," he said, "let me introduce you to Sam."

Sam stepped closer and started the Arian salutation, but before he could finish putting his hand to his chest, Samsung bowed his head low using a greeting Sam had never seen before. He didn't know what to do. So he just stood there, until Everette nodded his head at Sam, then he did it again indicating that he should emulate Samsung in a show of respect.

Sam bowed.

When they raised up Everette said, "And this is his sister, Viella."

Samsung bowed again. And Viella followed suit. She had read about the Nippons, but this was the first one

she had ever met. Underneath that gruff looking exterior, he appeared to be very respectful.

Everette picked up one of the bags and handed it to Viella. "These hand phasors aren't so heavy without the power packs," he said.

With her gloved hands she took the bag from him. "That's fine," she said. She bent over and picked up another bag and slung them over her shoulders. "I'm going to take these back to the concealment. When I'm finished I'll be back for more." She started down the ladder shifting the weight of the bags on her shoulder for better balance.

She stepped onto the tunnel floor and had gone about twenty paces when she heard someone coming down the ladder. She turned and shined her light. There was Samsung half way down with the last two bags of hand phasors. She turned back and continued toward the hideout.

Just then she heard Everette's voice, and turned again with her light. She watched as Sam came quickly down the ladder. He stood on the floor of the tunnel and waited as Everette, using a rope, lowered the first box of shoulder phasors.

Samsung turned and asked Sam, "Do you want me to hold the light for you?"

"No. You go ahead," said Sam.

Everette called out, "Here they come." His voice was so base it sounded like a loud growl.

"I'm ready. Send 'em down."

Viella picked up her pace and hurried down the dark tunnel waving her light back and forth as she went. She wanted to get back and help them, so they could finish before it got too late. As she rounded the first bend she could hear Everette and Sam working on the second box. She hadn't walked more than a few feet when a noise, somewhere in the tunnel, brought her to a sudden standstill. She whirled around instantly and peered into the dark. It sounded like soft, shuffling footsteps coming from the tracks.

She shone her light up the tracks toward Sam and Everette.

Just then, there were more sounds, and then someone, between her and Samsung, jumped up from the tracks and onto the walkway. She started to shine her light in that direction when a blue phasor bolt lit up the tunnel. She watched as it hit Samsung full in the chest catapulting him backward against the tunnel wall. Before the blue light faded into the shadows she could see him crumpling toward the floor in a state of stun.

She turned and started to run down the hall, but before she could take three steps, a hand shot out of the darkness and grabbed her arm pulling her into the chest of a large man.

Instantly she started to scream—a loud piercing scream, which caused pain in her ears. The sound reverberated off the walls and came back like a board being slammed against her head.

A big, rough hand clamped down on her mouth, squeezing harder than necessary to muffle the scream. She could taste blood in her mouth oozing from a cut on her lower lip. The man grabbed her around the chest pinning her arms and causing the leather bags and her handbeam to fall to the floor.

In the faint light she could make out the uniform of the man. *Oh crap*, she thought. One of Hurd's city patrollers. She suddenly felt like the tunnel was closing in on her, crushing the breath out of her lungs and making her dizzy. She shook her head and struggled to get free. She tried to shake loose so she could scream, but the man was too strong.

He clamped down harder and whispered in her ear. "Shut up, bitch, and stop wiggling or I'll knock you out."

Viella forced herself to a state of calmness. She knew that a struggle against this man, who was twice her size and three times as strong, was futile. She stopped resisting and relaxed herself in his grasp.

She had to escape. But to do so, she had to get him off guard. She knew that the only way to get free was to accomplish the unexpected—and it had to involve pain—the more the better.

The man felt her go limp in his arms, and he relaxed a little, giving-in to a subconscious reflex.

"That's better," he said. "Now put your hands behind your back."

Like hell, she thought. If he cuffed her hands together, that meant capture. She would be taken before the city's number one councilor. There would be a quick trial—bogus, and then she would be sent to the prison pits—the crystal mines in the Borgus plains of Ar—a certain death penalty.

But it wasn't her intention to go quietly and without a fight. She overcame the urge to panic. She mustered all her strength, and then as she started to put her hands behind her back she slowly raised her right knee, and then slammed the heel of her boot down on top of the man's arch. There was a crunching-snapping sound, and she could feel the bones give beneath her boot. The man quickly let go, and started hopping around in pain.

"You want a piece of me!" she said, using a line from an old movie.

Viella picked up the fallen handbeam and stepped away. She breathed a little easier. She began to think

more clearly. She wanted to run to Samsung, but he was in a state of stun, and she knew he was too heavy to carry. She wanted to warn Sam and Everette.

They probably heard her scream, but maybe not. She raced down the tunnel toward their location, sweeping the handbeam back and forth as she went.

She had only gone a short distance when her light swept across two patrollers sneaking up the tracks. She swept it back again, and there they were holding phasors, ready to fire.

They saw her light, and one of them spun around searching for her. He shone his light in her direction.

As his handbeam lit her up she suddenly felt like she was standing in a spotlight, but not for a song and dance number. And just then a red phasor bolt went beaming past her head. It wasn't from the patroller, which meant either Sam or Everette had fired the shot.

Damn, she thought, one of them almost put my lights out—for good.

The two patrollers started firing back, and just like that phasor bolts were being shot in both directions. They were lighting up the tunnel walls in demon-fire red and aqua-sky blue.

To go forward would be suicide, as she would be in the middle of a shootout. And it wasn't necessary anyway. Sam and Everette had been warned, and they could fend for themselves. She turned and started racing toward the patroller who had held her in his grasp. She knew that across the tracks from him and down the main tunnel about twenty paces was an access tunnel.

It was only a short distance before she would be upon him. She jumped down to the tracks and kept running. He would see the light from her handbeam, but she had no choice except to keep shining it forward in the black of the tunnel. It wouldn't be a good thing to trip over one of the railroad ties.

Just then she heard more patrollers coming up the tunnel.

She ran faster. She jumped over three sets of tracks as she ran to the far side. She kept sweeping the light in front of her, and then along the side of the main tunnel. She was looking for her only means of escape. And then there it was—the access tunnel.

She crouched lower as she darted for it. She sprinted up the metal ladder, started across the walkway, and was almost there when suddenly a blue light reflected off the walls, and a phasor-bolt hit the doorway just above her head.

The man, no longer hopping around in pain, but lying on the ground, had squeezed off a shot, and then another as several more patrollers rounded the bend.

The second shot missed, and Viella ducked inside the access tunnel. As she started down the tunnel, she heard the guard yell out, "The bitch broke my foot. Go get her!"

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

They were catching up, and she could hear the echoes of their footfalls. A phasor bolt hit the tunnel wall beside her and dissipated in a brilliant, red flash. *They switched to 'kill,'* she thought. They no longer want to capture me. From the sounds of boot leather hitting the floor she estimated they were forty yards behind in the low, dark tunnel.

Unexpectedly she came to a dead end. Her heart leapt into her throat as she believed the tunnel had ended and all was lost, but then she saw the bend and the tunnel continued into the dark.

She lengthened her pace and tried to speed up her stride, but running wasn't easy, even with her short stature. The tunnel, no more than five feet from the floor to the ceiling and had been carved through solid rock.

Explosives had to be used causing the tunnel to be roughly hewn. It was irregular with abrupt turns.

She ran hard in a crouched position. Her head was bent while trying to look ahead. She avoided stepping on chunks of rock lying on the tunnel floor. She crouched lower as she jumped over a large patch of slimy, orange fungus expanding the width of the tunnel and growing up the walls.

She knew the men behind her had the same problem with running and even more since they were taller and had to stoop lower. The sound of their running, which echoed through the tunnel, grew fainter. She was putting distance between her and them.

For only a moment she took her light off the floor and shone it ahead trying to see the opening into the workman's tunnel, but this quick glance turned out to be a painful mistake. She didn't see the rock in time, stepped on it, and went sprawling to the ground. An excruciating pain shot up her leg, and she felt a warm

sticky fluid oozing from her knee. *Damn*, she thought. The pain was excruciating, not so much from her knee as from her ankle. Get the hell up, she told herself as she lay gasping for breath on the tunnel floor. She wanted to lie there and rest, but knew she couldn't. Get up! she yelled at herself.

Finally, she rose to one knee and staggered to her feet. She started to run. But for all her effort, a sharp pain bit into her ankle, and she fell again to the ground. She was starting to feel panic—the patrollers were gaining. She urged herself up again and this time she adjusted her running in order to keep most of the weight off her injured ankle.

By the time she saw the opening into the workmen's tunnel most of the strain had been worked out of her ankle. Her ability to run, however, was not a hundred percent.

She heard voices in the access tunnel behind her. They sounded frustrated and angry as they ran and yelled back and forth.

Her injury had slowed her down enough that they had almost caught up. But they hadn't spotted her. She stepped gingerly into the workman's tunnel. She turned right and started running toward the city entrance. There was a slight limp in her gait, but she blocked the pain, stretched her stride, and fled into the darkness.

How much further? She remembered they had passed four access tunnels while traversing the main tunnel in search of Everette. And before that there was a sliding door leading into a hallway which had been reconditioned and put into operation by the underground. It was near the city entrance and ran parallel to the access tunnels.

It's at least a half-mile, she thought. *It's too far. I'll never make it.* As she continued to run she started thinking about the crystal pit. If she ended up there maybe her father could help her out, but if not, she would be at the mercy of the elements. They would put her to work in the cold—mining crystals. Her clothing wouldn't be adequate, and the food wouldn't be enough for the physical labor. She knew, and everybody in Newusa knew, if you were sent to the crystal pit, it was a death sentence.

She looked ahead. If she could reach that sliding door . . .

Behind her the footfalls of the patrollers became audible as they exited the small tunnel and started off in hot pursuit.

She could tell they were rapidly gaining, and she knew it was because they were in a larger tunnel. They didn't have to stoop while running

She quickened her pace. If she ran faster she might fall again, but if she didn't, they would surely catch her.

Her footfalls kicked up dust, putting dirt and fungi spores into the air. It was a path a blind man could follow. In a distant corner of her mind she could still feel the pain from her ankle. By now she was gasping for breath, and beginning to feel weak.

If she had stayed home as Sam had suggested, she wouldn't be in this mess. She knew there were informants working in the ranks of the revolutionaries. Why did she take this chance? Of course she wanted to help the people, and of course she wanted the revolution to succeed, but she should have been more selective about the work.

As she ran she continued to stare into the light of her handbeam illuminating the railroad ties and the rubble lying on or between them. She couldn't fall again.

Last one, she thought with a glimmer of hope. She passed the access tunnel. The passage had to be close, and if she could get there, she would be able to elude her enemy. She flashed her beam ahead. There it was, twenty yards away.

It gave her hope as she realized there was a chance for escape. Keep it going, she urged herself. *Keep the legs pumping. I'm almost there.*

But at that moment a flashing red bolt seared the top of her shoulder. Pain raced up her neck. Her pace slowed. Her chest was heaving in desperation for air.

From behind she could hear the footfalls of her pursuers coming quickly. The men were closer than she had realized. The entrance to the passage was only ten feet away. She dropped her handbeam, and with extreme effort she strove for the doorway. Three strides, long and fast. Her heart was pounding. Her lungs were rasping. Her knees began to buckle as she lunged into the passageway.

From the floor she reached up and hit the palm lock. The door slide shut before the man's outstretched fingers.

She hit the lock button.

Chapter Nineteen

She was lying, panting in the dust, gingerly feeling her knee where she had injured it when crashing to the tunnel floor. It was skinned and raw just below the kneecap with the blood slowly congealing around the edge, but still leaking from the center. Just then, a new pain suddenly bit into her consciousness, and she could feel her shoulder burning from the phasor bolt. She explored the wound and found that blisters had already formed. It was painful for her to move her arm in any direction. The skin was seared and made a slight crackling sound when she pushed on it with her fingers. If the bolt had been a few inches lower, she would have been in the hands of the patrollers, being cared for so they could send her to the crystal pits to die a slow death.

She sat up wondering about her pursuers. If they had enough stored energy remaining in their power packs, it would take them at least half an hour with their phasors set on low power to burn through the door, or if they decided to go back through the nearest access tunnel into the main and then along the tracks to the station and to the tunnel she was in, it would still take them fifteen minutes, unless they ran all the way, which she knew they wouldn't.

She had time and if she was going to make an escape, it had to be now.

With a lot of effort she stood to her feet and began groping along the wall. The tunnel was pitch black making her progress slow. She put one foot in front of the other, being careful not to trip over any debris. The main tunnel was about a hundred yards ahead. If she could make it that far with no nasty surprises, and if there were no patrollers in the underground station, she could escape to her friend's apartment and spend the night there.

They hadn't recognized her—she was sure of that. They hadn't had time to scan her with a body analyzer. And they hadn't taken any pictures. If they captured her brother, he wouldn't tell them anything. If she knew her brother, he would name off one of the councilman's wives. She was fairly certain Everette wouldn't name her, since he had already had a family member tortured and put to death by Hurd, and besides, he was a mountain man—true and loyal to his friends. She didn't know about Samsung, but she sensed that he was a fierce and honorable warrior and that he would say nothing. And as far as a mind melt, they wouldn't go to that expense for one rebel, nor would they take the chance of permanent brain damage—after all Hurd wanted men for the 'run,' and he needed men to mine his crystals.

Yes, she would fit back into society with no one suspecting her. And if her brother, Everette, and Samsung were captured, she would do what she could to help them escape.

She remembered that there was a middle passage somewhere ahead on the left, which traversed about fifty yards to a ladder taking anyone who climbed it into the park. It was a possible route of escape, but because of the scent, she would use this means of escape only as a last resort.

Instead of groping for the opening into the passage, she kept her hand on the wall to the right and moved on.

As she approached the large tunnel, her hopes began to crumble. There were new voices, and they were talking in excited tones. Since an all out revolution hadn't started yet, this was probably the most excitement they had had in weeks.

She moved closer until the voices were clear enough to hear.

"So far they've only caught one of them," said a gruff voice.

"Yeah, but I don't think the other three will get far," said a more moderate, optimistic voice.

"I hope not. If they get away, Hurd might take it out on us."

"I don't think so," replied the other voice. "If anything he would take it out on the Captain, maybe bust him down to a Sergeant."

"Maybe, but sometimes Hurd's in a bad mood, and he takes it out on everybody involved. Just a couple years ago he sent a whole squad to the pits. You remember that?"

"Sure. But that was different."

"There ain't no difference when he's in a bad mood." The gruff voice was obviously not happy with the situation.

"I still don't think . . ."

Viella had heard enough. Samsung had been caught, but there was nothing she could do about that. She had to think. The two patrollers were too close for her to escape through the main tunnel. She assumed they were posted at this location in case one of the revolutionaries made it back this far. She carefully turned around moving slowly so as not to make any noise and started toward the middle passage.

Going this way wasn't a choice she wanted to make, but now it was the only way remaining. If she had to, she would escape into the park, which was further from the apartment complexes than was safe for anyone out after curfew. She knew that the danger on the streets was potentially worse than being caught by the patrollers.

Her only hope was to get to the middle passage, and spend the night at the bottom of the ladder. In the morning, when the scents were shut down and locked away, she could emerge into the park and be on her way home.

The revolutionaries had been using the passages quite a bit, and the footprints in the dust and fungus were leading in all directions, because of this they wouldn't be able to track her, and they might figure she had made her escape before the other two patrollers had arrived in the main. Her hand, groping along the wall, suddenly touched nothing but air. It was the middle passage. She turned to her right and continued into the dark.

She walked toward an iron ladder, which would take her up to the metal hatch. Pushing it open, she would climb into the small city park. The park was only a block long and contained high reaching trees near the periphery. The grass was short and never grew more than an inch in height. There were no insects and no birds, the flowers were never pollinated, and the trees never lost their leaves. It reminded Viella of Nature without fertility.

She thought back when several weeks before, uniformed men had arrived in the park with a lot of equipment. It was rumored they were the Galaef's men on a secret mission, but what they were doing, no one knew. They had used heavy duty disintegrators to dig two holes about fifty feet apart, and finally, when the digging was done, they covered the holes with small domes and placed armed guards at the doorways.

The structures looked strange, protruding from the green grass of the park like two huge cream-colored mushrooms with doors in their stems and transparent windows in their heads. They were protecting something valuable, but no one knew what. It was rumored that an ancient underground building had been discovered. Perhaps all those men, who went in and out, were scientists exploring an archeological find. She wondered about one man in particular. He had smiled at her as he stepped out of one of the domes. Smiles were rare in Newusa, especially from those who considered themselves important. He was not much taller than average, but he had broad shoulders with well-formed muscles. His brown curly hair fell on his forehead. She thought that she would like to know him better.

Just then she struck a rock with her foot bringing her thoughts back to her present situation.

Her groping didn't last long. She reached the metal ladder and sat down to rest.

Hopefully the patrollers wouldn't follow her down this passage. If they did, she would either have to give up or flee into the night, which would mean she would be taking a chance of meeting with a horrible death. The choice would be a difficult one to make. If it had to be, she hoped it would be the right one.

She waited for at least an hour. Her eyes were growing heavy, and she was beginning to nod. It seemed they had lost her. *Good*, she thought, only half conscious. She slipped further into a light sleep, knowing that in the morning everything would be okay.

Abruptly, she was startled out of her light slumber. Voices were coming down the passage. She stood up and listened, trying to convince herself she had dreamed it, but again, the voices, and this time louder. And they were coming her way. She put her hand on the ladder. Now was the time to make her decision. She thought for only a moment, then started up the ladder. This way she had a chance. In the crystal pits there was no chance. She lifted the metal lid and emerged into the park. She waited. She listened.

Nothing.

She walked cautiously toward one of the trees.

Still nothing.

Her friend's apartment was only eight blocks away. She had a good chance of getting there unhurt.

She walked across the grass, then between two of the trees on the edge of the park, and across the street to the front of a large department store. The apartment complexes would be her haven of safety. The doors would be unlocked, and she would be able to get in from the danger of the night.

She began running. She had to hurry. Only seven more blocks and her worries would be over. She ran across the street and down the next block.

Somewhere in the back of her mind a nagging fear told her to go back. It told her that because of the distance there was no hope in her mad dash. Her decision to run for the apartment complexes was wrong. No one went outside at nighttime with the intent of traveling more than two blocks, or three at the very most. Death was almost always imminent.

Just then, as if fate had decided to prove her right with a horrible sense of irony, from above, like the soft

sound of a passing patrol car, she heard a distant hum, and then as it came closer she could hear a whirrrr of a magnetic repulsion motor as it made its way through the night skies of Newusa. Instinctively she came to a halt.

She listened. Her mind still hoped for the impossible. The spaceport was too far away for her to hear the ships' engines. They didn't sound like this, anyway. It wouldn't be a private car. They weren't allowed out after curfew. It could be the hum of a patrol car, but in the back of her mind she knew it wasn't. It was the hum of the scent—the scream of death.

She looked up and then she saw it. Fear gripped her heart as she stared at the cold, metallic sphere. The starlight glinted from its shiny surface—cold and foreboding. It would show no mercy, for machines have no compassion.

Just then it scented her blood, and as she watched, its razor sharp blades began to whistle through the air, rotating about its circumference thirty six hundred revolutions per minute—fast enough to butcher any living thing in less than a split second.

It was the controlling device used by Hurd and his city council. (As on other planets, it was used to discourage revolutionaries.) A half an hour after curfew they were expelled from the tower, and their only purpose was to hunt, to track the scent of blood, to fall upon its prey in mutilating objectivity, and to kill.

Sweat broke out on her forehead. She ran to the front door of a clothing store. She started pushing the button and pounding on the door hoping someone was still inside working late. But there was no answer and the door was locked as they always were at night.

She had gambled and lost. She turned and looked up. She watched in desperation as the scent checked its flight. She clasped her hands over her head as the scent dropped from the sky.

She screamed.

Chapter Twenty

Oblivion.

Consciousness without awareness, limited to the confinements of thought. Looking, trying to make out an object, any object, but darkness is everywhere, enshrouding, entombing—depressing the mind like the weight of a grave. To reach out in the blackness, a mental grasp, is to feel nothingness slipping through the fingers of thought. Where is the consciousness of yesterday, the foundation of knowledge?

Em made a mental turn. Oh God, where am I? What is this darkness all around? Obscurity was his answer. Still, he probed. Still he found nothing.

Shake down the robe of blackness. Light out the siege of despair. Strike off the shackles of darkness. Look out upon the relativity of existence.

The blackness lingered.

He concentrated harder. He searched in desperation. He felt fearful, helpless like a baby. He might never be able to leave this world of darkness. Trapped in the world of the unknown. There might be beings in this underworld who would want to do him harm.

He wanted to cry out, but knew not how.

And then came the grey. Fading blackness, the dark sea before the dawn, light spreading.

Rays beaming, a paradox; leaving the infinite. Becoming the relative, to observe, to experience the motion of life, to know matter separates from space, to know energy, the infinite link between . . .

The first contact with relative awareness came from sound. A vibration in the air, voices. Yes, they were voices. Low and soft, they spoke in a strange language, unknown to his scope of knowledge. Yet, he understood what they were saying. The words conveyed pictures of computers, graphs, readouts, data. The conversation was meaningless. It droned of boredom.

He willed himself to leave this world of computers, numbers, and unrest.

Suddenly there was the crashing of waves, falling upon jagged cliffs. They pounded. They rose two hundred feet and fell upon the rocks. The ceaseless pounding. The sky was dark, totally enclosed by grey, swirling clouds. Lightening shattered the night and thunder resounded and boomed upon the waves. Sympathy. He felt sympathy with the wind. It was the symphony of life. It was the power of the worlds. The wind blowing, raising the waves hundreds of feet into the air, towering above the horizon, then crashing down to boil

up again. The foam and the spray being carried for miles in the torrid wind. The clouds jamming together, bringing down thunder and letting loose . . .

He felt the wind in his soul. It was his life's power. It made him feel easy. There was peace in the storm, that which was absent in the other world.

Suddenly, he heard the voices again, low and soft, sneaking into his world. There must be a way to cease their meaningless yammer.

Concentrate. Will them away.

But this time it didn't work. They became louder.

The storm faded into the background.

"Professor," said the relentless voice, "come look at the heart monitor. The heartbeat is nearly normal."

There was a pause, then movement. Somebody was walking across a metal floor.

"His recovery rate is very rapid," said another voice from somewhere out there. The voice didn't seem pleased nor displeased. The tone portrayed puzzlement and wonder. "Maybe we've been feeding him too much juice," he continued.

"Impossible," said the first voice. "The whole program has been computerized. "If we've been . . ."

"I know. I know," interrupted the second voice. "I was merely making a point that he is indeed recovering very rapidly." The voice sounded as if it wanted to say, 'Why oh why am I surrounded by fools?' It chuckled and then became serious.

"Maybe he is 'a' God," said the first voice. "The legend of the Aeolian Master come true."

"Surely you jest."

"Well, you're the one who gave it credence in your thesis."

"Not that there was a God. Merely that there was probably an underground complex somewhere on Ar, with the slight off chance that there might be a man, most likely dead, in a suspended animation chamber."

The first voice became a bit irritated, "Nevertheless, here we have a man, or whatever, freshly 'off the ice,' as you would put it, and he's recovering far ahead of the computerized schedule."

"Yes," said the second voice, "and I think he's close to regaining consciousness."

"What?"

"That's right. It'll probably be a week, maybe two."

"But that's several weeks ahead of schedule, and I might add it's a schedule which the computer on board the Commander calculated."

"You already said that, but look at the readouts."

"I've looked at the readouts, and I don't understand how it's possible." There was a pause, then the second voice continued. "It's very confusing. In all my years of medical training and experience, I've never experienced anything like this."

There was a moment of silence, and then the voice continued. "Think about it. We have a man in a suspended animation chamber who is more than six hundred years old. At this point in time he should be just a pile of bones, but he's not. He's alive and healthy. And now, he's reviving faster than that which is humanly possible. To bring a man or woman out of suspended animation faster than the computerized schedule would destroy the tissues, not just the skin, but all the tissues."

"Well," said the other voice, "we'll find out more if and when he regains consciousness."

The voices continued to babble in meaningless terms.

The man lay on the elevated platform. His mind was besought with confusion. Searching for answers. But then he remembered an important concept, his body. Skeleton and muscles and blood. Yes, and other things.

Awareness with feeling. Slowly with his mind he explored his body. Suddenly he remembered his hands, tools for feeling and manipulation.

He tried moving a finger. Networks of nerves came to life. Electrical messengers stimulating chemical waves through the channels of myelination. Cells were revived. He could feel his finger, but he couldn't move it.

He put forth effort, energy. He drew from all the power he could find. He drew from the storm in the back of his mind. He exhausted all the sources, and exerted the energy in a final thrust. Straining, and finally it moved.

Exhaustion swept over his being, but next time he knew it would be easy.

The voices continued to babble as his exhausted mind slipped into unconsciousness. Time passed. How much he could not know, perhaps minutes, perhaps weeks. But as he regained consciousness he realized that

his energy had been restored. Where it came from or how he didn't know, but it felt good.

Again the voices were babbling and disturbing his peace, but this time he recognized the presence of a new voice. It was quiet and dignified, and that was okay, but it also had a pitch which was hidden in the vibration of the molecules, also known as the frequency of the sound waves which Em knew was . . . 'evil'. Yes, that was the word, 'evil.' It vibrated selfishness with no thought of others. It was . . . It frightened him. He wanted to get away from this new voice. He searched for the storm, the crashing waves and the wind, a place to hide, to find peace, but it wasn't there.

The voice continued, ". . . waste of the Galactic Empire's time and money," it said. "I want you to speed up this revival process, so that we can be done with it."

"Well sir," said the first voice, "it is proceeding a lot faster than we had anticipated."

"I'll give you two more weeks, Riker, and if you're not done by then, I'll personally see you in the pits."

There was movement across the floor, and suddenly the evil was gone.

"Don't look so distraught," said another voice. "At the rate he's reviving it won't be more than a couple of days."

The voices continued while moving across the floor, and then silence.

Em was worried. The malevolent voice made him question the type of people who populated this world. He wanted to leave and re-enter the world of the wind, but he knew he couldn't, at least, not for a while. He knew there was only one thing he could do. Somehow he had to move his body to a different location, somewhere away from these people.

He knew he could do it. He had moved part of his body once before.

He began concentrating on his musculature, and it wasn't long before he was making coordinated moves. Suddenly, and quite by accident he opened his eyes. And it was then that he remembered vision. It seemed a miracle, the perception of sight. He contemplated the physics of sight, the high-energy particles striking the optic disk in back of the eyeball, causing the optic nerve to send impulses to the brain, which interpreted these impulses into images. Images. Yes, sight was a wonderful sense, allowing a person to feel objects at a distance. Sight made him happy, and after awhile he remembered ocular movement, and he began moving his eyes from side to side.

At that moment he saw a man standing next to a door. Yes, a man and a door.

Em decided that the man must be there to keep him in the room. If he wanted to leave he would have to take the man by surprise. Move quickly and strike before the man could react.

Em started to sit up, but his brain went into shock, and he blacked out.

Time passed, and once again when he awoke he felt new and stronger, energy permeating his being. From then on he would take it for granted that spent energy returned during the unconscious period of living.

He opened his eyes and surveyed the room. No one was present except the man guarding the door.

He felt more confident as he put his muscles to the test. He wiggled his toes, his fingers. He moved his arms, his legs. He turned his head slowly from side to side. He watched all the time to make sure he didn't attract the guard's attention.

It wasn't necessary. The guard was unaware of his present surroundings. Daydreaming. He was on another world in another solar system reliving a past memory with a green eyed, green haired, big-breasted woman. It was indeed an expensive memory, a mistake that would break him in rank and pay.

The Aeolian Master ripped the electrical wires with the little pads from his arms, then sprang from the platform. His actions caused an alarm to go off, but it was too late for the guard. Before he could react Em was bouncing him off the wall, and as he hit the floor his phasor went spinning away. The guard jumped up to grab him, but Em's moves were too quick and his strength overpowering. He plucked the guard's grasping hand out of the air and bending over he tore an ankle from the floor. The guard, being nearly the size of Em, was more surprised than scared. Em lifted him over his head with ease and hurled him across the room. Upon impact the guard fell limply into unconsciousness, back to a state of dreaming. Several ribs were broken, but later that would prove to be the least of his problems.

Em turned and disappeared through the doorway. As he hurried down the hall he could hear excited voices shouting commands and footfalls racing along the hallway from behind, trying to catch up with him. They sounded like desperate men, who would do whatever they could to bring him down, to capture him and do whatever they had planned, but even with these thoughts, nothing frightened him more than the memory of that voice—that wicked voice.

The floor felt cold on his feet as he ran down the long, brightly lit hallway. Every so often there were

doorways on either side with luminous lettering or numbers above them. Twice he came to hallways, which went to the left and right of the one he was in, but he passed them by, hoping that the one he was in would take him to the outside of the building.

If he could not find an exit, there would be no way for him to escape. Everything was made of metal, the walls, the floor, the ceiling. No windows anywhere, just the cold, gray metal.

The sounds from behind grew fainter as Em stretched his bare feet to the cold metal floor in a desperate search for a way out of this depressing, grey prison. Why he was here and how he got here he didn't know, but he could sense the danger, and he knew he had to find a way out.

After another fifty strides, he could see the hall coming to a dead end with no halls leading in from the sides. It crossed his mind that he may have missed the exit by passing those other hallways, but it was too late to go back. Even though he had put a lot of distance between him and the men pursuing him, they would be upon him before he could go back and make his escape. He kept running toward the end. Why would they have a hallway ending with no exit?

With about twenty strides left to travel he saw indentations with cracks in the wall, and then he realized they were doors. There were two of them, side by side. Next to the one on the left there was a panel of buttons and lights. Next to the other there was nothing but bare metal. These had to be exits, but he didn't know which one to take. What would the buttons do? He couldn't take the time to think about it. They were getting closer and would be upon him in a matter of seconds.

He decided to take the door with no buttons. He stepped up to it and put his hand on the palm lock. It slid quietly open and before him there were small platforms, one on top of another. They spiraled away from him in two directions—up and down.

The visual reception quickly brought back the memory of stairs and how they were used.

He started up, taking them three at a time. He didn't know which way was out, but his intuition told him 'up.'

The stairs raced beneath his feet, and it wasn't long until he came to the final floor. The door slid open, and there before him was another brightly lit hallway. Surely this couldn't be out.

He cautiously stepped into the hall. Nervous energy filled his being. He waited for intuition to once again guide his footsteps, but this time there was none. He was in a quandary. Which way to go?

To his right the hall was only another fifty feet long and then made a sharp turn to the left. To his left there were many halls coming in from several directions. It appeared he was standing in a major corridor.

He finally decided to go right when he heard voices coming from that direction.

He turned and walked slowly toward the sounds, being careful not to make any noise. It occurred to him that they were guarding the exit.

He peered warily around the corner. There were two men standing in front of a door. They were dressed like the man he had thrown across the room. And in their hands they held objects which appeared to be weapons.

This must be the way out, he thought. And it was probable that the guards were there to keep him from leaving. *Yes, they will try to stop me.*

He calculated the distance to be ten paces. If their reaction time was between one and two seconds, then that would be enough time to take them down before they could use their weapons. It was the only thing to do considering his plight.

He crouched into the natural position of attack. His leg muscles rippled, taut and ready for the spring. His back and shoulders were brought forward as he bent at the waist. He could sense a tinge of fear. His long black hair spilled over his shoulders. He looked the sight of a wild man. He certainly was the opposite extreme of a God.

Now his adrenalin flowed steadily. His eyes took on a strange look, almost a glassy sheen, dulling the blueness of the pupils. He sprang from the hunter's position. And in six swift bounds he was upon them. He moved so fast they had no time to react. First he went for their weapons, grabbing one in each hand, he jerked them free and hurled them down the corridor. By this time the two guards had recovered from their shock. They attempted to go into the situ defense, to wait for the right moment, then to strike out killing their unexpected foe, but it was too late. Em had already grabbed them by their necks. He brought his arms together in a mighty heave, slamming them face-to-face, chest-to-chest. He let go, and they fell unconscious to the floor.

He may have broken their noses and maybe some ribs. He felt bad, but after all, they worked for the evil voice, and they stood between him and freedom.

He stepped over their bodies and through the doorway. He came into a room and on the other side he found

two more doors. Again, one with a panel of lights and buttons and the other without.

He stepped up to the one without, put his hand on the palm switch, as the door slid open he moved into the stairwell.

The stairs seemed endless as he raced upward. This time he hoped he would come to the out, and then he would find safety, a place to hide from the evil.

He climbed the stairs quickly thinking about his birth—the time when he became conscious of living in this world. There were three voices, two that seemed friendly, and one that was insidiously hostile. What was this world all about? He felt that he was suddenly born into a hostile environment with no help coming from those who gave him birth.

A picture flashed into Em's mind. He saw the two guards lying on the floor, unconscious with blood trickling from their noses. He felt bad. He didn't want to hurt anybody, but he had to get away, he had to find freedom in this strange world. What difference could it make to any of these men if he left this world of metal walls?

His mind leapt back into the present when the stairway came to an open landing. He rushed into full view of two more men. In back of them he could see a door, probably the final door, the door to the outside. But these guards had seen him, and he didn't have time to jump them.

One of the guards was quicker than the other. He drew his weapon and fired.

A bright blue beam hit Em full in the chest. The force of the beam hurtled him backward, causing him to roll violently down the steps, his flesh hitting sharp corners. When he finally came to a stop, he was lying face down with his head, chest and arms on the landing platform between the floors and his feet pointing up the stairs. Blood was flowing from a deep cut on his forehead and dripping onto the metal beneath him. His muscles were paralyzed, and he had no feeling in his arms and legs.

"Who or what the hell was that?" asked the guard who hadn't fired.

"I don't know, but you better get on the com and call it in."

"Right." The guard pulled out a communicator and started talking.

Em couldn't see them, but he could hear them, and he heard one of the guards talking as if he were talking to a machine—he could hear the guard's voice, but he couldn't hear an answer from anyone.

The other one walk to the top of the stairwell.

"Keep your phasor trained on him," said the other guard as he walked over and joined the one at the top of the stairwell.

"Why? He's down in a state of stun, and he won't be feeling anything for another six hours."

"Right. Who do you think he is?"

"I don't know. Did you call it in?"

"Yeah, they said they'd send someone down."

Em almost lost consciousness but he concentrated on the voices. He could feel a tingling sensation in the tips of his fingers. He was slowly regaining the use of his muscles. He tried moving his hand. It was difficult, but he managed a slight wiggle.

The guards were still at the top of the stairwell when one of them said in an astonished voice, "Look, he moved."

The other one sounded doubtful. "He couldn't have moved. I have my stunner set on quarter power."

"No, he moved," said the guard hurriedly. "I saw him move."

"Look," said the other guard. "Quarter power, that's enough to bring down a Chaision Lion."

"I don't care. I saw him move."

"I don't see him moving now. Let's go down and pull him up to the hallway."

"Alright, but I saw him move."

"Not possible. Right now his whole body is paralyzed, and he's stunned out of his mind. I was stunned at one eighth power once, and it was twelve hours before I started getting any feeling back."

The two guards each grabbed an ankle and began pulling him up the stairs. By now the blood had stopped flowing from the cut in his forehead, and the feeling in his body had nearly returned to normal.

He waited for the right moment. He continued to play limp. His body felt the pain of the metal scraping his skin as he was pulled up the steps. His ear caught on a sharp corner and started bleeding. The pain was intense, but the time was not right. It was too chancy. If he moved too soon, another bolt of blue would send him sprawling down the steps again.

The guards finally got him to the hallway. They let go of his legs. Then one of them bent down and grabbed

Em by the arm in an attempt to turn him over for a better look. But the guard would never get his look.

Em sprang to his feet, muscles rippling and taut. The bewildered look on the guard's face didn't have time to turn to one of frustration. He was hurled head first into the other guard, and they both went sprawling to the floor. Em leaped over their struggling bodies and slammed his hand against the palm switch. As the door slid open he shot up the last flight of stairs and out into the night. His eyes hadn't had time to adjust to the darkness and, in his flight, he didn't see the bush. His outstretching leg was stopped short, and he went tumbling to the ground, landing on the soft spongy grass.

He quickly got into a crouched position, watching for the guards.

He waited, but they didn't come.

With his eyes now accustomed to the dark, he rose and tread softly away from the domed stairwell. In his childlike ignorance it hadn't crossed his mind to wonder why the guards didn't come after him. It merely was.

He stepped out from beneath a tree, and looking up he noticed for the first time, the stars above in the cloudless night,—little lights flashing their intensity of illumination—gaining, then fading, then gaining again.

His whole being thrilled at the sight of them. Somewhere in his brain neurons flashed into operation for the first time in more than six hundred years. Electrochemical messages began to bounce around, bounding back from neurons yet to be awakened. He suddenly felt an affinity for the stars. He loved them. He wanted to touch them, to grab them out of the air. His arm moved automatically. His hand stretched out, groping the air, but he couldn't feel them. Then he realized they were too far away.

He lowered his arm and stared at them. Why were they so far away? The question, and the answer came quickly. He remembered the planets, the suns, the solar systems, and the galaxies. He remembered the distances and the infinite reaches of space. And then he remembered it was urgent for him to travel to one of these stars. It was of the utmost importance, but for what reason, he couldn't recollect.

Finally he turned his gaze to his surroundings. He noticed the tall buildings in the skyline. More neurons came to life. Yes, he remembered. It was a city composed of tall buildings with little lights glaring at random, shining with all their glory, telling him that he was alive, and that he had come from another world to . . . He couldn't remember. He looked around. Perhaps good people lived here. He would try to find them.

He stepped from the grass onto a smooth plastic material which felt warm and silky to his feet. He looked up at luminescent streetlights arcing out from the buildings. It was easy to see where he was going. Still, he wasn't in a hurry. He was sure the uniformed men were far behind him, and were no longer a threat. He could sense it.

He started down the street and hadn't gone far when he heard a loud, shrill noise coming from around the corner. The noise he knew was an indication of something. He stopped for a moment. Yes, it was a scream. It was usually emitted by a person in some kind of trouble. Sometimes it was emitted by a man, and sometimes by a woman. This time it sounded like a woman.

It occurred to him that he should help her. His intuition didn't tell him why, but he knew it had to be done.

He hurried around the corner in the direction of the scream knowing he could help whoever it was that feared some danger. Not more than thirty feet from him was a woman crouching in panic-stricken horror with her hands clasped to her chest. She was shaking her head back and forth as if she couldn't believe it was happening. Her face was askew. Tears were running down her checks. Her arms and legs were tense with fear, paralyzed. She couldn't move.

He knew she was ready for death. He didn't fully understand the situation nor the term 'death.' It was merely a negative abstract state of being, but he could sense her horror, and he knew she didn't want it to happen.

From above an object was hurtling out of the sky. An aura of intense waves of red emanated from the cold, metallic body. He remembered red meant danger.

This must be the object that horrified the woman, an object bringing death.

These thoughts and observations rushed through his mind in a fraction of a second. He must act quickly or it would be too late.

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

A large muscular arm came out of nowhere and encircled her waste. It swept her easily into the air.

With astonishment she abruptly ceased her screaming. Viella craned her neck, but couldn't see who came for her in this moment of extreme terror. The huge arm lifted her off her feet as if she were a rag doll to be

tossed away from the evil scent. Her mind was befuddled. She squirmed and fought to turn her body ever so slightly and then she saw the man's face, confident with a powerful look in his eyes. Why was he here? Who was he? Perhaps a fellow rebel. But it didn't matter. Now two, instead of one, would die a horrible death being mutilated with razor-sharp blades. All the lanes of escape were impossible to reach. The doors of the fabric houses, the food centers, the department stores, and all the public buildings were locked. There was no way in.

In desperation she grasped his muscular arm and felt his strength—arms of steel, but the power of sinew wouldn't save them now. If he had arrived in a transport, there would be a means of escape, but as she quickly looked around, to her added horror she didn't see one. The only other means of escape were the unlocked doors of the residential buildings, which were too far away for them to outrun the slicing horror of the scent.

Together then, they would die. She felt sorrow for this stranger that he should die too. Yet, for some reason, which she didn't understand, she felt easier about dying. Perhaps knowing that there is company makes it easier. She felt an instant comradeship with him. Even though they were about to die, and even though she felt sad that he was going to die too, she had an easier feeling not being alone.

She could tell from his movements that he was swift, and as he swept her up and moved toward the door, his agility seemed greater than that of most men his size, but it didn't matter. The sorrow she felt increased. She could feel his confidence unbounded, but all for naught.

As she looked over his shoulder she could see the scent arcing toward them. It was close enough now that she could see the double circular sheen from the razor sharp blades glinting light in the night. The sound of the magnetic motor was louder. She could already taste the steel of the scent as the blades cut through her flesh, bones, and muscles.

The man put his hand on the palm lock of the fabric house door.

Only a key would open this door.

Oh my God, she thought, *I should have chosen the crystal pits. In death there is no hope. In the pits, there is always that possibility of escape or rescue. And if the revolution is started, the possibility of escape is even greater.* She had made a fatal mistake, and now she would end up a pile of mutilated flesh.

Then the unexpected, she heard the subtle whoosh of a sliding door, and in another instant the man was running down the main aisle of the store with her tucked under his arm. "My God," she said in a voice of wonder. "How did you open the door?"

The death-seeking scent appeared in the doorway just as the door was sliding shut. A hacking sound erupted as the whirling blades chopped against the door and then there was a loud thud. One of the razor-sharp blades was caught between the door and the doorjamb. The thing beat itself several times against the side of the building and then a small wisp of smoke appeared from the blade slot just before the blade finally broke. The scent fell to the ground and rolled lifelessly into the street.

The door was wedged open with the blade protruding into the store, like the sickle of death reaching for its prey. The night air rushed in.

Viella breathed a sigh of relief. "You can put me down now," she said softly to the man who had saved her life.

He lowered her until her feet touched the floor, and then let go. When she turned and looked up at him she was startled by the glassy sheen of his eyes. It almost appeared that there was a faint light radiating from the pupils. Viella knew it couldn't be so. "Who are you?" she asked.

The man said nothing.

The light in the store was dim, but her eyes became accustomed, and she could make out his countenance. He was a large man, almost as large as the pictures of the Galaef, which she had seen on the home viewer. He had long dark hair hanging to his shoulders and surrounding the supple features of his handsome face. It looked recently shaven. His frame was thin, but not too thin. His muscles rippled and his stomach was flat.

Maybe he's an android, she thought. *Androids have inhuman strength.* She dismissed the idea. She had seen the bloody cut on his forehead and had felt the warmth of his skin. Androids don't have blood, at least, not red blood.

Maybe he's an off-worlder.

She looked at his thighs, and at that moment she realized he was standing totally naked. She admired his pose, but at the same time her face turned red.

"Who are you?" she asked again almost in a whisper.

He said nothing.

Maybe God had sent him specifically for her rescue. He appeared out of nowhere and whisked her to safety.

She laughed at the idea. Absurd. God had nothing to do with it. But where did he come from? And why isn't he wearing clothes? It was no longer mysterious. Now it was strange.

She began to feel uneasy. Not because he was unexplainable, but because he was naked.

"Can't you talk?" she asked.

Still nothing.

She was looking into his eyes when the sheen suddenly disappeared and left nothing but a vacant look. "Where are you?" she asked.

o o o o o

In his other world Em couldn't hear her, and even if he had he couldn't have told her where he was.

He surveyed his new world. It was different from his other world. The waves no longer crashed against the rocks, sending foam and mist into the air, the dark clouds no longer created lightening—shaking the night with a blinding force, and the wind no longer ripped the countryside with hurricane speeds, bringing terror and death to those hiding in even the strongest of shelters.

No, indeed, it was a peaceful world. Em looked at the distant mountains with green forests pointing toward the heavens, and then he looked at the tall and wide spreading trees nearby, the flowers in the meadows. Above was a blue sky with scattered, puffy-white clouds. Not too far away he could hear the gurgling of a stream, and as he looked in that direction he saw someone standing on the bank.

It didn't occur to him to wonder or question why he had entered this world. Instead, he enjoyed the serenity and tranquility in his newfound environment.

Maybe I should talk to the person by the stream, he thought. He started walking in that direction.

o o o o o

"We better get you dressed," said Viella. She took him by the hand and led him to a small booth in the clothing department, which was not far from the front door. She coxed him into the small room and told him to stand there. It was a typical clothing booth found in the fabric houses in the four large cities of Ar. It correctly sized the individual by the use of light touch laser beams. These measurements were then fed into a computer, which correlated all the data including the preferred style. The feed out impulse located the desired clothing and a few minutes later the garment was lying in a slot next to the booth.

After retrieving the tight fitting body suit she helped him into it, stood back and reviewed the product. It was good. Yes, very good.

She looked into his vacant eyes and sighed. "You sure you don't want to say anything?" she asked.

Nothing.

"Well then," she continued. "It's time to plan our escape. I say 'our escape' because I can't leave you behind after what you have done for me, . . . can I?"

Nothing.

"Somehow I didn't think you would object." She walked to a display counter and sat down. She contemplated their situation. At the moment things didn't look too grim. The plan was simple. They would spend the night in the restrooms, and in the morning when the store opened they would mingle in with the customers, and then make their way back to her apartment.

They would have to hide the scent and the broken blade somewhere in the store. Hopefully they would be gone by the time the scent was discovered.

She considered all the possibilities. *Yes,* she thought, *this can work.*

She took Em by the hand and was about to lead him in search of the restrooms when there came a loud clanging noise from the front of the store. The razor sharp blade rang as it hit the floor.

Fool that she was! She should have known patrollers would be dispatched to seek out the immobilized scent.

These ideas flashed briefly through her mind before she whirled around to see the two patrollers standing in the doorway. They stood with arms elevated, pointing their phasors. They hadn't yet spotted their victims, but it wouldn't be long.

o o o o o

"Eolia Masteet?" asked the man as he turned and recognized the Aeolian Master. There was a look of wonder on his face. "How is it I can see a dead man who has come to life? Is that really you?"

The Aeolian Master started to disappear.

"Wait!" yelled the man. "It's urgent that I talk to you Did you find it? It's imperative. We must have it!"

Em faded away.

o o o o o

Viella suddenly realized that the stranger was no longer standing beside her. She looked for him and saw that he had crouched behind one of the counters. In the darkness she could see a strange glow coming from his face, and then she realized it was his eyes. His muscles bulged through the body suit.

She saw him turn in his hunched-over position and stalk around the corner. He was moving down the side aisle toward the patrollers.

A shudder traversed her body so vigorously she had to put a hand on the counter to steady herself. She realized in her anguish that there was no hope for either of them. She admired his strength and bravado. He seemed to have great courage when it was time to face danger, but the task before him was impossible, and she knew it.

She squatted down until her head was out of sight of the men. She hoped they hadn't seen her. She peered around the corner. What could she do to help the stranger? There wasn't anything nearby she could use for a weapon. She wasn't strong enough for a man to woman combat. And her training in martial arts had only begun a short while before in the secret halls of the underground. In essence there was nothing she could do but watch. *Or maybe I can distract them*, she thought. She looked over the counter at them.

Just then one of the patrollers stepped forward and pulled an instrument from his belt.

A flesh detector, thought Viella.

The patroller had his head bent, concentrating as little lights flashed on the face of the instrument. For a patroller he was of average height, but his shoulders were massive and his chest bulged beneath his uniform. Around his waste was strapped a thick, black belt. Various instruments protruded from attached casings. On his feet, instead of the usual footpads of the body suit, he wore large leather boots

Probably very good at all forms of combat. Hurd picked only the best for his police force.

He continued to study the instrument, and she knew it wouldn't be long before he located the two of them. Then there would be much time to think about her mistakes on the way to the pits.

The patroller looked up and pointed in her direction. He had located the perpetrator. He looked again at the instrument to double check. Abruptly his expression changed quickly from one of authority to one of surprise. He looked to the left and grabbed for his weapon, but before he had a chance to draw and fire a man came flying out of the dark, landing on top of him and the other patroller. The three of them crashed to the floor with arms and legs flailing in all directions. One of the patrollers received a blow directly to the face from the stranger's fist. The patroller's nose made a crunching noise from the blow and his front teeth were pushed back rendering him unconscious before he was able to rise from the floor.

The stranger jumped up and lifted the other patroller into the air, and hurled him forty feet across the room. When he landed, fortunately for him, it was in a pile of sample fabrics. The wind was knocked out of him, and he lay gasping audibly for breath.

Viella rushed toward the stranger. She was stunned by his speed and strength, and how did he catapult himself through the air like that. But this wasn't the time to stop and think about it, or to try to figure it out.

Her flesh pattern would now be on record with the central computer. There was only one thing left to do and that was to escape from the city. The stranger would have to go with her. She bent over and picked up the fallen phasor and the flesh detector, which was lying a few feet away, then she ran to the shelves where the gloves were stocked and grabbed a pair for the stranger, then she ran to the back of the store where she had seen the coats. If they were to escape into the plains, the stranger would have to have some protection against the cold, night air. Unfortunately these weren't the coats used to survive extended lengths of time in the harsh plains of Ar, however they would have to do. She took the stranger by the hand and led him outside toward the patrollers' flyer, which was hovering in front of the store. She opened the door for the stranger, and after he had gotten in she rushed around to the driver's side, opened the door, and jumped in.

The hum of the engine increased as she stepped on the accelerator. It started forward, and she flew the craft

down Fifth Street and rounded the corner at the intersection of Gem. She headed for the edge of the dome all the while keeping an eye out for other patrol craft. Several times she heard chatter over the radio, and once she was sure the dispatchers were calling her craft. She knew she had to hurry. She pushed down on the pedal increasing the speed. Finally they came to the end of the street. She stopped the flier, and opened the door. She ran around to the other side and helped the strange man out. She led him to the bushes where a hidden tunnel would take them safely out of the city.

As she was searching for the hatch she heard the hum of another patrol craft. She had the stranger crouch down, then she continued her search. She found the handle buried in the grass and pulled with a hefty heave lifting metal and grass to get the small hatch open. Just then she saw lights as the craft came around the corner. She parted the branches of the bush very slightly and watched as the craft came to a halt next to the other one. The door opened on the driver's side, and a patroller got out of the craft. He turned and looked right at Viella. It was as if he knew she was there, or maybe he heard a noise. She wanted to let go of the branches, but she was afraid that the movement would give her away, so she continued to stare at him expecting him to draw his phasor and start shooting. But instead, he turned and went to the vacated patrol craft and looked inside.

She didn't wait to see what else he would do. She let go of the branches and stooped beside the stranger. She took his hand and pointed, indicating for him to go down the metal ladder and into the tunnel. It was with a sense of relief that he understood what she wanted him to do, and he started down. She went in after, closing the hatch quietly behind her.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Viella, shaky and nervous as she surveyed the surroundings, expected Hurd's patrollers to come rushing out of the dome at any moment, to snatch them up and haul them off to their doom. She turned her head over her shoulder and looked back at the dome—she could see no activity. She looked ahead again, and all was quiet, too quiet, like calm sands in the desert night, just before the hurricane winds. She quickly grabbed the stranger's gloved hand in hers and started off in the cold night air toward the mountains in the far distance. She was angry with herself—she could be home now sleeping in a nice comfortable bed, dreaming peacefully, but no, she ignored her brother's advice, and now she was running for her life.

As they hurried along she kept a close watch, not only on the surroundings, but also the air above. She knew Hurd would be intently searching the city by now, sending out squadrons of patrollers, hundreds of men to look in every corner and all reaches of the city to find these rebels and to bring them to justice. He would be confused and extremely angry. How could anyone not only escape the deadly whirling blades of a scent, but also destroy it and bring down two armed patrollers? It was almost impossible, but this event would fuel his hatred for the rebels and would compel him to cover all avenues of escape. And just to be sure, he would send patrol craft above the plains to search the lands of the toral on the off chance that these rebels had the audacity to think they could escape through the plains.

Viella didn't care a damn about Hurd and his patrollers, she knew if she and the stranger could make it to the mountains before sunrise, they could escape into the sparsely forested trees and from there they would find their way to the mountain people where they would be hidden and cared for, and Hurd would never find them.

She picked up the pace, but not too fast as she had to watch for the toral, the most feared, natural enemy on Ar.

The two moons had risen from the horizons, one from the East and one from the West, and since the moon, traveling from the East, was smaller and closer to Ar, it was traveling faster. This meant the two glowing orbs would cross each other's paths somewhere in the West in a couple of hours. The radiance they gave off produced an unworldly appearance on the surrounding landscape. It had an ethereal look. Double shadows were cast upon the ground, and only where the shadows of the objects overlapped were the shadows black, like that of the sun's shadows. The others were a hazy grey in the darkness.

In the subdued light Viella could see small plants and bushes scattered over the terrain. Big trees, more popularly called 'Beast Trees,' because of the toral, grew at random, sometimes three or four clumped close together, sometimes far apart, and unlike the trees of a forest, they were sparsely situated over the fields. Their height was short, a mere ten feet at the most, but their gnarled branches radiated out and ran parallel to the ground for thirty or forty feet. From their twisted branches hung a purple fruit about the size of a man's closed

fist. The purplish skin was leather tough, but the insides contained a sweet succulent pulp, which was edible and tasted good. It was known as the 'Toral Fruit.'

There were groups of toral, located to the Northwest of the city, which roamed the twenty-five mile stretch between the city and the mountain range. They got their water from small springs at the base of the mountains and ate mostly the purplish fruit that fell from the trees. Seldom would they eat meat, nevertheless, on Ar, they were man's most feared enemy.

During her twenty-five years of life Viella had never left the city, and in her early years she had spoken to only a few who had had reason or the adventurous spirit to do so. Lately, however, when the mountain people had become allies with the rebels, she had gotten to know some of them well enough to learn about life outside the city walls.

The mountain-people loved to talk, especially about the mountains and the plains, about their way of life, and about their battles against Nature for their survival. Before the discovery of the crystal, which brought the city to them, they journeyed to the city for supplies on a regular basis. Because of this they learned the way of the ferocious toral and over the years they had learned how to avoid the beast. But this knowledge had come with deadly lessons. Many of their ancestors and their ancestor's friends had been killed by the toral.

With conviction in the voice of the big mountain man Viella remembered his advice, "Never travel the plains in daylight," said he. "The toral feed by day and sleep by night, but at night they are light sleepers. So, stay away from the fruit trees, or they will either hear you or smell you coming."

Warily Viella guided the stranger around a rock and kept him going stealthily toward the next group of trees, under which they would be able to hide for a few moments while searching the skies for patrollers. All the while she kept scrutinizing the instrument in her hand, looking for little blips as the bright, green line swept in a circle around the face of the scope. She could only hope the flesh detector would be enough to get them to the mountains without being discovered by the toral.

Viella pulled on the stranger's hand, guiding him toward a clump of trees, which had no toral beneath them. "Did you know, besides the constantly frigid air, the toral is the main reason domes were built over the cities?" She whispered as she looked at the man. She looked back at the scope and then to the front in the direction they were headed. Outlined in the semi-dark, the mountains loomed ahead in the distance.

The man didn't answer.

"That's right," she continued quietly. "Many years ago when the cities were first being built, they constructed walls to keep them out, but the toral learned how to leap over them. So, later when mankind learned how to build transparent domes and oxygen generators, he was able to keep the toral in the plains and out of the cities." She squeezed the man's hand. "Great. Don't you think?"

The man said nothing. She let go of his hand and concentrated on the flesh detector as they trekked on toward the mountains. They walked for several hours. Twice they had to walk wide of toral sleeping under the trees. Once they started around only to find another clump of trees with more toral, which made them circle back, losing time to the coming sun and maybe the search of the patrollers.

They walked toward a beast tree, under which the flesh detector indicated there were no toral, and for good reason — the branches were so heavy laden with fruit they almost touched the ground. Toral would not be able to sleep under this tree.

Viella started around the left side of the low hanging branches when she quickly came to a halt, stopping the stranger, and standing very still. Her heart was pounding in her throat and her breath became rapid while breathing in and out the cold night air. There was another beast tree not more than forty feet away, and she didn't need the flesh detector to tell her there were toral beneath it. She could see them lying in a group, at least twelve of them, with the moonlight reflecting from their shiny fur like a beacon of death. Suddenly one of the toral snorted and stood up. He looked directly at Viella and the stranger watching to see what had made the noise, to see what it was that had invaded his territory. His nostrils snorted the frosty, night air. He pawed the ground several times and snorted again. Three of the other toral raised their heads from the ground, looking to see what was causing the commotion.

Fortunately, the toral had poor eyesight, and even though their sense of smell was superb, the slight breeze blowing across the plains was behind them blowing toward Viella and the stranger. A hunter's wind had saved the two intruders.

Viella stood like a statue, not moving a muscle, not making a sound, waiting for the toral to lose interest and go back to sleep. It was unnerving; the toral kept looking at them for at least three minutes, which seemed more like three hours. Viella's feet started to hurt, her mouth was dry, and her heart kept pounding so loud she was

sure the toral would hear it and attack—rendering them into lifeless hunks of flesh. But finally the big toral lay down. He kept his head up for another couple of minutes before he finally laid it upon the thigh of one of the other toral and closed his eyes.

Holding on to the stranger's sleeve, Viella very quietly took a step back. In the back of her mind she had worried that the stranger would make a noise and the toral would be upon them tearing into their flesh with their long talons, bringing death. As it turned out, the stranger was very quiet. It was as if he knew.

She took another step back, and kept it up until they had put some distance between them and the beast tree with the toral.

They went another hundred paces to the right walking softly and then they started toward the mountains. "We should be more than half way," said Viella in a whisper. She was becoming confident that they were going to make it, but no sooner had she spoken these words, than a spotlight from the sky lit them up.

Oh God. It was Hurd's patrollers. Now, although it was too late, she could hear the familiar sound made by the patrol craft's antigrav motors.

She grabbed the stranger's hand and started running. Pulling him along, and with the spotlight following them, she put forth the effort to run as fast as she could to escape a hopeless situation. She ran two hundred paces before she began to tire and slow down. Her legs were starting to feel like lead weights, and her lungs were burning from rapidly sucking in the cold, bitter air. Ar, being the fourth planet from the sun, had a frigid climate, even during the summer months, and when the sun went down the cold was penetrating, especially with the clothes they were wearing—designed for wear inside the dome. The air was so thick with the cold it was like running through thin sheets of ice. She started slowing her pace losing her energy and tiring. She felt like an insignificant insect running across an ice cube with no end in sight. All the while, in the back of her mind, she knew she had to keep the tree between them and the toral. Surely, by now, the toral were standing and watching the light from the sky.

Finally, she could run no further. She dropped to her knees in despair, hoping there was some way they could elude the patrollers. She kept her hand over her mouth trying to warm the air before it went into her lungs, but it wasn't helping. The cold air was making her throat burn. She peered into the darkness looking for a means of escape, something to sneak behind, some uneven terrain, which would hide them.

Suddenly she heard the engine of the patrol craft winding down. She looked behind her, not more than thirty feet, the patrol craft had landed, and two patrollers with phasors in their hands were disembarking.

She looked at them in desperation. *I won't be captured*, she thought, *not after being this close to freedom*. She struggled to her feet and ran blindly into the darkness, no longer caring where the toral might be. With reckless abandon she pushed ahead ignoring the pain in her lungs and the pain in the ankle, that she had sprained earlier in the underground tunnel. She no longer knew where the stranger was, as she dared not look back. Her feet pounded the hard surface as she exerted tremendous effort to get away. She had run for several agonizing minutes, when ahead in the moonlit landscape, not more than twenty feet, there loomed a field of rocks, each about the size of man's head and extending as far as she could see. She wanted to turn and flee in another direction, but she had no choice. If she changed her course she would be caught. She rushed ahead and began to run-jump, bouncing from one rock to another and slowing down to keep from falling. As it turned out, the rocks were bigger than she had believed making it more difficult to keep her balance, and they had small, hard spikes protruding from their uneven surfaces, poking into the soles of her shoes and delaying her progress with such intensity as it seemed they had been purposely laid there so she would be apprehended.

She took a chance with a quick glance over her shoulder. The stranger was to her left and only a few feet behind her. The patrollers, still holding their phasors, were only ten paces further back and coming fast to the field of rocks.

"They're gaining on us!" she cried out as if the stranger knew what she was saying. She pictured the manacles of imprisonment on her wrists and ankles—a frightening idea. In despair she threw caution to the wind and started running faster over the rocks hoping that she wouldn't fall and that soon she would come to solid ground. A moment later she heard a crashing sound, which sounded like metallic objects such as snaps and buckles hitting the rocks. She turned her head again just in time to see one of the patrollers sprawled out on the rocks with his phasor clattering to a halt and disappearing into the crevices, and then his partner tripped over one of his outstretched legs and joined him on the hard, spinney points.

She heard them spitting out curses along with their groaning in agony. She quickly looked to where she was going and kept her pace. She jumped to the next stone and then the next and then the next, and then the stones became smaller, and soon she was running on the hard ground of the plains. She quickened her pace and ran for

several minutes leaping from time to time over small bushes or running around larger rocks, all the while watching intently for beast trees. Fortunately for her, they seemed to be thinning out.

She took the chance to glance back while keeping the stride. But the patrollers and the field of rocks were so far behind she could no longer see them through the moonlit night. It seemed she was putting distance between them and her, but she didn't dare think she was going to escape. She knew they only had to climb into their patrol craft again and start searching for her, and though they would catch her, she wouldn't go down without a fight. She patted the phasor in her pocket, and then she started running harder, really pumping the muscles in her legs, putting forth every ounce of effort, forcing her legs to catapult her through the thick, cold air, sucking ice cubes into her lungs until her wheezing from the contraction of her throat almost made her pass out. She shook her head and pushed harder.

Then she heard the hum and saw the lights of another patrol craft, which had landed about seventy-five paces in front of where she was running. *Now, escape has just turned impossible*, she thought, and then she said to the Aeolian Master. "The other patrollers called in our location before they landed." This new patrol craft was between her and the mountains, so she changed her course and started running to the right in hopes of circumventing the newly arrived patrollers.

She was at a full stride when suddenly she almost ran over the edge of a steep embankment. As she tried to stop with her outstretched foot finding nothing but air, the stranger grabbed her by the hair and pulled her back to keep her from falling into the deep abyss.

"Ow" she yelled, with disdain in her voice. She started rubbing the back of her head. It was painful, but she was thankful that he had saved her once again. She looked in the direction of the recently landed patrol craft, and through the moonlit night she could barely see two patrollers coming her way. She looked into the gorge below. "Here it is," she said to the stranger not expecting an answer. "This is the arroyo they told me about. It runs from the base of the mountain for sixteen miles into the plains before it levels out with the ground. I was told if ever I was on the plains and could find this gorge; it would be a safe route through the plains of the toral. It seems, for some reason, the toral never go into the gorge. It is said they never even get close to it."

Looking down she could see the gorge was approximately forty meters deep or the height of a twelve-story building from the top to the bottom and about fifty meters across. There were large boulders here and there projecting up from the floor and there were caves in the walls at the bottom of the gorge. The first fifteen feet at the top of the gorge was straight up and down and then from there it was a steep, rocky, sandy incline to the floor. Injury was probable if they attempted to jump.

She was feeling anxious as she looked to the left watching the patrollers run along the rim of the gorge. They were closing in, and by now the patrollers behind her would have recovered from their spill into the rocks and would be chasing after. Therefore, she couldn't go back, she couldn't go left, and if she went to the right, she would be going toward the city.

She only had one choice. She scrutinized the steep incline, found a spot which looked bare of rocks, and jumped hoping that her injuries would be minimal enough that she could put up a good fight when the patrollers caught up with her. She assumed the stranger would follow her, and he did. She could see him out of the corner of her eye before she hit the steep incline and rolled painfully over several rocks. She continued her rapid descent, out of control with flailing arms and legs, until finally she was able to dig her shoes and fingers into the semi-soft dirt, bringing her to a slow halt on the steep wall of the gorge. During her roll her head had grazed a rock and there was blood slowly seeping down the side of her face and into her right eye. She wiped away the blood and explored the rest of her body with her gloved hand. No bones seemed to be broken, but her body was aching in several places where she had hit the rocks. Just then the stranger slid in beside her, which for some unexplainable reason brought her a sense of relief. She looked at him and said, "I'm so glad you're here. There's something about you that gives me resolve." She bolstered up her courage, and started down the incline. She went rapidly, mostly sliding, but sometimes walking on her hands and feet with her back to the dirt and her head raised off the ground like a topsy-turvy Manorian soft-shelled crab running across the white sandy beaches of Critton escaping the powerful snapping beaks of the seabirds.

Two feet from the bottom she stood up and stepped onto the sandy floor, wincing as she felt a sharp pain in her right buttock. She started limping toward a large boulder on the far side of the arroyo.

After limping three quarters of the way across the floor of the gorge she heard voices on top of the ridge, and then someone started shouting. "Stop in the name of the law. Stay where you are, or we will open fire."

She grabbed the stranger's gloved hand in hers and continued toward the boulder. "They'll have to be a hell of a shot to hit a target like us in the shadows at this distance."

Suddenly a blue phasor bolt hit ten feet to the right and three feet in front of them. She started limp running, ten more feet and then she and the stranger were behind the boulder. "That's strange," she said. "A blue bolt. That means they want me alive. But why?" And then it occurred to her that Hurd wanted to use her as leverage against her father. But how did Hurd know it was her. And then another realization. The flesh recording taken in the clothing store had given away her identity.

"Why didn't they shoot when they were only thirty feet behind us?" she asked softly. And then she shuddered when she realized what the men had in mind for her before they took her back to Newusa. In order for them to rape her she couldn't be in a state of stun.

She wanted to cry, to lie down in the sand and wail, but knowing that she had to keep her composure in this time of crisis, she couldn't succumb to thoughts of despair. She looked out from behind the rock and surveyed the arroyo. "Come on," she said, "we'll make our way along this side of the gorge from boulder to boulder toward the mountains."

Hoping the shadows of the canyon wall would act as a shield against enemy eyes, she walked stealthily toward a boulder further up the arroyo with the stranger following. In reality, she knew escape was no longer possible. The patrollers knew where she was, and they would eventually close in. It occurred to her that they no longer had rape on their minds. If she escaped because of their folly, they would feel the brunt of Hurd's wrath.

"It's not likely, but with luck on our side, we might make it to the mountains," she whispered to the stranger. "With this phasor," she patted it in her coat pocket, "and with your uncanny strength, we might be able to overcome them."

She knew she was being overly optimistic, and when another patrol craft landed on the bottom of the gorge near the boulder she had planned to hide behind, and when the patrollers opened the doors and jumped onto the sandy bottom of the gorge, she realized her thoughts of escape were folly. The net was closing in and she was beginning to feel the lines tighten around her.

Now there was nothing to hide behind without retracing her steps. She and the stranger stopped in the shadows as she tried to determine their next move. She had to formulate a plan, but she realized the situation was hopeless. She looked at the top of the ridge where she and the stranger had jumped into the gorge. On the far side, the four patrollers, bathed in moonlight and small in the distance, had spread out and were looking into the shadows of the arroyo.

The shadow cast from the wall upon the floor was beginning to recede as the larger moon from the west was starting to appear overhead.

Viella grabbed the stranger and moved slowly back to the boulder they had just left. She pointed up the ravine and said in a soft voice, "Go. It's your only chance. With your strength and athletic ability you might make it. After you've gone about a mile and a half, climb out and make your way to the mountains. It's me they're after, and I don't think they will bother with you." In his state of stupor she didn't think he would go, but she had to try. Why should she get this man, who had twice saved her, into more trouble? She pushed against his chest with all her might, but he stood strong. "No?" she asked. "I didn't think so. I just wish I could make you understand."

A light lit up the floor. The men from above had retrieved a spotlight and were searching the shadows. The two men on the floor were coming closer.

Viella took the glove off her right hand, put it in her left coat pocket, grasped the phasor in her right hand pocket and pulled it free. She stepped out from behind the rock and squeezed off a shot at the man coming down the gorge on the left. A blue bolt lit up the canyon hitting the man in the chest and down he went. She quickly got off another shot at the other man, but he had already dashed into the narrow shadow against the far wall and slid in behind a small boulder. He rose up and pulled the trigger on his phasor. The blue beam just missed Viella's shoulder by an inch and hit the stranger in the arm. He went down in stun.

Viella gasped in horror. In the back of her mind she kept hoping that this strange man would get that sheen in his eyes and come to her rescue. Now, there was no chance. Once again she jumped behind the rock, this time leaving the stranger lying in the sand.

The spotlight lit up the stranger and then moved toward the boulder. "Give up," yelled one of the men on top of the ridge. "You don't have a chance. Come in now and we'll make it easy on you."

"I'm sure you will," she yelled back. She peered around the right side of the boulder looking for the man lying behind the rock. If she could take him out of the picture, she could get to his patrol craft and make her escape into the mountains. But he was nowhere in sight. If she tried to move on him, he would gun her down;

nevertheless, it occurred to her that she couldn't wait. It would give the men on the ridge time to fly their crafts into the gorge. She had to take a chance.

She stepped out from behind the boulder. When the man rose up to take a shot, she would jump to one side and take her own shot.

The spotlight lit her up. "Lay down your weapon," yelled the man on the ridge.

She looked up in time to see him pointing a phasor rifle with a scope at her. She looked down and saw the little red laser dot in the middle of her chest. "Shoot, you fool," she yelled. She wasn't going to let them take her unless she was in stun.

The man behind the rock stood up with his phasor trained on her. "It's no use," he said in a heavy masculine voice.

She whirled around bringing her phasor to bear on the man when suddenly she heard a scream from the ridge. She looked up in time to see the giant fangs of a toral ripping into the throat of the man with the phasor rifle. His scream changed into a bloody gurgle. The other three patrollers turned away from the gorge and started firing their phasors, lighting up the sky in a red hue. They killed the toral that had just attacked their fellow patroller, but more toral were coming. They turned their backs to the gorge and started firing. Suddenly two of the men were grabbed in the jaws of the toral and shaken fiercely like rag dolls being attacked by an angry cat. The other man fell over the ledge, hitting the steep incline and sliding forty feet before he came to a stop. Viella couldn't tell if he was dead.

"That leaves just me and you," she said to the man twenty feet away. But she spoke too soon. Much to her chagrin the toral came bounding over the ledge and down the steep incline, which gave them blinding speed.

Without hesitation Viella and the patroller turned and started firing. Two of the toral went down after four or five shots, but the other two kept coming.

Viella stood her ground, but the patroller, overcome by fear, turned and ran for his patrol craft. "You fool," yelled Viella. "Stand and shoot!" She knew he couldn't outrun the toral, and he didn't. The toral closest to him bounded down the incline and chased him down like a cat chasing a three-legged mouse. He struck the man with his huge paw sending him ten feet in the air and then snatched him with the fangs of his jaws before he hit the ground. In a half-conscious stupor the man managed a final farewell. "Oh God," he said as he reached toward Viella with his outstretched hand. "Help me." And then he died when the toral grabbed him around the throat with his powerful jaws and crunched into flesh and bone.

Viella didn't take time to watch any more of the bloody execution. She turned and fired at the toral bearing down on her. The blue bolt hit the beast in the head and down he went.

"One more," she said talking to the stranger lying in the sand. But again she spoke too soon as five more toral came bounding over the ridge.

o o o o o

"Eolia Masteet, where are you?"

"I am here."

"No. This is only a projection of you. Where is your physical body?"

"I do not know. I only know that I am here."

"Eolia, what has happened to you?"

"I do not know."

"Eolia, it is urgent that you come home. We are being"

The man by the stream faded away, and the storm began to rage bringing with it hurricane winds, with lightning striking the sea, and thunder breaking upon the waves. Watching Nature's symphony, Em stood upon the edge of the cliff overlooking the ocean using his arms as batons directing the winds to release their destruction upon the Earth, upon the cities, upon the people. He killed them en masse. Millions died.

Red permeated the sky. The red became more brilliant, more intense. The red

o o o o o

Viella was too busy to notice when the stranger's eyes opened and the glassy sheen was once again present. She would not have understood it for she saw this man go down in stun, and it was impossible for anyone to rise from stun after only a few minutes.

She fired at the lead toral and brought him down. She fired at the next and missed. It wouldn't matter. There were too many of them.

The toral by the patrol craft dropped the man and turned toward Viella. Saliva from the excitement of the hunt dripped from his fangs. He dug his claws into the soft sand making ready to spring, to bring death to this creature.

Viella heard a noise behind her. When she looked over her shoulder she saw the stranger standing in the sand several feet behind her with his head moving from side to side taking in the present situation. He jumped forward and swept her up in his muscular arms as if she were a small child. He started running along the sandy bottom toward the patrol craft where the toral stood over the dead man's body.

"Are you crazy? Let me down." If this man kept running the toral would attack, knock them down, and rip them apart. Their only chance was for her to keep firing her phasor in hopes she could stun the five remaining toral before they got to her and the stranger, or before the phasor pack ran out of energy.

She shifted her position as much as she could trying to bring her phasor into the firing position, but the stranger's physique was too broad and tall. She could barely get her hand with the phasor in it over his shoulder.

"Let me down!" she commanded.

The toral next to the patrol craft stood up and took a hesitant step back with a puzzled look, and then, when he realized the man wasn't attacking, but escaping, he started the chase. The other four toral weren't far behind.

With hands and elbows, Viella pushed herself up the man's chest and turning in an awkward position looked over his shoulder. She could see the gleam from the toral's fangs in the moonlight. He was no more than two lengths behind them and gaining. But the stranger did the impossible—he lengthened his stride and stepped up his speed. The lead toral was no longer gaining on them. The stranger increased his speed again, and soon he was outdistancing the toral, leaving them behind as if they were slow moving Gorian turtles. Viella looked to the walls of the gorge, and saw nothing but a blur. She tried to look forward, but the wind created by his speed was blinding and brought tears to her eyes.

She closed her eyelids and relaxed. "You're an android," she said with a sudden realization. "No living man could shake off a stun so quickly. No living man could outrun a toral. No living man could run this fast. No living man could see where he was going in this darkness"

She could feel the heat coming from his body as his muscles pumped like a machine racing through the gorge away from the dangerous toral. "If you are a machine, then why is there heat?" Then she remembered the Galaef's men sinking shafts into the city park. *That's it*, she thought. *The Galaef and his scientists have created a new android in a secret laboratory, but for some reason the android malfunctioned and escaped.*

Viella looked over the stranger's shoulder for the toral, but they were no longer in sight. After another few minutes the stranger slowed down, came to a stop, and set Viella on the ground.

She was totally convinced of his mechanical endoskeleton and his artificial intelligence. There was no other explanation for his superhuman abilities and his constant stupor.

She looked up at him and smiled. "I have my own android," she said. She took him by the hand and started walking along the sandy bottom of the gorge.

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

It was difficult trudging along the sandy bottom of the gorge, especially with the cold penetrating through the light jacket and with the earlier tiring, gut wrenching, energy draining events of the night—pumping adrenaline through the arteries when running from the patrollers—fighting—fighting, running and now pushing through the sand, on toward their goal, on to the mountain people. Viella was exhausted as she and the stranger finally came to the base of the mountain. The gorge started at an incline narrowing as it progressed upward until about a half mile up the mountain it became a long rockslide.

One look and she knew they couldn't go that way, so she climbed out of the gorge, hands and feet on loose rocks, and made for a group of trees a hundred paces ahead. They had made it across the Toral Plains an hour and a half before sunrise, but it was still another forty miles until she came to Everette's village, and she knew she couldn't go on without rest and sleep.

After drinking the cold, refreshing water at one of the toral springs she found an outcropping of rock, which

would hide her from the searching eyes above, and as she lay wearily beneath it, her last thoughts were of wonderment of the stranger, then she fell asleep.

An hour later she awoke with a start, not because she felt refreshed, which she certainly didn't, but because there was something in the back of her mind telling her it was time to get up and move on.

In half an hour the sun would rise over the far horizon, but for now it was still semi-dark with the moons shedding a little light on the surrounding environment. She looked at the stranger who was sitting twenty paces from her. "I wish they would have given you a voice and the ability to talk," she whispered as if she didn't want the patrollers or the toral to hear her.

She bent down and scooped up a handful of water, watching the moonlight shimmer off the surface of the small pond. She lifted the water to her lips. In all directions the beams glimmered away. "I guess I'll have to decide what to do next," she sighed wishing she had someone to talk to.

The stranger sat on the rock near the pond staring at her and said nothing.

"I didn't think you would object," she continued, "In that case, I think we had better begin our journey up the mountain. When we get far enough from the toral to be safe, we'll find a place to hide then we'll get some more sleep before we travel on. Near the end of the day we should be able to find one of the villages of the mountain people, and from them we'll get directions to Everette's village."

She took him by the hand, and they began their way up the gradual incline. Climbing, at first, was easy, but as they progressed, the incline became steeper and the climbing became more difficult. Viella and the stranger, at times, had to look for a way around large boulders, which seemed to sit vicariously on the side of the mountain waiting for a small quake to send them hurtling down the slides and onto the plains. The light of the moons was nearly gone making it more difficult to climb. The smaller moon had already set behind the Eastern horizon and the larger one was disappearing behind the taller peaks.

It wasn't long, however, until the sun sent its dim rays across the tops of the mountains, lighting the way for the weary traveler. After awhile they stopped, and she slept for a couple of hours under a lone tree which had sprouted from the jagged landscape, then she rose, and they continued the climb.

Viella looked up the mountain and stopped for a moment. "We have a long way to go," she said. She didn't expect an answer. "The mountain people live as far from the plains as possible."

She brushed her hair out of her face and wiped her forehead. She was beginning to feel the strain of the past fourteen hours. As a city girl whose exercise time had always been limited, she was climbing a mountain where the air was becoming thinner and colder with every step. And, at the very least, she was on her way to a rugged life with the mountain people. She would probably never see her family again.

I hope my part will contribute something to the cause, she thought. Then she tried to figure out what her contribution had been. Nothing, since the underground would never get the firearms, which her and her brother were supposed to hide in a secret chamber. Her perilous journey of the night had been all for naught.

She shook her head in disgust, then took the android, at least she believed he was an android, by the hand and they began to climb. (It confused her that he had drunk water at the pond).

They climbed for several hours until they came over a small rise and onto a rocky plateau. Viella stopped. In front of them, not more than a hundred yards, was a small wooden shack. Smoke spiraled into the sky from a tin-pipe chimney.

What is this? she wondered in mild surprise. She hadn't expected to find any mountain people this far down the mountain. She was told, and in a proud way, by several of her mountain people friends that they lived in the high valleys where life was hard, but good. There they panned for precious metals and mined for magnetic drive crystals.

Then who could this be?

She felt hesitant about approaching the shack in which someone, maybe a patroller, could be waiting to apprehend them and send them back to the city and a sentence of death. Indeed, they had come too far to be caught now.

To the left and a short distance behind the shack was a small hill. Half of it had been excavated in strip mining. She could tell it had been a long, slow process. The older trailings were becoming part of the ground again, and there were green plants growing over it.

"A miner," she said, knowing the stranger wouldn't answer. "He must be one of the mountain people." This gave her added courage. "Let's talk to him."

They made their way slowly, cautiously toward the broken down shack. As they approached, they continually had to step over old tin cans, once an old rubber boot, and over or around other sorts of trash.

"It seems whoever lives here doesn't care where he throws his refuse. I wonder if all the mountain people are like this?"

As they came within a few feet of the shack an old man stepped onto the broken down porch. "Hello," he said.

"Hi," said Viella in a slow drawn out syllable. The climb in the thin mountain air had taken her breath.

"I sure am might surprised ta see you folks. Why I haven't had a visitor sin' I moved here two years ago."

The old man had a short white beard, still brown in some spots. Viella wasn't sure whether it was dirt or a natural color. His head was mostly bald with the exception of a few white strands around his ears. The most prominent feature of his whole being, however, was his large bulbous nose. It was even more exaggerated by a small thin-lipped mouth, which was mostly hidden beneath it. His back was slightly hunched, but not too bad. His overall height was not much taller than Viella's five feet two. His clothes were in pretty bad shape, and he didn't smell too good, either.

"Shore can git lonely out here," he continued. He looked Viella and the stranger up and down. A slightly detectable smile touched his lips. "Well, don't jes stan' there," he finally said. "Come on in an' have a sit." He opened the door and shuffled back into the shack.

Inside there was a bed, a table and two chairs, an old pot bellied stove, a few pans, some cupboards, some boxes, a few mining tools, and a miner's two way radio.

The old man saw her looking at the radio. "Don't work no more," he said. "Darn thing busted on me couple weeks ago."

This last statement didn't seem to fit the code of the mountain people. She had heard stories about the miner's radio. It was their most valued possession. It was their only link with the rest of the world. It served as a warning for coming disasters. It kept them posted on incoming supplies at the trading post. It kept them informed on the political situation. She once heard a mountain woman say she would rather trade off her husband than her radio, and she wasn't joking.

"These people at the tradin' post tole me this radio would las' five years. Need no fixin'. An' here it up an' quit on me in less 'n two." He paused. "I don' know where I'm gonna git the money ta have it fixed." His mouth drooped and expelled a small sigh.

But then his lips turned up a crooked smile. "Have a seat an' we'll talk a spell. Yes sir, it's good ta hear voices agin."

The stranger sat on the bed. Viella and the old miner had already seated themselves at opposite ends of the small wooden table.

"Say, I bet you two are hungry. I better get a pot a beans ta cookin' on the stove." He got up and started going through one of the cupboards. "You been havin' trouble in the city?" he asked as he pulled down a can of beans.

"Yes," she said. "That's why we're here. We're on our way to the higher villages to seek refuge with the mountain people."

"I been lisnen ta the radia up till the time it broke, an' I ain't heard much 'bout no political trouble."

"It's not something they would broadcast on the radio," she said. "Our government has become a mockery of representation. Our council has yielded to a monarchy of the worst kind. And justice has been replaced by greed." She choked back a sob of anger. What had happened to her city since the discovery of crystals on their planet was appalling. It had become totally corrupt in a short time. "Most of the people in our city are nearly starving, while a few are gaining more wealth than they could ever spend in a hundred lifetimes. If somebody tries to do anything about it, he's sent to the Run, from which there is no chance for escape, or even worse to the pits for a slower death. No, I don't think they will broadcast that on the radio."

The old man let out a soft, high-pitched chuckle. "Listen child, that seems like mighty big problems, but sometimes you young uns make more out of a sicreation than's really there." He poured the beans into the pot and put the pot on the stove. "I bet right now you could be back in the city enjoying good food an' fine clothes." He sat down.

"Yes, but . . ."

"Ya see! Ya see what I said," he was chortling jubilantly. "But you'd rather be stirrin' up trouble."

"But I come from a wealthy family," she finished in an irritated tone.

"Oh child," he said, "compared ta me all the families in that there city is rich." He paused a moment. "Ya think ya got problems, ya make yur own problems." He grasped the side of the table. His knuckles became white. His eyes began to squint. "But yurs ain't problems. Ya wanna know wha happened ta me. My people

said I was too old ta help support the clan. So, they kicked me out. They didn' give me nothin'. They jest sent me into the wilderness ta die. Thas yur precious moun'an people fer ya."

He failed to mention that he had been caught as a thief several times — thieving among the mountain people was considered the worst of evils, even worse than murder. Their view on thieving had come about before the discovery of the crystals, during the time when life was hard in the mountains. Now, life was easier, but their conviction about stealing hadn't changed. So, they banished the old man from their village. Usually a person would have been banished on the first offense, but he was old. So, they ended up giving him two more chances. Still he wouldn't change his ways.

"Yeah, they threw me out, but I showed 'em. I found me a crystal back there in that hill." He jerked his thumb to the right to indicate which hill. "An I been supportin' myself fine ever since."

He continued. "Things are gittin a little low now," he mumbled. "But I expect ta find anudder one any day."

He got up and went over to the stove. Viella didn't know what to say. She didn't want to seem persistent about city politics when they didn't have any real meaning for him. So she didn't say anything.

"Yur man is goona have ta eat out of a cup cause I ain't got but one plate."

"That's fine," she said. "We really appreciate your hospitality."

"No trouble. No trouble a tal." He looked over at the stranger. "Say, yur man don' talk much does he?"

"No he doesn't," she answered. "But he's still a good man." She looked at the stranger who had saved her life and smiled. *Indeed*, she thought, *he is a good man, or android*.

The old miner passed her the plate of beans. "Ya can jes call me Nahum," he said. "What 's yur name?"

"My name is Viella," she replied. She looked over at the stranger and suddenly realized she didn't know what to call him.

"What about him?" asked the old man indicating the stranger.

Viella considered telling him the truth, but how could she explain that the stranger, probably an android, appeared out of nowhere, like a Godsend? How could she explain that this man/android with the vacant look in his eyes had saved her life several times? She didn't understand it herself.

"His name is Zed," she blurted out. It was her uncle's name, the only one she could think of in a moment of haste. "Well Zed," said the old man. "Here's a cup a beans. Eat hearty." The old man handed the cup to the stranger and then filled a cup for himself. Between gulps he asked Viella more questions. Occasionally he interjected with comments of his own.

The android ate the beans, which made Viella realize he was an extremely sophisticated machine, much more human than the conventional android.

After they finished eating, the old man got up, rinsed off the plate and the two cups in a bucket of water, and stashed them away in one of the cupboards.

Viella could tell he was starved for conversation. They talked the rest of the day. Mostly about the old man's dreams of finding a crystal big enough that he could move into the city and live the rest of his life in comfort.

That night he assigned Viella the bed, and he and the stranger slept on the floor.

The next morning after they finished eating breakfast—water and flour pancakes with a little sweetener sprinkled on top, the old man proposed a plan. "I have some diggin' I wanna git done taday," he said as he looked at Viella. "So if ya stay with me taday, an' tanight, then tamarra we'll pack some things and I'll take ya up the moun'an." There was a sparkle in his eye. "I have ta go ta the tradin' post anyway. And I know all the short cuts. And I know where all the springs are, and more 'n that, I'll keep ya from gittin lost."

Viella considered for a moment. She was sure the patrollers wouldn't be able to find them now, but the part about getting lost concerned her. "That sounds good," she said. "Are you sure it won't be too much of a climb for you?"

"There ya go," he shouted. "Ya sound jes like the people a my clan. If I couldn't make it, now would I offer? Huh, would I?"

"No I guess not," she said apologetically.

"An' didn't I jes say I have ta go ta the tradin' post?"

"Yes you did."

"Well then ya better take me up on it. It's your best bet."

She realized it was a generous offer, and therefore decided to accept. A few minutes later she excused herself and went outside to visit the scenery. When she came back the old man was still sitting at the table with a funny look on his face, almost a guilty look, but in her naivety she didn't think anything about it. She saw that

the dishes hadn't been done so she offered to do them. The old man readily accepted, jumped up, grabbed his tools, and went off to the diggings.

The android got up and went outside. It was the first time he had done anything on his own, except fight, since she had met him the night before. She watched to see what he was doing, but he just stood on the porch and stared into space.

After she finished the dishes she decided to lie down and get a little more sleep. The previous day had drained her of most of her energy, both physically and mentally, and also the old man had gotten them up quite early.

She laid on the bed and instantly fell asleep. At one point during her nap she awoke just long enough to see the stranger sitting at the table, still staring vacantly into space. That's all she remembered until the old man came shuffling into the shack.

"Viella!" he yelled in a high-pitched tone. "Viella!"

"What?" she asked as she sat up from a deep sleep. There was a look of bewilderment on her face. She couldn't remember where she was. "What?" she asked again. Then suddenly in nightmare torrents it all came flooding back. "What?" she asked for the third time.

"Ya know that crystal I been talkin' 'bout?"

"Yes," she said in the middle of a yawn.

"Well, I found it."

"You did?"

"Yeah, I did. And now I can move ta the city an' have all those comforts I been talk'n' 'bout, good food, an' nice clothes, an' sof' beds, an' all those things."

"That's great," she said as she stood up. "Where did you find it?"

He looked at her with a peculiar smile on his face. A smile such as a little boy would have had after doing something naughty, but fun. "Well, really I found it yesterday," he said.

"What?"

"You see, I lied about the radio."

"What!?"

"Yeah, I knew it was you when I first saw ya. How could I miss the description, a man six feet three and a woman just over five feet. They were blabbing that description all day long. Whether ya know it or not you're the two most wanted outlaws on the planet, maybe in the whole Galaxy. The sum of money they offered fer ya is huge. I'll never be able ta spend it all."

The horror of what he was saying struck deep. "You sold us out," she said anticipating the worst. She ran over and looked out the door. "You sold us out!"

"I had ta," he said. "I'm down ta my last crumbs. Another month an' I'd be starvin' ta death."

"Don't you know what you've done?" she yelled. "I'll be spending the rest of my short life in the pits. You're evil. You're a wicked old man," she said between gritted teeth.

"Don' be callin' me evil," he screeched. "I'm not the rebel here. I'm not the one who's broken the laws. If ya don' like a gover'ment ya change it the slow way or ya leave it, but ya don' break the laws an' go aroun' killin' people."

"Sometimes a rebellion is the only alternative," she yelled.

"Never. Thas never the way." He stared at her for a moment. "We better go out now. They're waitin' fer us." The old man walked to the front door.

Viella took the stranger by the hand.

"Not him," said the old man. "They want him ta come out last. They got their stunners set on half power, which would kill any normal folk. They don' want ya in the line of fire in case they gotta use 'em."

"What difference does it make?" she asked. "Now or later."

"Come on, thas dumb." He took her by the arm and pulled her out the front door.

Surrounding the shack there were between twenty-five and thirty uniformed men. It was a type of uniform she had never seen, and the insignia was different, too. No. *That's not true*, she thought. She had seen them once before on the home viewer. "That's the Galaef's personal body guard," she said as more of a question.

"Thas right," said Nahum. "That fella ya got in there is a pritty important fella. If it wasn't fer him you'd probably be on your way ta the moun'n folk right now." He pulled her in the direction of a waving guard.

"When they's talking about him on ta radio they called him 'M.'" said Nahum. "I ne'er heard a no 'M,' but they's talking as though he were someone famous."

Viella looked distressed. "They're only saying that because they don't want people to know one of their experimental machines has escaped."

The old man gave her a funny look, but didn't say anything. He walked her to the side of the house where a guard grabbed her and bound her arms behind her back with a magnetic coupling lock. He motioned to one of the other guards. "Put her in the cruiser," he ordered.

At that moment the android stepped through the doorway.

Viella expected him to go into a crouch at any moment making ready for the attack. But this time it would do no good. She knew that the odds were too great, they were probably armed with magnetic android guns, and he would be shot down in stride.

It was much to her relief that he didn't go into the crouch; instead he seemed to accept the fact that there would be nothing now, but capture. He stood waiting for whatever would happen next.

Two guards moved cautiously toward him. One was carrying two sets of magnetic coupling locks. The other was carrying a gun, posed for firing at any second.

As the guard put the locks in place, Viella noticed that they were made of a metal with a blue-green sheen. She knew it was the strongest molecularly forged metal in the Universe. No man would ever be able to force his way out of these.

As she was being led toward the cruiser it occurred to her that she still didn't know what they called this android, probably something like, Xtx-2—she was sure it wasn't 'M.' "What do they call him," she asked. "The man you just captured."

The guard, in a serious military manner, marching straight ahead and not looking at the prisoner, informed her that he was called 'Em.' "It's short for 'Aeolian Master,'" he said.

Viella didn't believe the man. She knew the myth, and she knew no such thing nor person could exist. "How ridiculous."

Chapter Twenty-four

Thorne seated himself comfortably into the form-fitting chair, letting his feet rest easily on the floor. His eyes moved methodically back and forth taking in all the aspects of the room. He noted the finery and eloquence which had gone into the interior decoration, the El carpet on the floor, the fine furniture, most of it imported, the translucent walls—illuminating the room and giving it that sense of spaciousness, the original Gek paintings, the large monitoring screens and the dual computer readout screens. In the slowly curving corner sat a wabaw plant, shipped from half way across the galaxy. Its tantalizing aroma awakened the olfactory senses into a depth of new perception.

"It's good to see you surrounded by comfort," said Thorne.

Across from him, and on the other side of a large oval desk, sat Hurd, the number one councilor of the Newusa City council. Behind him and higher up on the wall was an original (probably the only one in existence) oil painting of the ancient Earth President of the United States, Teddy Roosevelt. The first time Thorne had seen this painting, when talking to Hurd on the viewer, he had asked about it, and Hurd explained who he was and then commented that, "This president never took any crap from his political adversaries, and when he was in battle he would charge full force into the enemy lines."

"How are things going in the city?" Thorne asked as he glanced at Hurd's bodyguard standing to the left and next to the wall. He looked back at Hurd and waited for an answer. It wasn't just a trite question to start the conversation. Thorne had an interest in the city, especially since some of it, including the tower, had been built with his donations.

There was a pondering expression on Hurd's face, as if he was wondering what Thorne was doing here and what he really wanted. "The new stadium, for the run, was just completed a month ago." A smile crossed his lips and his eyes gleamed a little. "The rebels caused a few set backs in the building of it, but we have our way of dealing with them."

"Yes, I know," said Thorne. He gave Hurd's comment a cursory smile.

Hurd had been a second rate councilman before Thorne started making contributions toward his cause. Now he was the ruler of Newusa with the power to do virtually anything he so desired.

"We give them a choice," continued Hurd. "The run or the pits. If they want to make it quick they choose

the run. If not, they choose the pits." He leaned back in his chair. "It makes no difference to me. Either way we get rid of a rebel."

"The rebels, according to my reports, are increasing in number. It's been estimated that they've tripled since last year."

Hurd's mouth turned into a frown. "I have spies everywhere," he said. "I know all their plans before they've even finished working out the details."

"Nevertheless," replied Thorne, "it would probably be beneficial to your cause and mine if you would tighten your hold. Perhaps step up your rate of arrests."

Hurd glared at Thorne. "Believe me," he retorted, "we have the rebels under control. And if I ever need help you'll be the first to hear me yell."

Thorne was sure he would.

"How are the plans for the new air force progressing?" Thorne was wondering how much money, through black market crystals, he would have to donate to this new project.

Hurd ignored his question and eyed him suspiciously. "It seems to me that there is something more important than the affairs of the city on your mind." He gave a nervous cough and cleared his throat.

Thorne smiled, but not with happiness in mind. It was a fact that he had never visited Hurd in person. Their deals had always been made over the telecom or by way of couriers. He could tell Hurd was suspicious. He leaned forward placing his elbows on his knees and looked Hurd in the eye. This last statement by Hurd irritated him, as he wasn't quite ready to reveal his plan. First, he wanted to initiate a sense of need in Hurd. From this point he would maneuver Hurd into accepting his takeover.

"You're too impatient, Hurd," said Thorne in a threatening tone. He stood up and walked over to the desk. "Someday that might be your downfall," he said as he leaned on the desk.

Just then Hurd's bodyguard became alert. He shifted his stance and dropped his hand to the butt of his stunner.

Thorne was aware of the guard's movements, but he remained calm and seemingly very still as he leaned closer toward Hurd.

Hurd again started twirling his mustache. "I have to take care of some rebels later this week," he said. He signaled his bodyguard to relax. "And I have a council meeting in half an hour," he paused in contemplation. "But if you wish it, I can cancel all my afternoon business."

"That won't be necessary. What I have to say won't take that long," said Thorne. He slipped the palm stunner back under the sleeve of his body suit.

"What you have to say?" asked Hurd in mimicry.

Thorne straightened up. "We need complete privacy," he said.

"Yes, of course." Hurd made a gesture for his bodyguard to leave.

"Now," said Thorne as the guard exited and the door slid shut, "for the past several years my men have been working on a plan that involves myself and the Federation. It also involves perfect timing." Thorne started pacing the El carpet and then stopped. "However, the plan will no longer work." A flash of irritation penetrated his expression. "The Galaef became so involved with that childish myth that he didn't even go home for the annual Federation reports." Thorne started calmly pacing again.

"What is . . . or was your plan?" asked Hurd.

"You fool," said Thorne quietly. And then a little louder, "My plan is to take over as the new Galaef of the Galactic Federation.

Hurd became almost silent with stupefaction. "You're going to overthrow the Galaef?" he asked in a whisper. "That's not only impossible, it's unthinkable."

"No it's not," said Thorne. "Not when I have some of the best minds in the galaxy working for me." He stopped in front of the desk and stared down at Hurd.

"It must have been a good plan for such a high risk."

"It was, but as I said the plan will no longer work." He smiled down at Hurd. "So it has been revised. You see, all the key personnel are in place. Now it's just a matter of location." He slowly lowered himself into a chair as he watched Hurd's face. He waited for the realization to set in.

"I hope your plan works." He paused while twirling his mustache. "You'll be the new Galaef. I won't have to smuggle crystals anymore." The corners of his mouth turned up. "We'll both make . . ." A look of terror suddenly dominated his face. He jumped up from behind the desk. "You're telling me because I'm part of the plan! Is that right?" He ran around the desk shaking with fright. "I'm part of the plan. Is that right?"

"Relax Hurd. The plan won't fail. And as you were about to say we'll both be rich."

"But I don't want to die a horrible death!" cried Hurd.

"It won't fail," said Thorne in an irritated tone.

"It's a horrible death," whined Hurd. "A horrible death."

Thorne was amazed by Hurd's outpour of fear. "If you're so afraid, carry a suicide pill."

Hurd calmed down a little. "Yeah," he gulped audibly. "I will." He leaned back against the desk and wiped the perspiration from his forehead. "I will," he said again. "That makes good sense." It seemed that the idea presented by Thorne had made him feel a little easier about the situation. "Tell me about the plan," he said in a reluctant tone.

Thorne rose from the chair. "There will be a meeting tomorrow at three o'clock in this office." Thorne glared at him. "Be here. And don't bring your body guard."

Hurd walked around the desk and sat down. "Who else will be here?" he asked. There was a slight tremor in his voice.

"The Galaef, myself, and Myra. Which means, if you haven't figured it out yet, the takeover is tomorrow."

"But . . ."

"There are lots of but's, and they've all been dealt with."

"I don't understand how you can take over, even with the Galaef dead." For clarification of his question he added, "The Federation computers will never respond to your voice pattern."

"Taken care of," said Thorne. "Everything is taken care of." He knew that aboard the Commander he had the holder of the key.

"If that's true, if all the details have been worked out" Hurd's mouth turned into a greedy smile.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Hurd flicked off the computer's read out screen. The odds of Thorne's success of overthrowing the Galaef and taking over the Galactic Empire were better than he had anticipated. He leaned back, and with his foot he spun his chair one hundred and eighty degrees until he was looking up at Teddy Roosevelt. He sat stroking his mustache. With the knowledge at hand, the computers gave Thorne an eighty-five point six three three per cent chance of success, and if this were an accurate read-out, and if Thorne was able to step into the position of Galaef, that would mean Hurd would rise in power too. Thorne would be grateful for his help, and he might give him the entire solar system or maybe a galactic sector.

He heard a slight hum and spun his chair back in time to see a small red light flashing on one of the control panels. He pushed a button. "Yes?"

"It's your wife on line one, sir," said his secretary's voice over the speaker.

"Very good," said Hurd. He pushed another button. "Hello Sweetie Pie," he said in a honey-dripping voice.

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"He did? That darn little pooch. I'll give him a good talking to when I get home."

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"No, I won't be home 'til later this afternoon."

.....

"It's not that Honey Pie. I have to take care of some business—you know, some of those darn, nasty rebels."

.....

"Okay Sweetie. I'll see you later this afternoon. Bye bye."

Hurd rang off and pushed the button which signaled his secretary. "Send Juez in when he gets here."

"He's here, sir," she replied.

"Okay, send him in."

If something went wrong with Thorne's plan, he'd pop the pill—a painless way to bail out. And indeed a much better way out than the traitor's death, which involved torture and mutilation or even worse, the zi pits.

At that moment, Juez walked through the doorway. He was a tall man with white hair, brown skin, and a dignified look. If ever Hurd had met a man's man, it was Juez. He walked across the room and came to a halt a couple of feet from Hurd's desk. "What do you want?" he asked.

Hurd looked Juez in the eye and snickered. Here was the people's champion, always trying to help those in

need, always trying to bring up the so-called standard of living—as if it needed improvement, and always trying to strengthen the middle class. Juez was always voting against him in the council meetings, which greatly annoyed and aggravated him. He would have planned a little accident for Juez a long time ago, but he was too well liked by the citizens of Newusa, and more importantly, by the city patrollers. Soon, however, soon.

“You know,” said Hurd, “I believe it’s important that a person improve one’s vocabulary. It helps a person become more dignified and more intelligent. He pulled out the top desk drawer on the left and retrieved his vocabulary book. He pointed at the cover and recited the title, Words of the Intelligentsia,” he said. “I learn a word everyday, and you no what my word for today is?” Before Juez could say anything Hurd opened his book at the book marker and read, “Intractable, which means stubborn, disobedient, uncontrollable. And they give an example, which involves a disobedient child.”

Hurd paused, so Juez repeated himself, “What do you want?” he asked.

“Not much interested in vocabulary, eh? Okay then, your impatience forces me to the point,” he said. It was going to be great wiping that dignified look off his face.

“Which is?”

“I have some bad news for you Juez.” He waited, but Juez remained silent. “I felt it only right that you hear it from me and no one else.”

“Well stop playing cat and mouse, and let’s get to it.”

Hurd stood up and clasped his hands behind his back. “It’s about your son, Sam. It seems he’s been intractable.”

Juez suddenly became apprehensive. He reached down and grabbed the front of the desk as if he were going to rip it off the floor. “What do you mean?” he asked in a low, threatening voice.

Hurd felt the penetration of Juez’ glaring eyes. He sat in his chair behind his desk and secretly slipped his finger to the button that would create a magnetic force field around him and the desk. “Last night he was caught smuggling arms into the city,” he said.

A look of horror swept over the councilman’s face. “That can’t be,” he replied. “Last night he was home with me.”

Hurd smiled. “Come now Juez. It’s too late for that kind of nonsense. He was caught in the act.” Hurd had him this time, and there was no way out. “And you know the penalty for smuggling arms—the run or the pit.”

The creases in Juez’ forehead furrowed slightly. “Surely you won’t do this to my son?”

Hurd looked at him in mock seriousness. “But of course, I must. You realize the dangerous situation in this city. If I let one rebel go, it would serve as a bad example for our two million law biding citizens. A rebellion would break out. Many innocent people would be killed, and it would all be on my head. Besides, if it was my son, I’d do the same thing.”

Juez ignored what he was saying. “But we can ship him to another planet.”

“Oh no. The underground would find out, and then the whole city would know.”

“But we could keep it quiet. We could smuggle him out.”

“You know that wouldn’t work,” he said. “The underground has spies.”

We have to work something out, Hurd.” Juez was no longer pleading.

“There is a compromise, of course,” said Hurd. He had noticed the change in Juez’s tone. “If your son chooses the pit, I’ll arrange with the warden to give him light duty. And that will keep him alive and healthy.” Hurd paused waiting for a response, but Juez didn’t say anything.

“Well?” asked Hurd.

“This time there is no choice, is there? My son will live, and I will help you with your plans for the city.”

“That’s exactly right. And we won’t have any more quarrels at the council meetings, will we?”

“No, we won’t”

“And that new tax bill I’ve been trying to get through . . . You’ve been giving me a lot of grief about it, but I’m sure it’ll pass at the next meeting, won’t it?”

Juez spoke in almost a mumble. “No trouble,” he said.

“And of course that other problem we’ve been having with the armed forces.”

“Of course,” said Juez. “It seems you have me in a tight squeeze, and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

Juez turned to leave and was almost to the door when Hurd said nonchalantly, “Oh, I almost forgot.”

Juez turned and stared at him. Hurd was still sitting behind his desk.

“Your daughter was with them, and of course we can’t make any excep . . . ”

Before he could finish, Juez had jumped back and was drawing his phasor. “Not my daughter, you dirty

bastard. God damn you, not my daughter."

He jerked out the phasor and fired, but the red ray bounced harmlessly off the shield and burned a hole in the ceiling.

A split second later a blue ray flashed out from the corner and hit Juez full on the shoulder. Hurd's bodyguard had been quick to react.

Hurd turned off the field and walked around the desk. He stood over Juez. "Your whole body is paralyzed, but you can still hear me." He turned him over with his foot so he could look him in the eye. "This outburst of yours will cost your son and daughter one week of hard labor in the pits." He pointed a finger at Juez. "You're a foolish man, Juez. You don't want me dead. If anything happens to me, the warden has his orders to kill them both. So you're going to be like a second body guard, keeping me happy and alive." Hurd pulled at his long black mustache. "One more fact, Juez, your daughter hasn't been caught yet, but it won't be long. You see, the Galaef wants her as bad as I do."

He looked at his bodyguard. "Have someone take him home. And have the secretary send someone in to fix this hole. He pointed at the charred plastic in the ceiling. "When you're finished I'll be in the council chambers."

Hurd chuckled to himself. His worst opposition was now his best asset. Antagonist turned comrade. The people of the city would no longer have their champion. The sheep would no longer have their watchdog. Yes, he had defeated the white knight. He became mirthful and laughed out loud. Indeed, this was a good day.

He stepped through the door and walked down the hall. Now it was time for the council meeting.

Chapter Twenty-six

Young Bo Whimple, perhaps the quietest of the three councilmen, was sitting behind the long rectangular desk with a cup of Arian coffee in his left hand and a pencil in his right, which he slowly and methodically tapped on the metallic surface of the desk. In his mind he was in a turmoil of emotions. He hated Hurd and what he stood for, and yet he had to pretend to agree with his plans. He had to protect his family.

He shifted his weight in the form-fitting chair and set the pencil down in front of him. He knew there would be another fight today between Juez and Hurd. Among the minor squabbles there was always one of two issues which would become a heated feud between the two of them—either the raising of city taxes or the building of an army and an air force.

Neither of them would give in, so every week one of these two issues was put on the agenda and brought up again—another fight.

Bo thought about Hurd's shouting tantrums which never did any good since Juez would always have the upper hand. The law was written such that it took a unanimous decision by the council to pass changes in the constitution or changes which dealt with taxes, and since Juez was holding out, Hurd would never get his motions passed, unless, of course, he found a way to get rid of Juez. And it surprised Bo that this hadn't already happened.

Twelve years ago Bo was nothing more than a stock boy, not even a glorified stock boy, on the third floor of the tower. He was scraping out a living with a meager wage by running errands, keeping the secretaries stocked with office supplies, and by keeping the stockroom in order and up to date. Then one day Hurd stepped off the etron mover on the third floor, looked around at the personnel, saw Bo, and called him over. "I've heard good things about you, son—you're intelligent, you have a good personality, and most importantly, you get along with those around you, and you always do what you're told."

"Yes sir," stammered Bo, not knowing how to respond to the most powerful man in the government.

"I guess you've heard the bad news about Councilman Hy Landers?"

"No sir."

The corners of Hurd's mouth turned down. "Early this morning Mr. Landers met with an unfortunate accident, either that or he committed suicide. Either way, he fell thirty stories to his death." He paused for a moment of silence as a show of respect for the recently departed, and then he continued. "An hour later two of the other councilmen resigned. I guess they couldn't stand the stress of big city business." He put his hand on Bo's shoulder. "Anyway, out of bad things oftentimes come good things, and this is good for you because I'm making you one of the new councilmen."

Bo was shocked by this sudden turn of events, "I thought councilmen had to be elected."

"Actually," said Hurd with a tone of serious business in his voice, "we've passed a new law which allows the head councilman to appoint new members to the council."

And that was that.

Later Bo was to realize that Hurd had never read a file on him nor had he ever seen him before that day. Here was a timid looking stock boy who would be easy to manipulate, easy to bully into passing any new law which Hurd saw as an enhancement to his station. But what Hurd didn't know, and maybe it didn't matter since Bo did everything Hurd wanted, was that Bo hated him as much or more than anybody in the city because of what he was doing to the people. And, in spite of his unexpected and greatly undeserving raise in position—being a city councilman, and in spite of his greatly increased salary, and his elevated status, Bo had decided a long time ago to do everything in his power to bring Hurd down as hard and as low as possible.

As Bo sat thinking about the past and whether or not it would be possible to overthrow Hurd, the other two councilmen in the room, Went Chen and Tylr Rono were discussing the ramifications of creating an army and an air force for the city.

At no surprise to Bo, Went, playing his role well, was arguing that they should do exactly what Hurd wanted. He was like a dog licking at Hurd's heels and waiting to perform his every command. He pretended to jump, lie, sit, play dead, kill that woman and her baby. It didn't matter what it was, Went would do it.

On the other hand, even though Tylr did whatever Hurd wanted, he still believed it was logical to consider all the alternatives.

Just then the door slid open and Hurd stood in the doorway with a frown on his face. As he surveyed the councilmen he walked across the room and sat in his seat at the head of the council table. "I talked to Juez only a few minutes ago, and he told me he won't be able to make it to the meeting, something about his daughter. So, we'll have the meeting without him." He looked at Went and nodded. "So, let's get started."

Went looked at the agenda sheet in front of him. "The first order of business," he said, "is the Mountain Men. Two days ago one of the clans was attacked on the Pike two miles from the spaceport by armed bandits and every one of them was robbed and killed."

"So what's the order of business?" asked Hurd in a mild surprise, almost bordering on amusement.

"Once again, Everette, the leader of the Unified Clans is requesting an armed escort for the pack trains to and from the space port."

Hurd looked at the three councilmen. "Does anyone have a comment?"

Bo said, "It doesn't seem to be an unreasonable request."

"Nonsense," boomed Hurd. "We have enough problems of our own without taking on those of the renegade Mountain Clans. If we start financing an armed guard along the pike, then we'll have to more than double the city taxes." Hurd paused for a moment, then lowered his voice. "I'm only thinking of the people of our fair city. If the Mountain men want more protection, let them pay for it themselves, after all they have the money." Hurd paused. "Any more comments?"

Since no one said anything Hurd asked for a vote to have the Mountain Clans pay for their own protection along the Pike. Everyone raised their hand except Bo, who slowly raised his hand after a glare from Hurd.

"Good," said Hurd. "Now, what's next on the agenda?"

Went looked at his sheet. "Memorial services will be held in two days for the policemen who were killed while capturing the rebels two weeks ago. Eulogies will be given at the Earth Christ Church and, as usual, black arm bands will be required."

Hurd slapped his hand on the desk. "They were good men, damn it, doing their jobs, keeping these nasty rebels at bay, and keeping them from their desire of tearing our great city apart." He looked solemn for a moment. "Damn those rebels,—they were great men. And who had to inform the wives of their deaths? Why, me, of course."

Went scribbled on the sheet. "Will you be attending the services, sir?"

"Of course I will, as will all of you," said Hurd firmly. He looked from one councilman to the next as they nodded in agreement. "Now what's next on the agenda?"

"The plans to build an army and an air force, sir."

"Ah," exclaimed Hurd. "I have good news. Juez told me today that he will give his consent to build the armed forces. He feels, like me, that we need the means to protect ourselves from any possible invasion from foreign powers."

Went clapped his hands several times.

"But," continued Hurd. "We'll have to put off the vote until next week when Juez is present." Hurd smiled. "Since we know what his vote is going to be, however, we can go ahead and start the preliminaries. Went, you take care of it."

"What about the other cities?" asked Bo. "What about our treaty with the other cities which clearly states that no city will build nor maintain an army nor an air force?" Bo tapped the desk with his pencil twice, then laid it down.

"Nothing to worry about," said Hurd. "I recently made a pact with the Galaef, and he's going to back us."

Bo whimple raised his hand. "I thought the Galaef wasn't supposed to get involved in planetary politics?"

"There are always exceptions to the rule. And since we mine a valuable commodity on Ar, we have become the exception. It's time to unify this planet under one government. Now that we have the Galaef backing us, the opposition will be virtually non-existent."

"Yes, you're right," said Went, "this planet needs to be unified."

Tylr nodded his head in agreement.

"Next," said Hurd.

"Sir," said Went "they're making a few minor adjustments on the new arena, and it has been reported that it will be completed within the next week."

"Good. Good," replied Hurd.

"Also, I was informed this morning that we now have enough runners to start the run."

"Excellent," said Hurd. "Then we will have the run one week from today in the new arena."

He stood up indicating the meeting had come to an end. *Things are looking good*, he thought. *If all goes well tomorrow, if Thorne can pull off the usurpation of the Galaef, then, at the very least, I will become the ruler of Ar. If Thorne fails, I'll pretend I was forced to be a part of it.*

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Myra sat behind a small, raised desk thinking about her predicament, and, at the same time, she half listened to a discussion between the Galaef and Thorne. Since it was a topic of lesser importance, and since she had no conscious intent on the words, she didn't know what direction their chatter had taken them. In front of her was a computer input keyboard, and to the left, a horizontal readout screen.

As the conversation in the background became nothing more than a mumble of incoherent words, she thought back to the beginning, just after her childhood had ended, and remembered how it was that eight of the nine of the Inner Circle of the Twelfth Padigm had chosen her for this mission. She was told how they had searched Zorzorsta in every way possible looking for the right person. They even used such primitive methods as word of mouth, hand written tests, and personal interviews, but in the end it was the intuition of the Seek which had found Myra for them. Later, Joslin, one of the Zorstas, told how she had brought forth three names from the golden crystal orb, and then from these three they had chosen the fifteen year old Myra, from Calistay in the Black Forest, to perform their mission.

Myra stood before them, a frightened young girl watching and listening as they debated her fate. One of the nine, Cassandra, was vehemently opposed to choosing Myra. She said her intuition told her that Myra would not only fail, but would bring shame and dishonor which would eventually result in the destruction and downfall of the twelfth Padigm on Zorzorsta. "She is not the one," she said distorting the circle as she stood up. But the other eight disagreed, and three times they chanted, "Enter the Gate. Enter the Corridor." And then Myra was taken to a secret room where a door was opened, and she was pushed forcefully into a hallway. She was instructed that she must go on alone.

The corridor had a musty smell and was dark with only dim illumination coming from the walls. She stepped slowly forward, a frightened girl, wanting nothing more than to go home. Suddenly she saw a figure coming toward her—and then nothing.

The next thing she remembered she was back in the chamber of the Zorstas and the Seek. What happened in that corridor she could not remember. All she knew was she had a painful little bump on the back of her head, but it was gone after a few days.

And that was it.

From that day on, Myra was taken under the confidence of the circle and instructed in physical combat,

which included situ and phasor training, and mental combat, which included intense conditioning and the learning of every facet of the

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Seek. For five years she trained with them, and trained hard, and at the end of the five years she was no longer a frightened girl, but rather, a confident woman, a Zorsta. Finally, they said she was ready. She had achieved the highest level of the inner circle in the shortest amount of time ever, that is, with the exception of Cassandra who had achieved the same level in just over four years. But along with Myra's natural ability at high level intuition she also had the beauty and personality to go with it. They had no doubt she would succeed, and with that they gave her the honor of becoming the tenth member of the inner circle of the twelfth padigm, the most powerful of all the padigm.

One final time, they put her into the hall of knowledge, and once again she had no recollection of what happened.

When the time came to initiate the mission they not only gave her false documents of birth and residence on another planet, known as Rignon of the solar system Jag, but they also sent her there and set her up as a citizen. Then they made it known to the computer that she was a prime candidate for the position of the Galaef's personal secretary—one of the highest positions in the Galaxy. And they knew she would be chosen, for they had trained her well—extremely well.

For nine years, after arriving on the Computer Planet, she had interwoven her scheme through the fine network of Thorne's plans. But now to no avail. From the first moment she had met Thorne she knew that not only did he have aspirations of becoming the next Galaef, but actually had plans which he felt would succeed. She knew she had stepped into a favorable situation. If she could thwart Thorne's plans for usurpation, then from her glean she knew the Galaef would chose her to take Thorne's position as second in command of the Galactic Empire. From there it would be easy to plan her own usurpation, and even easier to pull it off.

The scheme presented a scenario with little chance of failure. And it certainly would have worked, except the Galaef had unwittingly sabotaged it by becoming involved in this absurd archeological expedition during the week of the Federation reports. It was an action which she could have never predicted—an action which was foreign to his norm. It was simply a stroke of bad luck.

In the back of her mind the Galaef's conversation suddenly came to her consciousness alerting her that the Galaef would be needing some inconsequential information. She kept her eyes on the screen as her fingers raced nimbly across the keys. And then she waited as the computer memory-banks brought up the requested information, as the logic circuits correlated the information, and as the answer was printed out on the screen.

Thorne's plan had evolved around the computer planet. He knew something about Galactus VII, which would allow him to depose the Galaef and take over his command as the Ruler of the Galactic Empire. But what was it? Myra had no way of knowing and in spite of her tireless efforts to find out, she had come away empty. All she knew was the computer in the Computer Planet was almighty. It ruled, completely, the Galactic Federation in an Omnipotent God-like capacity. It only had one flaw: it was subservient to the Galaef.

Myra looked at the number on the computer screen, and then leaned back and turned toward the Galaef.

The Galaef weaved his thoughts through the happenings of the last couple of days in an attempt to turn theories into fact. "Em must have some kind of supernatural power," he said. "He managed to get through three doors which had palm locks." The Galaef was sitting in his high chair in the middle of the room, which was the control center of the spacecraft. He looked down at Thorne. "No one can get through palm locks without first being coded," he paused, then added, "He must have powers beyond the realm of science. You know like those . . . like those. You know, those so called witches on Janus V."

Myra flinched inwardly at the Galaef's last statement.

"I think not," said Thorne. "Palm locks are fallible."

The Galaef's response was immediate. "The calculated odds against three newly installed palm locks failing at the same time, especially in this situation, would be phenomenal. It involved three doors and no power failure." He pivoted in his chair. "Myra, find out what the odds are in this situation."

"I already have, sir," she said.

The Galaef raised an eyebrow, and then wondered why he was surprised. *She does it all the time*, he thought, and then he asked. "What is it?"

"The odds are more than twelve septillion to one. Would you like the exact figure?"

"You see," said the Galaef as he turned back to Thorne. He ignored Myra's last question and continued. "The odds are so great that they are for all scientific purposes, nil."

"There is another possibility," said Thorne calmly.

"What?"

Thorne shifted in his form-fitting chair. "With his unusual strength he was able to force one of the guards to open the door."

"But you're forgetting the first door. There were no guards."

"He grabbed someone," said Thorne. "Someone who didn't report it."

"Not likely," replied the Galaef. He pondered for a moment. "In addition to all the other unusual circumstances, such as all those years he spent in suspended animation, he was able to find his way out of the complex, get by the scents, which is a supernatural feat in itself, cross the desert of the Toral, and make it into the Borgus Mountain Range. All in all, and at the very least, I would say there is something very unusual about this man."

"Everything can be explained," said Thorne. "Since he had to come into the complex, it would only be natural to assume he would remember the way out. And then once he got out, he got that girl to help him. . . . Simple."

The Galaef looked at Myra, but she didn't say anything. So, he continued, "Simple is right. Once we get him back to the laboratories we will conduct a whole battery of tests which should give us our answers."

Myra once again lost interest in their conversation and drifted into thinking about ways to stop Thorne's takeover, but she already knew that since it was happening on Ar there was no possible way for her to stop it. Thorne had too many players on his side, and the Galaef, without knowing it, had undone himself, and in the process was taking her down with him.

No sense in trying to stop Thorne now, she thought.

Her fingers once again raced across the keyboard. But this time she was telling the computer to formulate a flight plan to Janus V and to relay the information to the onboard computer of her personal ten man destroyer. Was there any alternative? She believed not, but she would once again consider all possibilities before she made her way home to Janus V and the wrath of the Inner Circle.

Her glean suddenly brought her back to the Galaef's conversation. "Em has been located," he said. "An old miner radioed in his location this morning."

Why has my glean brought me back to this seemingly unimportant information, she wondered.

The Galaef stepped down from the dais. "I want you to organize his capture and safe return. Once we have him aboard the ship, we'll return to the home planet."

Thorne looked up quickly. "But we have an interview today with the head of the town council," he exclaimed almost too vehemently.

Myra recognized the give-away tones in Thorne's voice. She realized today was the take over, the usurpation. How had she failed? For the past four years she had perceived Thorne's scheme to become Galaef. That should have been enough time.

But in just one day Thorne had changed his plans. Why? And why on an alien planet so far from the home planet? Why didn't he just put it off another week and continue with his plans on the Computer Planet? It was a sorry reality that the why's added up to nothing. The fact was he had changed his plans, and now all her preparations were for naught.

"We will keep the appointment," said the Galaef in a chafed voice. "It's important to keep the planetary politicians happy; especially one who controls such a large interest in Z crystals."

Myra looked at Thorne as he nodded his approval at the Galaef's last statement. She knew that some little piece of information, which he had acquired on one of his archaeological expeditions to the ancient computer worlds had changed him from being a loyal servant during his first few years as second-in-command to a scheming usurper of present. For four years and possibly longer he had built his plans around this piece of information, this small bit of knowledge. If only she could have found out what it was, but now it was too late. And once she returned to Janus V the least she could expect from the Inner Circle was banishment to the outlands, a fate worse than purgatory. Myra came out of her reverie as she heard the Galaef say, "Today we might learn part of the truth." And then he said to Myra, "Alert the medical staff and Professor Hillar to meet us at the launch bay in one hour."

She acknowledged his order with a nod. "Taul," she called out as he and Thorne started to leave. "I'm going to stay aboard and finish some work on the Federation reports."

"Fine," said the Galaef. He could think of no reason why she should accompany them to Newusa, in fact, he had discovered that she had little interest in their new archaeological discovery.

He and Thorne left the room.

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The Galaef was the most powerful man in the Galaxy—a Monarch. Myra contemplated for a moment. It's a known fact that a Monarchy can be the best or the worst form of government, depending on what type of man becomes the Monarch. If he's a fair, reasonable, and intelligent man, then it can be a great government, one that helps the people and their way of life. If he's a greedy and selfish man, the people will suffer. Oftentimes torture and mutilation, unfair taxes and starvation are forced upon them.

When the Federation computer was constructed and intellectualized by those wise scientists of the past, all these factors were understood and programmed into the computer. When the computer chooses the new Galaef, fairness and intelligence are two of the most important characteristics considered.

Once the Galaef is chosen, the computer gives him total control over more than two million inhabited planets, and, just as importantly, over it—the computer. It becomes his advisor and servant, and always obeys his commands.

The computer is programmed to recognize voiceprints and there is no way to falsify them. The Galaef's voice and no one else's can command the computer within the Computer Planet. And the most important single factor which comes out of this is the fact that no one can command the Federation warships into battle except the Galaef. For the supreme leader to declare war, the computer must not only have voice recognition, but visual recognition as well.

No single planet nor even a solar system has the resources nor the battle fleets that the Federation has, nor are they allowed to. This makes the Galaef the most powerful person in the galaxy. Unfortunately even the best of the computer chosen Galaefs can be fallible. And this one, unlike his predecessor, has a fatal characteristic flaw—he's too trusting.

Myra sat at her desk for another forty-five minutes probing the computer for information, which might help her, but the possibilities which came back were the same as before. There was no way to keep Thorne from taking the Galaef captive. I still don't understand how this will help him since he cannot command the computer on the warships nor on the computer planet.

She had gleaned earlier that Thorne's plans included her as well as the Galaef. She wasn't sure why or in what way, but since her own plans had been thwarted, she was going to make sure she didn't become his captive for whatever he had in mind.

"It's time to go home," she said to herself as she rose from behind the desk. "Maybe the council will be understanding when I tell them what happened," she paused. "But probably not."

The thought of failure and the possible consequences began to set heavily with her as she hurried down the loading tube. At the end of the tube the air lock was open revealing her personal ten-man destroyer. It was, of course, guarded by one man even as all the warships on the space platforms were guarded and kept in readiness for launch. She had chosen her ten-man destroyer because it was the smallest ship capable of hyperspace flight.

As she stepped through the hatch and set her small carrying bag on the deck her glean suddenly told her what Thorne had in mind for her. It was like being hit in the head with a large stick. She reeled in the horror of it. She had to force the hysteria away from her mind. She had to calm herself. She kept her hands from shaking. Thorne was more evil than she had realized.

The guard looked up and snapped to attention.

"Guard," she said in an authoritative tone. Mentally she was still shaking from the sudden revelation, but no one would notice it on the outside, no one, that is, except another Zorsta.

"Yes ma'am," he snapped. His thick muscular arms were rigid by his side. His chest bulged through the body suit.

Myra took control of her mental state of being and forced herself to a state of calmness. She said, "The Galaef has ordered me to take this ship to Newusa."

Myra noted the expression on the guard's face. Something was wrong.

"I have orders that no one is to take this ship, including yourself."

"Thorne's orders?" she snapped.

"Yes ma'am," he answered.

She stepped closer to the guard. "Thorne is not the commander of this ship. Are you placing his orders over that of the Galaef's?"

The guard said nothing. Obviously Thorne had been working overtime. He had placed all the men loyal to him in key positions. It was probable that even the Galaef's personal bodyguards were loyal to Thorne. How else could he pull it off?

"Do you know what the penalty is for treason? Believe me you don't want to experience it."

"I'm sorry ma'am," said the guard.

Since her threat didn't work, her only recourse was to physically subdue him. If that didn't work, her fate would be whatever Thorne wanted it to be, and her glean had already told her what that was.

"I'm only trying to keep us both out of trouble," she said. She took two steps toward him. Now she would have to use her expertise in the martial arts. These guards were trained to be ready for anything, but Myra had two qualities which worked in her favor—first, her beauty often distracted the adversary, especially if he was a man, and secondly she had her glean, which told her exactly when and how to strike. And now it would help her to overcome this guard.

She took another step, which put her within striking distance, but she could glean the time wasn't right. The guard suspected something. So she smiled pleasantly and said, "You look like a nice person. I think I've seen you before—maybe in the commissary."

"I know I've seen you before. You're not a person someone would forget.—And it wasn't in the commissary, it was in the observation room."

"Ah, yes," said Myra. The memory of it quickly came to her consciousness. "You were with a very beautiful young lady, and you were observing the planet Haley of the Fifth quadrant."

"That's right," said the man surprised that Myra remembered. "I was with my wife."

Myra's right hand shot forward, hitting the guard in the throat.

He threw his hand in the air and fell against the bulkhead. The blow to the adam's apple rendered him helpless, but she knew it wouldn't kill him. The force she used was just enough to take him down.

She took another step forward. Her right leg kicked him in the solar plexus, and he doubled over. "I'm sorry about this," she said. "But if I don't leave the Commander, I will become Thorne's slave. And after a short time, my glean tells me, he will no longer need me, and then my life will be over."

While he was gasping for breath she grabbed him by the arm and led him to a chair inside the loading tube and sat him down. She removed his communicator and phasor. She stepped out and said to the Commander's computer, "Shut the loading tube and make ready for space flight."

"Yes, Myra," said a calm feminine voice.

As the door slid shut she pushed a button on her remote and opened the door to her destroyer, then she stepped into the ship and hit another switch. The hatch-door slid into place.

Thorne will never find me now, she thought.

She made her way to the ship's computer and sat down. She manipulated the appropriate controls. The ship raised from the platform. She punched in the computer flight plan, left the Commander, slipped into hyperspace, and was gone.

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

Ben sat in the chair staring out the window at the city below. What the hell am I doing here? he wondered. He should have been on that ship which had already disembarked for the Borgus Mountains to pick up Em—the man from the suspended animation chamber and that woman—what was her name? Vi something or other. Instead, the Galaef had asked him to come along to this meeting with Thorne and Hurd, which had something to do with Z crystals, and keeping political relations flowing smoothly. What was he going to do, say 'No' to the most powerful man in the Universe? And why did the Galaef want him to come along anyway? It occurred to Ben that the Galaef was starting to view him as a comrade, a friend, someone to hang with and talk trivial nonsense or sometimes Archaeology or politics or whatever. Yeah, Ben was sure the Galaef was starting to like his company and maybe that was good and maybe that was bad. Time would tell.

Besides, this little side trip might not be so terrible, since he was, of course, interested in the political happenings of the city of Newusa. Today's action is tomorrow's history and with the discovery of Em, Archaeologists all over the Galaxy were going to take an interest in planet Ar, especially Newusa and the complex located beneath the city park.

Since Ben was the Archaeologist involved, it would be his responsibility to write an accurate account of not only the archaeology extending back several thousand years, but to also show the present day setting and how everything had evolved to this point. It wasn't a project that was going to be too difficult or time consuming since he had already written most of the archaeology of Earth and it was now in his computer at the University. He would have to add in the history of Ar and the new discoveries—the computer complex, Em and whatever they could find out about him, and the development of Newusa, but since this would be a general theme with not too many specifics, it could be done rather quickly. Later, after a lot of research on the findings, more detailed books could be written.

Ben stopped staring out the window and once again looked around the room. The only thing that interested him was the painting of a man which hung on the wall in back of Hurd and just over his head—you could almost line them up. The painting was obviously very old and was framed in a vacuum-sealed case for the sake of preservation.

"Who's the man in the picture?" asked Ben.

Hurd's eyes lit up, and he spun his chair around until he was looking up at it. "Why that's Teddy Roosevelt," he answered.

"Teddy," quipped Ben. "Let's see, . . . the ancient Earthians had a toy they called a teddy bear. I wonder if there's a connection."

Hurd quickly spun his chair around until he was facing Ben. "Absolutely not," he said with vigor. "This was a great man, a leader, a president, a warrior. Why he would lead his men into battle charging up hills to kill his enemy."

Ben started to chuckle.

"Why are you laughing?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Ben as he lied. He was thinking about the absurdity of war and politics. "I was just thinking of something Myra had said earlier. I assure you it has nothing to do with what you just said." Ben became serious. "And actually since I'm an archaeologist studying Earth, I would like to know more about this man. Perhaps when we have more time you could give me the specifics."

"Why not?" answered Hurd in a seemingly courteous manner. "Since you will be writing the history of ancient Earth and Ar, you must add in Teddy Roosevelt, otherwise your history will be incomplete."

"That important, huh?"

"Yes, sir."

Because of his renown as an archaeologist and because of the job description that came with it, politicians were oftentimes trying to influence what he wrote, especially if it had to do with their city or planet. Since Ben had come to Newusa he quickly found that Hurd was no exception. Ben was told of Hurd's rise to a glorious leadership over the city of Newusa by several different sources, including Hurd himself. And all the accounts of Hurd's rise to power and his commitment to the city appeared to be slanted. In fact, none of them ever reported anything derogatory nor negative in any manner.

With this in mind, and knowing there are always two sides to a story, and sometimes more, Ben went out amongst the citizenry of Newusa to hear what they had to say. And indeed, they told a different story. Among others, he especially remembered an older saleswoman who told him of 'the good life' before the discovery of the Z crystals in the Eastern plains. And then she told him what happened after the discovery. She talked of the greed and corruption, and how it had infiltrated the city council bringing with it hardships and even unwarranted deaths to friends and family members.

Before the discovery of the crystal the people of Newusa had democratic control of their city. Every year, depending on whether it was an odd or even year, one or two of the city council positions would come open for election or re-election to a three-year term. A councilperson could only be re-elected two times giving him or her a total of nine years. If there was failure on the part of a councilman to represent the people's needs, then he or she could be impeached and would never be allowed to run for city council again.

It was a good system, but after the discovery of the Z crystal a great deal of money came under the control of the city council and the corruption began, especially when Hurd came into power. He slowly started weaseling his way into the city's money dealings and then one day he seized the opportunity to become the chief planner of the mining operations. It was rumored that he set up a smuggling operation in which crystals were taken to another planet and sold on the black market.

With this money he was able to buy the right people, mainly high officers of the city patrollers, the wardens of the city prison and the crystal pits, and the city's mayor—an office which he eventually abolished. With this

kind of power he was able to take control of the city, and finally, due to the outcry of the public, he declared a state of emergency in which he claimed dominion over the city until it was able to once again revert to its normal form of government, which, of course, never came to be.

From that point in time, the situation grew worse. Hurd started taking control of the city businesses. He cut back on salaries and raised the prices of goods. He formed a curfew and put more restrictions on the people. Finally he built a control tower on top of one of the taller buildings in the center of the city and brought in the scent.

For his final act of control and for his amusement he created "The Run." It reminded Ben of a historical document from Ancient Earth which told of a people, called the "Romans," who fed people to a beast called a "lion." Due to the condition of the records Ben had been unable to determine whether this event took place in the United States or on a continent called, "Europe."

Nevertheless, it didn't matter where it took place; it was, indeed, a grim picture of mutilation and suffering, as with "The Run."

Yeah, this man was a real sweetheart of a politician.

Ben settled back in his form-fitting chair, which was placed directly in front of Hurd's desk, and folded his arms. What next? he wondered.

Hurd started twirling his black mustache while nervously tapping the fingers of his other hand on the desk top, then he started talking about the rebel faction in the city.

Ben had already tuned him out, but caught the end of it. ". . . we have our way of dealing with them."

"So I've heard," said Ben.

Just then the Galaef walked through the door with two of his bodyguards. Ben noticed Mordrous was absent and wondered why.

"Good news," said the Galaef. "They picked up Em near the base of the Borgus Mountains about ten minutes ago, and they're bringing him in."

The bodyguards positioned themselves, one on either side of the room.

"Well, I'm glad we got him back," said Ben. "It doesn't seem right to have perhaps the greatest Archaeological discovery of all time running around the countryside making a nuisance of himself."

It was when Hurd broke out in laughter that Ben realized he may be getting too comfortable with the Galaef, but then the Galaef laughed too, and said, "Yeah, I'm just sorry we lost him in the first place. We could've been on our way home by now."

Hurd, still twirling his mustache, but faster now, asked, "Will you be leaving today?"

"Yes, as soon as we have Em safely aboard the Commander."

"What about the ancient complex beneath the city?"

"I'll leave some men behind to head up the research operations. A group of archaeologists and computer experts will be arriving in a couple of weeks to study it."

It was understandable that the Galaef wasn't as interested in the computer complex as he was in Em. Finding a legend, a live human being that may be hundreds of years old, and who had already exhibited some amazing abilities, would intrigue anyone who loves to solve mysteries.

"There is certainly no inconvenience to the city," said Hurd apologetically. "I have hopes that your discoveries will be beneficial to the Federation. And," he added, "I am happy that it has been our planet and our city that has contributed to your findings."

The Galaef smiled a politician's smile. "We are grateful for your assistance." He walked over to the front of Hurd's desk. "Since we have been here, operations have gone smoothly with your help. And now that we have recaptured our mystery man from the suspended animation chamber, we will need to be leaving soon." He looked up at the picture of Teddy Roosevelt just above Hurd's head. He studied it for a moment and then looked back at Hurd. "But before we do, Thorne said you have something important to discuss with me. If it has anything to do with the crystals, you know I'll do whatever I can to help with any problems which may have come about."

Hurd stood up and stroked the hair on his head a couple of times. "I would like to wait until Thorne gets back," he stated. "It's something we should discuss together." He paused and then said, "But there is one favor I would like to ask."

"Yes?" asked the Galaef being noncommittal.

"There was a girl with Em, a known traitor to the city, a rebel who needs to be dealt with."

"Yes," said the Galaef anticipating his question, "you can have her."

"And what will you do with her?" asked Ben in a mumbled voice, "send her through the impossible Run?" He hadn't meant to ask the question out loud. It just seemed to blurt out before he realized it was audible.

"We will give her a choice," responded Hurd. He attempted to cover his shock, but Ben could see it in his face. "Rebels must be dealt with for the good of the city," he said. "You're an archaeologist. You must understand that."

"I've studied enough history to understand many political situations." He was tired of playing games with this over-inflated egomaniac. "And I understand that politicians love to paint a pretty picture of themselves, even when it's far from the truth, . . . such as yourself, for instance."

Hurd's face turned red. "You've been listening to false rumors!" he blared.

"I don't think they're so false," said Ben calmly. "And you know what I find amusing? Once when I was reading some literature from an ancient earth dig I came across a description of a villain who had a long, black handle bar mustache, which he constantly twirled as he was thinking of his evil deeds—past, present, and future. Now I wonder, is that a coincidence with no significance, or is it a sign of your true nature?"

"Ben!" said the Galaef.

Obviously the Galaef was thinking that insulting the head councilman of the city of Newusa was not a good political tactic, especially when he had control of the Z-crystals.

Ben was sure the Galaef was going to continue, maybe with a reprimand to Ben and an apology to Hurd, but just then Thorne walked in and everyone became quiet.

Thorne turned his head both ways, observing the room. He looked at the Galaef, who had turned to see who it was, and then at the two guards.

What happened next took less than a second. Thorne raised both his hands, which were clenched as fists into the air, uncurled his fingers, which flared toward the ceiling, and fired two small palm stunners.

Two blue streaks flashed out, at ninety degree angles to each other, one of them hitting the Galaef full in the chest, spinning him around and slamming him across the top of Hurd's desk while the other one brought down the guard directly to the left.

In an instant Thorne adjusted his right hand and with another bolt brought down the other guard who had just drawn his phasor. As the guard fell toward the floor, the muscle spasms, which gripped his body, caused the phasor to go spinning wildly across the room. It was lying about five feet from Ben when it stopped whirling across the El Carpet.

At first Ben couldn't believe what he was seeing. Was Thorne out of his mind? Was he suicidal? Was there some logical reason for what he was doing? But Ben remained in shock for only a moment. He started to rise from his chair . . . if he could get to that phasor . . .

But he didn't.

Thorne pointed his left hand at him. "You won't make it," he said.

And Ben knew he was right. He sat slowly back into the chair waiting to see what would happen next.

"Get the phasor," said Thorne.

Hurd hurried around the desk and picked up the phasor.

Thorne walked to the desk, grabbed hold of the Galaef, and sat him in a chair. "I now declare myself," he said seriously, "the Federation's new Galaef."

"You won't be able to get by his personal body guard," said Ben.

Thorne smiled in a knowing manner. "Actually, that's not true," he retorted. "You see these two lying on the floor . . . They're the only two not working for me."

"It must be an extremely intricate plan if you think you can pull this off."

"Intricate with many purposes," Thorne said and pointed at Taul. "This man has been neglectful of his duties—duties that have been placed on his shoulders for the good of the Galaxy." He paused. "That's just one of many," he added.

"Then you've done the right thing," said Ben. From everything he had read or was told which involved all the failsafe systems built into the Galaefship it was virtually impossible to overthrow the Galaef. Thorne was obviously a . . . what was that ancient Earth term? Cracked? A nut?

"You don't really think I'm stupid enough to believe you're on my side . . . do you?" asked Thorne.

"Wait a minute," said Ben. "I'm not on anybody's side. I have nothing to do with politics. But if I did, I'd say you'll make a fine Galaef." He looked from Thorne to Taul. "And now that it's over, I need to get back to work."

"Get back to work?" yelled Hurd. He pointed at Ben and looked at Thorne. "I want this man," he said

angrily.

"You want me?" Ben suddenly didn't like where this was going. "What do you mean, you want me?"

"Well?" asked Hurd looking at Thorne.

Thorne shrugged his shoulders. "He's yours," he said.

"What do you mean I'm his?" Ben lowered his voice to a growl. "I have nothing to do with the politics on this planet or anywhere else in the galaxy. I'm not a politician and you have no right to treat me as one. I'm a private citizen, and you must let me go."

"Can't do that," said Hurd.

"Look, be reasonable," said Ben with a subtle threat in his voice. "I'm not one of your rebels who's trying to bring you down. I'm just an Archaeologist doing research and writing a history about your planet."

"That's exactly what I mean," said Hurd.

"Look, if you're upset about the history thing, I'll write whatever you want."

"The history's not important, anymore," said Hurd. "The fact is I just want to give you a choice."

Ben looked inquisitively at Hurd, even though he knew what was coming.

"The Run or the pit," he said with great pleasure.

Ben looked at Thorne. "I'm just a history teacher," he said. "I have nothing to do with politics." Ben was becoming angry and frustrated. Suddenly these fools were in control of his fate, and he didn't like it.

"This time you got too close to the top," said Thorne, "and it broke off."

Ben didn't appreciate his witticism, which was nothing more than a boring cliché.

"Make your decision," yelled Hurd. "You have fifteen seconds, and then I'll make it for you."

"But . . ."

"Stop pleading. You sound like a coward." And then he added, "twelve seconds."

Ben looked at Thorne and then back to Hurd. He hadn't been pleading. He was trying to show them some logic. *But then logic is a foreign concept to these ignorant politicians*, he thought. Anger started welling up in his mind. "You think I'm a coward when I'm trying to talk logic and common sense. I'll tell you what, if you think I'm such a coward, why don't we settle this like men—a duel, and you can name the choice of weapons."

"I don't have to fight you," said Hurd. "I own you."

"Then I guess we know who the real coward is. And you certainly don't have the bravado of Teddy Roosevelt." Ben pointed at the picture.

Hurd's face became flushed with a crimson red. "You have five seconds to make up your mind."

"Okay," said Ben, "the pit."

Hurd shook his head back and forth. "That would have been a good choice, but you're too late. Your five seconds expired. So I'm going to choose for you, and I choose the run."

"That wasn't five seconds," said Ben with an angry voice.

"Too late," repeated Hurd. He pushed a button on his desk and said, "Send in my guards. I have a new runner for tomorrow's run."

The guards quickly entered the room, and as Ben was being escorted out he heard Hurd ask Thorne, "What are you going to do with the Galaef?"

"I will be personally escorting him to the crystal mine," said Thorne, "I need to set up a safe environment for him—isolation and no hard labor."

"But . . ."

"I need him, because I need Myra," said Thorne anticipating Hurd's protest. "Myra is the holder of the key, and she has fled, . . . probably to her home planet. The computer keeps giving me false information and that means the Galaef is the only one who can tell me which of the two million planets is her birthplace."

Hurd started stroking his mustache quickly. "It's dangerous keeping him alive."

"Yes, it's dangerous, but it's only for a few days. If I have to I'll use the mind machine. But it needs to be done in the secrecy of the pits where no one can observe what I'm doing," he paused. "After that . . ."

The door slid shut before Ben could hear anymore.

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

The hall was long and wide with Vitalites set into the ceiling Illuminating and casting soft shadows from the

seven men and one woman as they traversed the hard, cold floor. The uneasy echoes from their footfalls rebounded from the walls and reverberated into the distance until the sound was gone and replaced by the next set of echoes. The echoing was like a voice enticing them further into the bowels of the building.

Sam, smoking a cigar and leading the pack, kept slowing his pace so he wouldn't get too far ahead. Thinking about the night he was captured, he started cursing the unknown rat, one of Hurd's spies, who had informed on their rendezvous. He was wishing he could find out who he was, then get his hands on him and rip off his head. He'd like to stuff it down Hurd's throat.

The three men just behind Sam were spread out and obviously in no hurry as they walked along, almost skulking, like their shadows sliding across the floor. A somber mood prevailed and the atmosphere was uneasy as they moved toward an unseen, but known destination. Fatal danger awaited.

Immediately behind the three men was Dahms, a woman with short blond hair that fell to an inch above her shoulders, a tall athletic body, and a seemly face, although without expression. She walked with purpose, and unlike the others she walked easily and with confidence. She had no fear, and no gloominess about her. She was wearing leather shorts and a leather top with boots on her feet. Because of her attitude, an objective observer could have predicted she was getting ready to go on a nice, peaceful hike in the mountains, except, of course, for the sword she was wearing on her left hip and the dagger she had strapped to her right calf.

Behind her ambled three more men, scattered in various positions and walking with an attitude of resignation. No one cared to be friendly, and talking was virtually absent, except for the occasional chatter from the three men in the front, and Gaal, who was walking behind Dahms, next to Perry Higley.

Suddenly, Harold, the man just behind Sam, took the cigar (a last request granted by Hurd) out of his mouth, ground it into the palm of his hand, and threw it on the floor.

Hal looked at him with a wry face. "By all the heavens, what the hell did ya do that for? It musta hurt like a bitch."

Harold looked at his palm. There was a large red circle with blisters starting to form around the edge and black ash molded into the center. "I wanted to make sure I was awake. And what differences does it make? We're all gonna be dead by sundown."

Harold had been a rebel. In fact the entire group now traversing the hallway, including the woman, had been rebels. There were no criminals in their midst. The city council rarely sent criminals to the Run, instead they sent them to the city prison. As for the rebels, they never went to the prison, instead they always got a choice of the Run or the pits—death either way; except the Run was faster.

Harold had believed in the cause of the rebels and believed that their plan to fight for a better place to live was not only just, but righteous. Hurd, the leader of the city council, had virtually eliminated the middle class, with the exception of the police. And the only reason the police still had a good life was that the council needed to keep them happy in order to keep the majority of the population under control. The social structure now included only a few of the extremely wealthy—the city council and a few others, with the police in between, and on the other side were the masses of the lower income and the very poor. Most of the people were living on semi-starvation wages with no chance of ever digging themselves out of debt and certainly no hope of ever having even a modest life. The essentials of living were hard to come by. What was considered to be good food was seldom seen. And the only reason cheap clothing of adequate design was more accessible was because of the clothing factory within the city walls.

Harold, a middle aged man, had known of the rebel underground for several years, but had delayed in joining them, not only because of the danger, but also because of what he believed was rationality. Hope kept him thinking that Hurd and the council would come to their senses, would become humanitarian and would start helping the people. But it never happened, and finally he realized it wasn't going to happen. Hurd got greedier, and the more he got the more he wanted. Harold laughed out loud. So loud that the sound echoed down the hall. And although the others looked at him, they didn't ask him why. He was thinking about the irony of it all. Two weeks after he joined the underground he, the two men on either side of him, and the woman behind him were caught in a raid in one of the underground arsenals. His life was over and there was nothing he could do about it. And the bottom line was, he didn't care, it wasn't his life he was worried about.

Jos moved closer and put his hand on Harold's shoulder as they continued to walk along the hallway. He was breathing heavily, but not from the long walk. The air of frustration crept over all of them. "I'm sorry I got you into this," he said, and then he added, "but at least we'll go out fighting."

"Don't take on any guilt because of me," growled Harold. "I'm man enough to make my own decisions in life. And as far as the fighting goes, it'll be a futile fight with death in the end for all of us." He paused briefly.

"Only when someone takes it to Hurd and the other council members will it all have meaning."

Jos took his hand off Harold's shoulder, bent his head, and didn't say anything more.

Harold had been Jos' best friend since they were kids. They had grown up together. They had been the best man at each other's weddings. And they both had jobs in the clothing factory. Life was hard, but at least it was life. Two weeks and two days ago after a lot of pleading and goading from Jos, Harold had finally joined the underground. And now, with no way out of it, they were both going to their doom.

Despite what the others thought, Harold wasn't worried so much about himself as he was about his wife, Julene and their three kids, Nathan five years old, Jason, four, and Abby, two. How would she be able to eek out enough money for the bare essentials? With him dead and in the grave it would be a desperate situation for his family. Maybe she could get a job at the clothing factory, but then who would watch the kids? Maybe Hal's wife, Ailene, . . . but she'd be in the same predicament. Maybe they could live together with one working and the other watching the kids, . . . but then there wouldn't be enough money to feed everyone. With all the kids and the economy the way it was they would never find another husband. Maybe . . . maybe this and maybe that. Harold knew it didn't look good and the only way out was an overthrow of the city council.

Harold balled up his right hand into a fist and banged it into his left palm breaking the newly formed blisters. They popped and fluid oozed out and onto the knuckles of his right hand. It was painful, but he didn't care. Through his stupidity he had gotten his family into a worse situation than before.

"Hey Harold," said Gaal, "it's not going to do any good to beat yourself up. There will be plenty of monsters out there who will do it for you." He paused, but Harold didn't answer so Gaal continued. "Save your energy and strength for the run."

Gaal Leibman, who was not only the most outgoing of the bunch (with the exception of Rennie), but also the tallest at six foot four, was striding alongside Perry Higley, and towering over him like a gargantuan from the planet Micon. Since Harold wasn't going to be conversive, Gaal walked a little faster, caught up to Sam, and leaned down toward his ear. "I know for a fact that this is only the second time a woman has ever chosen the run over the pits," he said softly. "And there's something about her that no one knows, at least no one in this group."

Sam didn't answer, as he wasn't feeling very talkative at the moment. He turned his head slightly to the left, as he had done several times before in order to check out the Captain of the guard and the other two who were following about twenty paces behind. Through his peripheral vision he could see the raised phasors. *Probably set on short-time stun*, he thought. *They wouldn't want to cheat Hurd out of his pleasure.*

Gaal looked at the ceiling. "Well since no one wants to talk I guess it's just you and me God." He paused and then asked, "What shall we talk about?"

Rennie, the man behind Jos, let out a laugh. "That's a good one," he said. Rennie was the jubilant joker of the bunch, and it surprised Sam that he had been quiet for such a long time—all the way down the hall. For the eight days that Rennie had been jailed with Sam, he had been telling jokes and laughing the entire time. His chatter had been non-stop.

"I'm sure God gives a shit," quipped Rennie. "That's why he let us get ourselves into this mess—a big doo-doo mess."

A few of the others laughed.

"And besides, by the end of the day you won't have to talk to the ceiling—you can talk to him in person." Rennie let out a whoop and burst into raucous laughter. It was more the way he laughed than what he said that made the others follow suit.

Sam and Dahms were the only ones who remained unaffected by the laughter. Dahms' stoic manner and mask of confidence continued as she strode down the long hall thinking about the pain that the city council, and especially Hurd, had brought to her life.

Dahms came from a small family. All she had was her mother and father. Her grandparents had died when she was very young, and she had no brothers or sisters.

Hurd was just coming into power when Dahms turned fourteen, and he was throwing his weight in all directions. With his bullying attitude he was able to take control of the voting majority of the council. The mayor became his puppet, and the city police did his bidding. She never did understand how he rose so fast, perhaps he had some outside help, or perhaps he was paying off the right people with money he made from crooked marketeering.

By the time Dahms was eighteen her father anticipated the tyrannical takeover by Hurd. So, he started selling his assets in order to amass a large amount of money to move his family off the planet. His business was

the first asset he sold. It was a company that built fliers (another term for magnetic drive automobiles, which cruised three feet off the ground, but could go as high as a mile). Then he sold all his personal fliers and all the furniture and anything of value, such as paintings by famous painters, and his collection of rare books. He decided he would take nothing with them except some clothing and all the money he could acquire. He and her mother had decided to move to the planet Cyton. And everything was in readiness. Most of the money had been transferred to a Cyton bank. The house was still for sale, but he decided it was time to leave. They would let a realty company sell it, and they could send him the money, minus their commission, of course. They were waiting in the spaceport, and it was just ten minutes before they would embark when Hurd's guards arrived and arrested them.

He had them put into a holding cell on trumped up charges of espionage. They were tried in mock courts and thrown into prison. The city, which was under Hurd's control, was able to confiscate what money hadn't been transferred and their few belongings, and their house. Dahms found out later that Hurd was furious that most of the money was gone. *Still drawing interest*, she thought. It was still in the Cyton bank, and she had used none of it. The money belonged to her parents and as long as they were alive she wouldn't touch it.

That was seven years ago and Dahms' parents were still in prison. She did what she could to help them—bribing guards and getting them extra food, but it wasn't enough. She had to get them out. She knew they wouldn't survive much longer being caged like rats and living under terrible conditions.

Because of her position in the legal department, Dahms was able to meet a very influential man—a man of high status in the city. She had gotten to know him well enough to trust and confide in, and together they formed the underground. They started smuggling in arms and started training recruits.

They had been ready to attack for three years, but the tower, which Hurd had built, and the scents, which could be released on a moments notice, were an impenetrable foe. They were still working on overcoming these obstacles. They were sure that eventually they would accomplish their goal. And Dahms hoped, for the sake of the people and for the sake of her parents, that it would be soon.

She and the others came to a halt as they rounded a corner. They could see the end of the hall about thirty meters in the distance.

Rennie slapped his thigh and said, "Look, boys, not much further now. A runner's paradise with a tropical setting and little beasts to feed upon. We can slaughter a wild pig to eat. Hey, we could even invite Hurd down from his tower to join us." He paused and with a mock frown said, "Oh no, we couldn't do that. He and the pig are probably first cousins." He and Gaal let out a hoot, but the rest of them just chuckled a little. It wasn't as funny anymore, especially now that the end was in sight.

The hall became wider at the end with eleven transparent doors side by side. There were numbers over the top of each door, lit up in red, which indicated to Dahms that anyone who stepped through the doorway was taking a number to hell.

The doors led into small cubicles, which were also transparent.

o o o o o

Just then a side door, about twenty meters from the numbered cubicles opened and a guard stepped out followed by Ben and another guard. The lead guard said to the Captain of the guard, "We have another one for you, but he doesn't have the choice to leave the run. And the computer says to put him in stall number eleven."

"Right," said the Captain. He looked Ben up and down, then he herded the prisoners, to the end of the hall. The guards in the back kept their phasors trained on the group as the Captain stepped forward and said in a loud voice, "When your name is read step into the open cubicle."

The name of each runner was called out as the doors, one by one, slid open.

[Chapter Thirty](#)

The runner-viewing room was located on the same floor as Hurd's office and the council-meeting room, both of which were three floors down from the scent room. The entire floor of the room was covered with "L" carpet for a heightened enjoyment of the pleasures and the excitement of the action. There were ten rows of stadium-seating, high-backed chairs with twelve chairs to a row. The chairs were form-fitting for comfort, and they had

rocking and swiveling capabilities. On the sides of the room were lounging areas with couches and chairs. There was a liquor and soft drink bar and a snack bar area. A small hall ran along side of the stadium seating to a door, which led to a kitchen where full course meals could be prepared. Hurd couldn't understand why no one wanted to eat, but because of that the kitchen, more or less, fell into disuse. On the wall opposite the stadium seating was one large screen twelve feet by twelve feet with ten smaller screens—four on each side of the large screen.

During the run there was a man behind the bar to serve drinks, and there were two waiters to take orders for drinks, snacks or meals.

Bo and Tylr had already arrived and were sitting in the second row when Hurd entered the room with Went following. Juez never came to the view of the run. And as it turned out it was best that he hadn't showed up for this particular run.

Hurd sat down in the middle of the first row, and as Went sat two seats further down Hurd flipped a switch that was set in the arm of his chair. On the wall in front of them the eleven screens came to life with a face filling the center screen, and, at the same time, most of the smaller screens were filled with the faces of the other runners.

Bo whimple quickly surveyed the screens, looking at them. His first thought was, as usual, Hurd was a barbaric monster for conducting such an inhumane form of execution. His second thought was brought forth when he looked at the smaller, bottom screen on the left: My God! Is that Sam Tybo? How did he get there?

The young man in the screen gripped his sword and looked out over the sandy stretch of the first zone.

Bo was certain Hurd hadn't yet seen Sam, otherwise he would have said something.

"These damn rebels," said Hurd out loud. "If we would let them, they would tear our fair city apart. We have to make an example of them."

I don't think that's what they have in mind, thought Bo as he watched the bottom left screen.

The day before the run each runner was given a complete and rigorous physical and mental examination, which would allow the computers to determine the strengths and weaknesses of each runner and thereby ascertain the odds for wagering.

During the three years and some odd months that the run had been in existence only two runners had ever made it through the final zone. Of course, they were immediately whisked away and put in the city prison in solitary confinement where no one would ever see them. In a sarcastic tone, Bo thought, *we can't let those damn rebels go free to continue their havoc upon the city.*

"Well gentlemen, let's see what we have." Hurd always started with stall number one and worked his way to stall number eleven. He opened his notebook and looked at the first page. "Ah yes," he said. "The man's name in the number one stall is Perry Higley. He's twenty-five years of age and unmarried. I see that he is a clerical runner right here in Hurd's Tower. No gratitude. Absolutely no gratitude. I give him a good paying job, and this is how he thanks me. Well, now he will learn his lesson."

Bo remembered how good the pay was when he was a stock boy in Hurd's Tower—he could only buy the cheapest food. And not much of that, and other than his Hurd-tower uniform, most of the time he was wearing rags for clothes.

Hurd punched the button, and the number two stall came up empty. "It appears the computer has determined that no one is weak enough to be in this stall," he said.

He punched the button and the number three stall came up empty. "Looks like we're going to have a good one this time."

He punched the button, and the number four stall came to life on the center screen. Hurd looked at the face, then turned to the next page in his notebook. "This man's name is Renquai Smith. He is twenty-two years old and unmarried. He is a nurse at My Lady of the Saints Hospital." Hurd paused, then said, "I just don't understand how or why these people become involved with the nefarious rebels."

Bo had never heard him use 'nefarious' in a sentence before. *Must be his new word for the day,* he thought.

Hurd punched the button and a face filled the center screen. He flipped to the next page in his notebook. "This man's name is Joshua Mellenblast. He's thirty-two years old, married, and has two children ages ten and eight. He works in the clothing factory making a great living, and now he's thrown it all away."

Hurd punched the button and the next man came onto the screen. Hurd flipped the page and looked down. "Halbert Bolsom," he said. He's thirty-five years old and married with no children.

Bo watched as Hurd's face turned red. He jumped out of this seat. His notebook went flying onto the floor. He turned and faced the councilmen. "What the hell is going on in my organization. This man was a dispatcher

for the city patrolman.”

Bo was wondering what was so bad about that, and then Hurd continued, “He was scheduled to go to work in the scent tower next week. My God, do you know what the consequences could have been.” He said to Bo, “Take a note—from now on all personal scheduled to work in the scent tower will take a lie detector test. And their personal histories will be double, triple, and quadruple checked by the Internal Affairs Division. Got that!?”

“Yes, sir,” said Bo with no intentions of doing any of it.

Hurd bent over and picked up his notebook, then he pointed at the center screen. “This man is about to go to hell, and he deserves to go there.”

“It’s most fortunate that we caught him,” said Went.

“No. Not fortunate. God is one hundred percent behind me and my regime. Always has been and always will be. God blesses me everyday, and He will make sure that we overcome these impertinent, intractable rebels.”

Hurd sat down. His hand was shaking with anger as he pushed the button and turned the page in his notebook. A new face appeared in the center screen. “This man’s name is Harold Blessings. Now that’s ironic, isn’t it?” Hurd’s anger had subsided. “He certainly won’t be getting his blessings today.” Hurd looked at the notebook. “Let’s see,” he said. “He’s thirty-two years old. He’s married with three children, and he also works in the clothing factory.” He shook his head. “These people are so stupid. I just wish we didn’t have to make an example of them. Now what will become of his family.”

Two more families the underground will be sending money and smuggling food to. Bo knew the underground would also be finding them jobs and helping with the babysitting. He knew this because this was one of his responsibilities in the underground.

Hurd pushed the button, but this time he didn’t turn the page of his notebook—he didn’t have to. Instead he half rose out of his chair with a stunned look on his face. The image that came up was a short man with blondish-brown hair and a red mustache, who was smoking a cigar. There was fire in his eyes.

Hurd looked at Went and Tylr as they made quiet exclamations. “As you must have heard,” he said in a solemn voice. . .

No, we hadn’t heard, thought Bo. And I’m sure we were never meant to hear about Sam.

Hurd sat down. “and much to my dismay, Juez’ son was caught smuggling arms into the city.” He paused. “It is sad for all of us, but I had rather thought he would choose the pits.” And then he added, “Where he would have gotten light duty, of course.”

“Of course,” reiterated Went.

Of course, thought Bo. Now we know why Juez has okayed the Army and the Air Force.

“I would like to force him to go to the crystal mine, but the law is written that each man and woman will have a choice, and that choice will be honored. So, there is nothing I can do.”

Bo knew it wasn’t true. Since you wrote the laws there’s no reason you can’t make exceptions when you chose. He wondered why Hurd would let Sam continue with the run. Did he hate Juez that much?

Hurd quickly jabbed the button switching to the next screen. Obviously he wanted to get the councilmen’s minds off Sam. After all he did need their votes to further his plans.

But Bo was still watching Sam on the smaller screen. He was not only surprised to see Sam in the run, he was even more surprised to see him in the number eight stall. Each runner was seeded according to the computerized predictions. Runner number one had the least chance of making it through the zones and number eleven the most. Obviously the computer predicted Sam had a good chance of making it.

Bo turned his attention to the center screen as Hurd said, “Look at this one, the muscular build, and the height, six feet four. He’ll make a good wager.” Hurd looked at his notebook. “This man’s name is Gaal Liebman. He’s twenty-eight years old and unmarried. It says here that the computer put him into the nine slot because he is an avid reader, mostly non-fiction, and has a great memory, which will be an aide for him as he makes his way through the run. And . . .” Hurd suddenly made a brief pause, then blurted out in an angry tone, “What the hell is going on? This man is a city patroller.”

“Another lucky catch,” said Went.

“Not lucky. How many times do I have to tell you? It is God’s will. These rebels will never succeed because God won’t allow it!”

Hurd waited a moment as he calmed down, then he pushed the button again. And lo and behold this was a day of surprises.

"A woman," said Bo acting surprised. "This is only the second time a woman had chosen the run over the pits. And even more surprising the computer has slotted her number ten."

"Yes," said Hurd. "I know this woman. Her name is Dahms Rassiter. She works as one of the legal supervisors for Hurd Enterprises. She does a good job, and normally I would be surprised to see her here, but I remember her parents were sent to prison a number of years ago. So, it looks like a bad apple fell from the bad tree. Or you might say, 'like parents, like daughter. She continues to pursue in their criminal ways.'" Hurd's face lit up. "And how exciting is this? She was put in the number ten stall. I know computers don't make mistakes, but I can't imagine a woman making it through the run. Can you?" He looked around at the council men.

"No, sir," said Went.

Hurd punched the button for the final stall, and Ben's face filled the center screen. Again Hurd didn't have to look at his notebook. "Here we have a man by the name of Ben Hillar. He's an off-worlder, which is most bewildering. Why would a man come from another planet and get involved with the rebels? They must have paid him."

"Didn't he come with the Galaef's research team?" asked Bo.

"Yes, he did, which makes it even worse. We contacted the Galaef, of course, and we were told to treat this man no differently than we would treat any of our rebels."

Of course, thought Bo.

"I am surprised, however, to see him in the number eleven stall. There must be something about him that I don't know."

You should keep up on sporting events, thought Bo. *He's only one of the top swordsmen in the galaxy. And I'm sure if he gets killed in your infamous run, eventually the galactic games' officials are going to find out. Then you'll have hell to pay with the heads of thousands of other planets. His home planet will probably send a war fleet to blow you out of existence. And guess what? God will be looking the other way.*

"This is the most unusual group of runners we've ever had," said Hurd. "This will make a day for strategic wagering," he looked at the buttons on the left side of his chair. "Okay gentlemen, make your bets. And don't forget it was a number six and a number two seed who got to the final gate."

Much to his chagrin Bo started making his wagers. *Someday Hurd will be thrown off his throne of infamy*, thought Bo. He punched in a prediction of Zone Eight for Ben and Sam hoping they would get through.

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

The translucent door slid open, and Perry Higley, a small, thin man, stepped out of the stall and onto the soft powdery sand that composed the entire field between him and the next section. In the other sections he could hear the hue and cry of beasts and unknown creatures as if beckoning him to his untoward end.

The sands before a deadly tropical paradise, thought Perry. He took a step forward, shuffled his feet to get a feel for the sand, and then turned his body as he surveyed the surrounding environment. Finally he looked up. About a hundred feet overhead he could see the steel-girder beams which held the dome's structure in tact, and mounted to them were small mini-cams used for viewing the runners. He knew they were state of the art mini-cams with sound amplifiers so the viewers could also hear what was happening in the field of battle. The run was sent to all the viewers in the city, but no one in the lower class, which was most of the city, would watch such a barbaric event.

"Good morning, Mr. Higley," said a voice from above resounding upon the battlefield and the participants below.

He knew it was Hurd.

"And good morning to the rest of you." There was a pause, and the sound over the microphone cracked and hummed like a bad record over a loud speaker. "I am sorry you are about to embark on a most dangerous journey, one which will most likely result in your death. But you have violated the laws of our city bringing with it a threat to the city council and the good citizens who abide herein.

"For reasons of your own and having been warned that the odds of making it through the run are extremely slim, you have, nevertheless, chosen this over the crystal pit. I admire your courage and bravery, and for some of you, your confidence that you think you can actually make it to the end. This is most commendable." He

paused and then continued.

"But if any of you are having second thoughts at this time, it is not too late. You only need step to the side near the door that has the exit sign above it, and one of the guards will take you to a holding cell, where eventually you will be taken to a transport and shipped to the crystal mine.

"As for you Mr. Higley, if you decide to continue, the first section of the run is one of the most difficult, especially without the aid of your fellow runners. It is therefore my pleasure to inform you, if you make it through to the first safety chamber you will not have to continue with the run. Rather you will be given your freedom immediately—exiled to another planet, of course." There was a pause with more humming and crackling and then, "Good luck to you all."

Perry surveyed the distance between him and the safety chamber - about two hundred yards. There was no sign of life, no bushes, no trees, no grass, and no rocks nor boulders for something to hide behind. *What the hell*, he thought. He walked onto the sand. He glanced from side to side, still he saw nothing, only the high walls to keep the runners from escaping.

He was just about to start his trek when he heard Sam yelling from his cubicle. "Get the hell out of here." His voice sounded muffled on the other side of the door. "Take the exit," he shouted.

Perry looked over at the door with the exit sign above it. "I wouldn't last more than four weeks in the crystal pit, and it would be a slow and torturous death." He turned and looked at Sam. "I'd rather get it over with quickly."

Sam shrugged his shoulders. "Okay, Perry," he said resignedly. "I hope you make it."

Perry pulled the sword from the scabbard and held it high. He looked up at one of the TV cameras in the rafters. "Hurd," he yelled. "Why don't you step down here for a moment?" There was tense laughter from the stalls of the runners. "I'll be real easy on you as I teach you a few swording tricks." After a few moments the laughter ceased and silence took its place. He looked back at the landscape, and took a couple of steps forward.

He knew there was something hiding in the sand waiting for him.

He gripped his sword as he surveyed the white expanse. *Well, no reason to wait*, he thought. *Wherever this monster is, he's not going to come to me.* He started off with a short slinking stride, sword raised high and ready to strike.

He kept turning his head in all directions as he moved cautiously forward watching for the unknown creature—probably some hideous monstrosity like a sand worm found on some of the desert planets of the Galaxy.

He was three quarters of the way to the safety station, with about fifty meters to go, when he suddenly felt the firmness beneath his feet giving way. It was as if someone had pulled the rug out beneath him leaving nothing but a hole in the floor. He tried to jump back, but the suction had caught him in an unreleasable grip and was pulling him down in a turning and twisting motion, counter-clockwise like a maelstrom in the sand.

At first he was puzzled. Was this the mouth of some hideous beast hiding in the sand? Was it about to rear its ugly head and swallow him like a snake swallows a frog?

And then he was up to his knees still struggling to pull himself free. Hysteria started to set in. He desperately pulled, using his free hand to get his leg out and was almost successful, but the other leg went deeper into the sucking sand. He tried again, but to no avail. He leaned forward trying to find firmness for his hands to pull against, but the sucking sand had become like a large funnel. Finally, he reached out with both hands and drove his sword into the sand up to the hilt trying to kill the monster, but he felt nothing.

He was up to his chest in the sand before he realized there was nothing trying to eat him. It was a dastardly trick. There were no beasts, no invidious creatures to fight and die with sword in hand. Instead he had stepped into a sink trap and it was quickly pulling him toward suffocation.

Hopelessly he tried again to pull himself free with his sword, but the sand kept pulling him down. He pulled the sword out and laid it flat against the sand. This slowed his decent, but didn't stop it. He looked up. He knew it was only a matter of moments before he would be breathing sand into his lungs. "Hurd, you bastard. This wasn't even a fight. Give me a Toral!" He threw the sword into the air as if trying to kill Hurd. He started yelling profanities at the number one councilman.

His chin was now resting on the barren surface; a glassy look replaced the sparkle of his eyes, and a moment later there was a muffled sound as the top of his head sunk slowly out of sight. The sand boiled for half a minute while he struggled against the inevitable death. Then it stopped.

Two minutes later the doors to the eight remaining chambers slid open and the runners stepped out.

Ben looked out over the sands. It was the first time he had ever seen a person die, or, in this case, murdered. It was a helpless feeling watching this man, Perry, die without being able to do anything about it—without being able to help him. It was a senseless death of a fellow human being committed by a psychotic egomaniac. And even though Ben trained hard in swording and fought mock battles, he never thought of it as actual training to kill someone—it was merely a spectator sport. And when he watched movies on the viewer, he knew death was merely a pretense. But the actual experience of watching someone die, because of political reasons or greed made Ben angry. And where was the sense of it? Here was a man, like all the living, who had an entire world revolving around him with friends, family, acquaintances, fellow employers, (fellow rebels), and fellow cityites. And he certainly had enemies—one who had now taken his life. He had likes and dislikes, and pleasures and displeasures. And all of this and more made life for him worth living, but now it was gone. He was the nucleus of his world and when he died, an entire world vanished with him. Where was the sense in this murder?

"Such a sad loss," boomed Hurd's voice over the speakers.

The tall blond woman, whose name was Dahms, looked up at the girders and shook her head. "You're a sick man, Hurd," she stated calmly.

"No need for insults," came Hurd's voice. "But then I guess I should expect it of rebels. I haven't met one of you yet who isn't rude and insulting in the heart, mind, spirit, and speech." It sounded like he was becoming upset, but then calmed himself. "Enough of that," he said. "Let me remind you one more time, if you want to step out of the run, this is your last chance."

Ben knew that the choice to leave the run had been taken from him, so he watched the tall blond woman and the others waiting to see who would have enough sense to decide the pit would be better. But he was disappointed, none of them moved toward the door with the exit sign. Ben believed their decision was unwise. In the pit there would always be possibilities, but if you die today, then there is none.

"Very well," continued Hurd, "Keep in mind if you make it successfully through the run, you will be given your freedom. Now, let the run begin."

Ben had been told that the part about being freed was a lie. A sales woman at the clothing store gave Ben the complete history of the run. There were only two men who had ever made it to the end, and they were sent to the city prison. The woman stated that at least it was better than being sent to the crystal mine where the prisoners had little food to eat, and improper clothing to protect them against the bitter-cold, Arian air. Most of the prisoners never lasted more than two months.

Ben examined the other runners. All were wearing tight fitting leather shorts and running shoes with black socks protruding half way up their calves. He noticed they had all chosen a short sword, which hung in a scabbard from their waists and a dagger which was strapped to their legs. They were bare from the waist up with the exception of the tall blond woman who was wearing a midriff leather top.

When Ben had been given a choice of weapons he, like the others, had chosen the short sword, which rested in its scabbard on his right hip, but instead of a dagger, he chose another sword. It was eight inches longer and narrower than the short sword and was only one and a half inches wide at the hilt tapering to a point. It rested in its scabbard on his left hip.

"A crappy way to die," said Sam to no one in particular.

Gaal looked at him. "You got that right," he said. There was a glare in his eyes as he looked at the spot where Perry had moments before sunk beneath the surface of the sand. "Maybe I should choose the pit. That way, at least, I would have a chance to get back here and rip Hurd's heart out."

"I'll second that," said Harold.

Then why don't you, thought Ben. *I will certainly applaud your decision.* Finally Ben ignored the other runners as they began to talk about Hurd and what they would like to do to him, or how senseless it was for a man to die for no reason. He walked over to Perry's tracks and started toward the safety chamber. At first he walked slowly, but then lengthened his stride, all the while following Perry's tracks and keeping the spot, where Perry had disappeared, in sight—the spot where the tracks stopped. Half way there he turned his head to the left, and over his shoulder he could see that Dahms had fallen in behind him and then the others behind her.

As he approached the indentation in the sand he came to a halt and then dropped to his knees. The other runners stopped beside him. "I don't suppose it would do any good to try to get him out?" he asked in a rather rhetorical tone. "He's been under for at least five minutes."

"There's no way we can help him," said Gaal. "For a sink trap to pull with that kind of suction it has to be at least thirty feet deep.

Dahms stepped beside Ben. "Damn," she said looking into the depression in the sand.

"Yeah," agreed Ben.

Chapter Thirty-Two

The safety chamber was a large rectangular building with windows facing all directions giving the runners a chance to see where they had come from and where they were going—to see the dangers behind or the possible dangers ahead. Ironically on the inside there was plush furniture, a snack bar area, and a drink dispenser. And on one of the counters was an open box of Tiberian cigars. Under other most circumstances this would have been an enjoyable lounging area.

Ben was standing in front of the window, which looked out upon the next zone. In front of him he could see three paths leaving the safety chamber—one to the left, which traveled at an angle for a hundred yards and then disappeared around a small hill. And the path to the right did the same thing, except in the opposite direction, but the one in the middle traveled straight for fifty yards and then it seemed to end at a doorway.

The nervous chatter in the room became a little louder, and he turned to look at the other runners. In times of war it's natural for combatants to pair up with others for the upcoming battles, and this was no exception. These runners were already forming into small groups of two, two, and three with Ben being the outsider. Dahms and Gaal were sitting on a couch talking. The tall blond woman seemed composed. She wasn't nervous or fearful, which seemed peculiar under the circumstances. Sam and Rennie were standing near the counter with Rennie talking nervously and rather loudly. Sam reached into the box and pulled out a cigar. He lit it up and started puffing and blowing a blue, white smoke into the air. Harold, Jos, and Hal were sitting in chairs close to each other. They were talking in whispers.

Sam left Rennie in mid sentence and walked over to the food dispenser. He punched a couple of the buttons and two different kinds of energy bars suddenly appeared in the slot below. He grabbed them up, stuck one between the waistband of his shorts and his stomach, ripped open the wrapper covering the other one, and began eating. He sat down in one of the lounge chairs, leaned back, and closed his eyes as he continued to crunch his energy bar.

Just then, the man named Harold walked over to where Sam was sitting and said, "I would like to make a pact before we start out." and then a little louder he continued, "a pact with everyone. Right now I'm not so worried about myself as I am about my wife and kids. So, I'd just like to agree that if any of us make it through to the outside that we'll look in on the others' families and help them however we can." He paused for a moment, but no one said anything. "Is it agreed?"

Most of them nodded or gave their consent. "I especially mean you, Sam," said Harold as he looked down at him. "We all know that your father is one of the city councilmen—the only one who actually tries to help the people. And I personally admire you for joining the cause, because we know you're rich, and you could be home right now enjoying the good life. And because you're rich, and I know you'd help my family if you could, I'm going to do everything in my power to see that you make it through, or at least as far as I do."

Sam opened his eyes and looked up at Harold. "I'll do whatever I can," he said. He closed his eyes and popped the rest of the energy bar into his mouth. "But right now," he continued in a mumbled voice as he chewed on the bar, "Hurd is probably laughing his ass off because you're considering the idea that any of us might make it through."

"Nevertheless. . .," started Harold.

"Nevertheless, if I make it out, I'll do what I can to help your family."

Dahms frowned. "It's been reported," she said, "that a couple of the runners actually made it through. What happened to them after that we're not sure, but my sources tell me they were sent to the city prison."

"So," said Sam, "if they made it through the run, it doesn't matter, because they're still not free, and that means there will be no help for anyone's family."

"True, but there might be another way," she paused and then said, "I don't want to give anyone false hopes, but I heard information on the outside which could be useful. And for right now, one of those things is that the runners usually split up and take different paths, which proves to be their downfall. If we stick together we

have a better chance of making it."

"Is there anything else?" asked Harold.

"Yes, but we'll go into it later." She pointed at the ceiling. "When Hurd's not listening." She lowered her hand, then said, "Did you hear that Hurd, you bastard. I've got information that's going to help some of us get out of here." She looked around the room, then her eyes stopped on Ben. She gave him a wary look. "I've never seen you before," she said. "And I know you're not one of the rebel forces. I'm sure you're not one of Hurd's spies, because the odds of you living the rest of the day are against you. And since I like to know who I'm going into battle with why don't you tell us who you are?"

Before Ben could say anything Gaal said, "I know who he is. His name is Benjamin Hillar. I've seen him on the viewer. He's the greatest swordsman in the Galaxy."

"What!?" said Sam. He lowered his energy bar from his mouth and said, "I've heard of you."

"We all have," said Dahms as she leaned forward and stood up. She looked at Ben. "How the hell did you get mixed up in this mess?"

Ben frowned thinking about Hurd, and then he said, "Most of you may know I'm an archaeologist by profession. Recently I came to Ar to conduct a study on an ancient computer complex, which is located beneath the city park of Newusa. Unfortunately I met Hurd, and he didn't like my plan to write a history which included this city being run by a psychotic egomaniac who is exploiting the people for his own personal gain and greed."

Hal let out a low whistle, and Rennie laughed out loud and yelled, "I bet that curled his mustache."

"Now we know why you're here," said Sam.

"It's still not right," said Dahms. "He should have never sent you to the run, but then you were right when you said he's a crazy man. So it looks like we're in this together."

Suddenly, there was a soft, high-pitched whistle and then a pleasant, feminine voice said, "Time is up. Everyone must now vacate the safety chamber. You have one minute."

Ben was starting to understand that Dahms considered herself to be the leader of the group. She strode quickly to the door, and as it slid open she was the first one out. She walked about twenty yards down the left hand path, then turned and motioned for everyone to huddle up. "I have another piece of information," she whispered as Ben and the other runners drew in closer, "which I will share with you now, in case I don't make it past the next zone." She paused for only a moment to make sure everyone was listening and then she continued in a whisper, "Always stick to the left hand path—even in the left hand zone if you come across a fork, go to the left. It'll always be less dangerous than the right."

"How do you know this?" asked Sam.

"We have inside information," she said, and then she added. "Actually we were able to bribe a few of the guards who work in here. And also, couple that information with the fact that Hurd is left handed, and you start to see the picture."

Harold frowned as if he had doubts. So Gaal whispered, "For those of you who don't know—Dahms is second in command of the rebel army. We haven't told you before because she is the only one who knows the identity of Rogae X. If Hurd knew this, he would do a mind melt on her to find out who it is." He paused for a moment, then said, "The point is, if she says she has information, you can believe it."

"Why doesn't he do a mind melt on all the captured rebels?" asked Ben.

"He can't," said Dahms. "He needs a work force to mine the crystals, and then, of course, he needs runners. And I'm sure you know what a mind melt does to a person's brain."

"Yeah," said Ben thinking what he had read about them in college. A person came out of a 'brain interrogation process' or 'bip' also known as a mind melt, as a babbling idiot and sometimes as a vegetable.

Some of the other runners were nodding their heads as Dahms turned and started down the trail.

"Is there anything else?" Rennie called out.

Dahms looked around at him while still walking. "Yes, but we'll talk about it when the time comes."

"What if you're killed before you get a chance to tell us?"

"When the time comes, Rennie. When the time comes." She looked to the front and continued forward.

It wasn't long until they rounded the bend, and Ben could see a huge wall in front of them blocking from sight whatever was behind it. The path led to a doorway with no door and passed on through. *The start of the second zone, he thought, and now the fun begins.*

Dahms was the first to step through the doorway. She turned and said over her shoulder, "I can feel a force field. Watch for anything that moves. It's probably a switching mechanism of some kind."

Ben was second in line following Dahms with Sam close behind him, and as he stepped through the doorway he could feel a tingling sensation coursing through his body. He walked on through and continued toward the next zone following Dahms.

Finally, as she came to a halt, he stepped beside her on her left side, and looking forward he noticed that the landscape was similar to that of the first zone. It was flat the entire distance to the next safety chamber. There was a path crossing the zone, but instead of being straight it was winding like a sidewinder lying in the sand. The path was more of a compact type of clay, but the surrounding soil was sandy with small clumps of green, leafy vegetation sparsely located throughout.

She put her hands up indicating that no one should go any further. The wall to their left was forty feet high as was the wall separating the left zone from the middle. But now there were two more walls only twenty feet high, one inside the complex wall and one just inside the wall separating the two zones. These two smaller walls were flush with the bigger walls.

"Why are there four walls?" grumbled Ben as he looked at Dahms. He was still angry that he had been sent to the impossible run.

"I never got that information," she said. Then she pointed at something ten feet in front of them. "There are laser beams crossing our path," she said. "The force field must have switched them on."

The red beams were barely perceptible. From top to bottom they were six inches apart to a height of ten feet. They traversed the entire distance from one short wall to the other.

"Is there any way around them?" asked Gaal.

"It doesn't look like it," said Dahms. "And you can bet as soon as we touch one of these beams it's going to trigger something real nasty."

"Let's throw a rock over the beams and see if anything happens when it hits the ground." Sam was looking for any kind of debris to throw as he spoke the words. Finally, he saw a dirt clod, bent over and picked it up. He took a puff on his cigar, flicked the ash, then gave the clod a heave. It cleared the beams and landed thirty feet down the path.

Three small, black heads popped out of the ground. The heads weaved back and forth. Little forked tongues flicked in and out. And then the heads disappeared into the sand.

"Damn," said Gaal. "Black sapphires. I read about them in a magazine. Once bitten you're dead within five seconds." He paused for a moment. "And they're very sensitive to footsteps."

"I'm assuming that's going to make it impossible to get through the field," said Dahms in more of a question.

"Not if you're real fast," replied Gaal. "But anything that makes you slow down will result in your quick demise."

"I've got an idea," said Rennie. He waited for everyone's attention then said, "Let's tell Hurd we've changed our minds." He chuckled, but no one else thought it was funny. So he sobered up.

For a moment Hal studied the path, which wound its way through the field. "Maybe there are only a few groups of snakes here and there. We could throw dirt clods ahead of us to determine where they are."

"Yeah, maybe," said Dahms. She sounded doubtful. "But that sounds too easy."

While the others were talking, Ben was studying the smaller walls and finally decided they had to be the key for getting through the zone. This was supposed to be the easiest zone. During preparation one of Hurd's guards told him, in a whisper, that each zone was progressively more difficult to pass through. And then he added that it was possible to make it through each of them, even the last and most difficult one. He said that they all had an alternate route, which would take you out of the extreme danger and put you in a much less danger.

It was obvious Sam was thinking the same thing as Ben. "I'm going to check out the smaller wall," he said. He started walking toward the right hand wall, following a parallel course next to the beams

"I'm going with you," said Rennie, and he started out after Sam.

Gaal called out, "Watch for snakes. These black sapphires aren't the fastest, but like I said, once bitten, you're dead."

"I'm going to check the wall on the left," said Ben.

Dahms continued to look at the field, then said, "I'm going with you." And she hurried to catch up with him.

"Me too," said Harold.

And Jos, without saying anything, followed along.

Gaal was still studying the path and the empty, barren field. "I'll wait here," he said.

"Me too," muttered Hal.

Sam figured the entire field was full of snakes—deadly poisonous. He continued walking and studying the wall looking for anything that might help them get to the top of it. He had another hundred feet to go when Rennie caught up.

"What are you looking for? It's just plain dirt."

"I don't know, but keep your eyes open."

They were fifty feet away when Sam saw the little dark spots near the corner of the wall going all the way to the top.

As they came closer, he could see they were grooves. "I think I got it," he said. They were now ten feet from the wall.

"Got what?"

"Those grooves. See those Grooves?"

"Yeah."

"They're spaced every twelve inches, and they go all the way up. With your sword and dagger you can go hand over hand to the top of the short wall."

"Damn, I think your right," said Rennie. "It'll take a lot of arm strength, but it can be done." He surveyed the wall for a moment longer and then said, "We need to tell the others." Without waiting for a reply from Sam he turned and started back, but he had only gone three strides when, in his haste, his foot hit a clump of dirt causing him to lose his balance. His arms started whirling to keep him from falling, and in that moment the tips of his fingers touched one of the beams. His eyes became wide. "Crap," he yelled back at Sam.

"Get the hell back here!"

Ten feet behind them, parallel to the beams, a wall started slowly rising out of the dirt spewing dust in all directions. It was thick and it was solid. It stood like the last barrier in a rat trap.

It was still rising when Sam said, "There's no going back now." He walked over to the sidewall and scrutinized the grooves. He pulled his sword and dagger free from their sheaths. "Come on," he yelled to Rennie. "The others will see what we're doing."

The short sidewalls began to move back and forth causing the ground to rumble. The noise was deafening.

Little black heads started to pop out of the ground. Suddenly the whole field was alive with snakes, thousands of them.

"Let's climb," yelled Sam.

Rennie raced the last ten feet, and when he was close enough Sam pulled him by the arm. "Go," he yelled.

Rennie started up the wall with his sword and dagger, hand over hand. When he was a full body length up, Sam started after him. The wall was still shaking which made it difficult to get the points of the dagger and the sword into the slots. They had to go slow as they pulled themselves up. Sometimes it was frustrating as it took two or three tries, but they continued to move up the wall without falling into a field of deadly snakes.

When Sam was a safe distance from the ground, he looked to the other side. Dahms was already standing on top of the short wall, and the others were moving quickly up without the use of their swords or daggers.

"Damn," said Sam. "They must have hand and foot holds. I should have remembered what she said about going to the left."

Sam climbed the last five feet using his arm strength to pull himself up. The climb was physically exhausting and when he reached the top he could barely drag himself onto the ledge. It wasn't so much the climb as it was the shaking of the wall.

"Gaal and Hal aren't moving," said Rennie.

They were frozen with indecision standing before a sea of black squirming snakes, which were slowly coming toward them like an incoming tide. It seemed they didn't know whether to run for the walls or run down the path.

But Sam knew they wouldn't have time to start up the wall without being bitten. The snakes would be there before they were. "Run down the path!" he yelled. "It's your only chance."

Sam watched as Gaal shook himself out of his state of indecision and took off running with Hal right behind him stride for stride. There were so many countless numbers of snakes, they had to run on top of them.

"One slip," said Rennie as he watched, "and they're dead."

And just like that, as if he had had a psychic premonition, Hal tripped on a small rise in the ground and went

sprawling into the black sea of sapphires. He was dead so quick his body didn't even realize it. The brain willed the flesh to rise, and he continued running down the path another twenty yards with little black snakes hanging to his flesh. He suddenly came to a standstill, weaved to and fro a few times, and fell again into the squirming and wriggling sea of blackness.

Sam continued to watch as Gaal made it safely out of the zone and into the safety station, then Sam looked at Hal's dead body. It was already turning black and becoming bloated. At first he didn't say anything, but finally, "At least it was quick," he said. He threw his half smoked cigar into the wriggling mass of snakes.

Because the wall was shaking so violently, they were unable to stand up. So he and Rennie had to scoot their butts along the top until they came to the far side of the zone.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Ben was sitting in a chair wishing the Galaef hadn't insisted he accompany him to that meeting with Hurd and Thorne. Is there a moral to this story?—maybe,—don't become too friendly with politicians in high places.

The other six runners were sitting in various locations staring into space. This time they weren't eating snacks or drinking beverages or laughing nervously.

"Well, if it's all the same to you," said Rennie who finally couldn't stand the silence any longer, "I think this whole thing is absurd. Just think about it for a moment. Here we are in the middle of a civilized city,—you know: advanced technology, intelligent people, a fairly decent understanding of the Universe, hell we even have access to hyperspace—can you imagine that, hyperspace? And yet with all this intelligence around us we're in the middle of an absurd complex in our home city being killed by creatures imported from millions of light-years away. And the absurd part of it is,—it's on purpose."

No one said anything.

"Don't you think that's absurd?" He looked at Sam. "Come on Sam, don't you think it's unrealistic that an arena is built for spectators to watch other people being killed?"

Sam pulled at his bright, red mustache and squinched his eyebrows. "Beyond absurd," he said.

"Absurd, yes," said Ben, "but not unrealistic." History has taught us that there have been many rulers who have perpetrated hideous forms of unjust and unfair punishment on their subjects. Consider for a moment the history we have learned about the civilizations on Earth. Do you remember one such dynasty who fed the Christians to some sort of beast? They watched for amusement as the beast tore limbs off his prey, a man or a woman, and gnawed on their still live, quivering bodies. And there was another crazy dictator who put people into fiery ovens or poisoned them in make-believe showers."

"That doesn't make it right," quipped Rennie.

"I didn't say it was right," retorted Ben. "All I'm saying is it's not so unusual. It seems the criminally insane become rulers of people more often than we would like to think.

"Yeah," said Gaal. "there's no doubt Hurd's crazy."

Everyone became quiet again, so Ben stood up and studied the upcoming zone. It was quite a contrast to the first two zones. There were trees, bushes, vines, unusual flowers, and grass. The foliage was so dense in some areas it was impossible to see further than ten feet. A lot of life milled around in the greenery and off to the right, he could see an animal, which looked like a wild dog, standing in some tall grass. *I hate jungles*, he thought. *And I've never even been in one.*

Just then the soft, feminine voice told them they must leave, and the door slid open.

Dahms stepped out, gripped her sword, and started down the path. "Time to get mean," she said.

As Ben walked behind her, about ten feet. Sam sidled up to him and said the most inappropriate thing, "I wonder what she would be like on a date. It's kind of hard to imagine. She has a pretty face, a hard athletic body, long legs, blond hair, and an interesting personality. But on the other hand she might be too demanding. She always seems to take charge."

Ben was trying to figure out why Sam was talking nonsense in the middle of a deadly environment. But then, he considered the psychology involved when people are under severe external stress—it has an effect of bonding relationships faster than normal.

Sam continued, "She has some kind of underlying leadership quality and everybody just seems to do whatever she says. Still she might be. . . . What the hell am I talking about?" he said a little louder. "We

probably won't even make it through the third zone."

"Yeah," said Ben. "It sounded like you were starting to get weird on us."

"Don't be so negative," said Gaal. It was obvious Gaal had only heard the part about not making it through the next zone.

Sam snickered. "You think I'm being negative? Only two people, out of what? . . . five or six hundred have ever made it through the run. And you want to be positive. Look around you. For the first time in my life I'm seeing plants, insects, and reptiles I never knew existed before today."

Even as he finished his words he jumped back as a small snake with a green body and a bright purple head suddenly slithered away in the grass. Sam watched it to make sure it kept going in the opposite direction, but at a distance of fifteen feet the little snake quickly turned and coiled its body. Its head weaved back and forth, its tongue flicked in and out, and then its mouth opened wide while at the same time extending its neck in a rapid motion and with great force.

Sam, watching with fascination, was almost hypnotized as the purple head danced like a reed in the wind, and then, from the mouth, there was a small flash. The snake's head drew quickly back.

Ben was also watching the snake as it spit. He reached out and grabbed Sam by the arm and jerked him to one side allowing the venom to miss his eye by a mere two inches. It hit him on the left temple and started burning a hole in his scalp.

"Damn," yelled Sam. He reached up and wiped away the burning venom. Small blisters began to form where the venom had touched his skin, even on his hand.

"That little son of a bitch," he mumbled under his voice.

"Let's go," said Ben. "I don't want to wait around to see if he's going to spit again." They strode quickly down the trail catching up with Dhams.

She had heard Sam yell. "What happened?" she asked as she stopped and turned to look at him.

"That little snake with the purple head spits venom," he said.

Dahms examined the blisters on the side of his head. "Probably the least of our worries."

"Thanks, I'll remember that when one spits on you." Sam was half joking and half not, nevertheless Rennie loved it.

"When one spits on you," he repeated what Sam had just said and started chuckling. He said it again under his breath and chuckled some more.

Dahms started down the trail coming closer to the end of the grass and the beginning of the thick jungle vegetation.

To Ben, Sam said, "I've seen her before, but I never knew she was second in command of the underground forces. She was in Hurd's tower when I was taking care of some business for my father. I had spoken to her once or twice, but only briefly."

"It doesn't matter," said Ben. "For now, let's keep our minds on the run."

"Yes, of course," said Sam slowly and unconvincingly.

"Watch for movement," said Dahms as she continued to lead.

The path wound its way into the jungle. Large limbs hung over the path casting long shadows, and huge orange globes, growing in clusters on the branches, weighted them down so that some of them were almost touching the ground. The foliage was so thick it was like walking through a green fog. Most of the light was shielded making the path hard to see. The soil was moist, and there were irregularly shaped pools of swampy water on both sides and sometimes crossing the path.

Dahms used her sword to hack at the vines and to push them aside as she progressed slowly through the dense plant life. And just like that they stepped into an open area where the lights were once again bright and this time almost blinding. The opening was about thirty yards across and all around the periphery the shrubbery was sparse and the trees were smaller. Examining the trees on the other side of the opening there were long, hanging vines, which ran back and forth overlapping each other and extending from the trees to the ground making it easy for creatures to climb to the branches and stare down at the intruders. Here and there snakes were slithering upon the limbs, their forked tongues flicked in and out. Once in awhile one would fall to the ground and disappear into the dense jungle.

Some of the vines grew from the ground where the large green stalks were as thick as a man's leg. Little, pink orchids were growing throughout the vines, and Ben noted their scent was not sweet and fragrant as most flowers, instead it was rather fetid and quite strong. He could smell them thirty yards away.

"Look," said Rennie. He pointed at a pile of what looked like old rusty handbeams about ten feet off the path

in the open field. He walked over and picked one up. He put his hand about three inches in front of the lens and flipped the switch. He could see the light reflecting off his palm. "It works," he said a little amazed. "The damn thing works." He swung it around to show the others.

Dahms walked over to examine the handbeams.

Rennie flipped the switch to the off position and then bent down and picked up another one. He handed it to Dahms. "I bet we're going to need these for something."

Dahms took the handbeam, turned it on to make sure it was working, and then turned it off. "You're probably right. Everyone grab one and let's go."

Ben picked one up and hooked it to his belt.

Sam, who was always puffing on a cigar, bit the end off, spit it out, and started fervently puffing. He picked up one of the handbeams, looked it over for a moment, and then threw it back on the pile. "Why the hell are we going to need these in the middle of a jungle?"

Ben and Sam caught up with Dahms while the others were picking up handbeams.

The six men, with Dahms leading, were half way across the opening when they heard a loud, almost humming or buzzing noise coming from above.

Everyone looked up, but with the blinding lights shining directly down from the rafters, they could only make out a number of large shapes—about two feet in length and a foot in width—hovering, as if suspended in mid air.

"What the hell is that?" said Ben.

Sam popped the cigar out of his mouth. "Let's get out of here," he yelled. The runners bolted for the trees on the other side of the opening. They all made it into the thick foliage, and a few moments later the noise coming from the flying insects faded away and finally was gone.

This time Ben took the lead. He used his sword to hack a snake in half that was hanging from a branch. He kicked at another one in the path and catching it in the side he sent it hurtling into the underbrush. There was a nest of strange looking insects to the left of the path, but he passed them by. While rounding a curve in the path he came upon another opening, and as he stepped out of the jungle and looked ahead he could see open spaces all the way to the safety house. "Damn good to be out of the jungle," he said.

Ben started across the opening, gripping his sword and waiting for the humming sound to return. But it didn't come, and as he came to a small rise, the path forked and went in different directions. The right path traveled around a pond and under a group of trees about thirty yards ahead. The path on the left side of the fork continued down to the same small pond, where it ended abruptly in the water. The pond was twenty yards across, and the path reemerged on the other side. It then joined the path that crossed under the trees and traveled on to the safety chamber.

In the short grass to the left of the pond were hundreds of green-coiled bodies with bright purple heads waving back and forth. *Spiting snakes*, thought Ben. This made it impossible to go around the pond to the left. The only two choices were either through the pond or under the trees to the right of the pond.

"I'm sure there's something here," said Dahms. "But is it in the pond or behind those trees?"

So far they hadn't come across anything deadly in this zone, which meant it would be any moment. The safety chamber was in sight, and not that far away. Ben scrutinized the pond. It was a dark, murky color with floating green scum and little bugs skittering back and forth feeding on the slime. Beneath the surface of the water there was another type of bug, about ten inches long and black with little legs and antennae. Its head was yellow, tapering into a stripe down the back.

Sam saw it too, "Look at that little bastard," he said. "Could be poisonous."

The humming-buzzing returned and was getting louder. Something was coming fast over the trees. Ben and the other runners whirled around and looked up. Forty yards behind and forty feet above them five insects came flying toward them. As they came speeding closer he could see their bodies were more than two feet long and their wingspans, from tip to tip, were at least four feet. Two beady eyes on two-inch stalks protruded from their heads. Their bodies were long and slender, coming to a taper with what appeared to be a stinger at the end. And then he saw the fangs. He had never seen insects with teeth. "What planet did these come from?"

"They're from the planet Ocianna, and they're called Mooregangers," yelled Gaal. "They're very fast, and their stingers are poisonous."

They came lower until they were just above their heads and just out of reach.

"Form a circle," yelled Dahms. But the sound from the creatures' wings was so loud that it drowned out her voice.

The lead insect made a direct assault on Jos. It was so fast and so unexpected that no one had a chance to react, and before anyone could do anything, it formed a 'C' shape bringing its stinger forward from behind and plunged it into Jos' chest.

The thing sunk its teeth into his face and hung on with ferocity. Harold raised his sword, and hacked the nightmarish insect in half. "Damn this thing," he yelled and he kept hacking and hacking at the insect.

Sam grabbed him by the arm and pulled him back. "It's dead," he said.

Harold looked up and yelled at the cameras. "Hurd, you God damn bastard, you're going to die!" His voice all but choked and then he looked down at Jos who was still alive, but barely.

Paying no attention to the insects still hovering above their heads. Harold kneeled down. Jos tried to say something, but could only stammer meaningless sounds. Blood was oozing from the wounds, but it wasn't the loss of blood that was killing him, rather it was the poison from the insect's stinger. His skin turned a light yellow and then his tongue swelled and turned black. He took a long slow breath and finally let out the death rattle.

Sam grabbed Harold under the arm and stood him up. "They're still up there," he said pointing with his sword at the four remaining insects.

Ben could see the anger and frustration, the hate and the sorrow all at the same time in Harold's face. "Get ready for another attack," yelled Ben over the droning.

Ben and Gaal put their backs to Dahms' as they watched the insects.

"They act like they're trying to protect their young," yelled Sam.

"That's right," yelled Gaal. "That's the only time they'll attack a human. They probably have a nest close by."

"Who the hell cares?" retorted Harold.

The insects flew to a height of twenty feet above the heads of the runners and formed into a 'V' shape like a flock of birds. Their moves were coordinated as they came closer. The noise from their wings was almost deafening which made it not only difficult to hear, but difficult to concentrate.

The lead insect moved slightly below the others, then dove for Ben's chest. But this time Ben was ready for it. As the insect made its 'C' shape he quickly stepped to the side and at the same time struck with his sword. The stinger was severed and fell squirming to the ground. The flight of the insect was forced away by the blow of the sword, but it turned in mid air, backtracked, and continued its attack. It butted Ben's chest several times with its stub. It was obviously senseless to pain, and it was in the midst of dying, but didn't know it.

Gaal grabbed a wing and flung it to the ground. He and Sam crushed out its life with the heels of their running shoes.

"That probably cost Hurd ten thousand tal," Gaal said.

Craning his neck so he could watch the insects, Ben used his free hand and wiped away a blue oozing slime off his chest where the insect had tried to sting him without a stinger. Then he pulled the short sword from the sheath and waited.

One of the three remaining insects broke formation and acting as a decoy flew in front of Dahms. While Ben turned his head over his shoulder to watch, Sam turned to face the attack, and he and Dahms raised their swords. But as it brought itself into the 'C' shape, within just a few feet of Dahms, it suddenly stopped short. While it had the runners' attention, the other two broke formation. One came in from the side, and the other came from behind.

Unknown to Sam, by turning to help Dahms, he had exposed his back to an assault. One of them dove for his back while the other attacked Ben from the side.

Ben saw them coming and shouted a warning to Sam, but the noise was so loud he was unable to hear it, and even if he had heard it he wouldn't have been able to turn in time.

Seeing this and knowing Sam was about to die, Harold stepped between the stinger and Sam's back. He didn't have time to kill the thing, but he did have time to stop Sam from being killed. He slashed with his sword, but missed.

Sam was still watching the other insect in front of Dahms as Harold took the stinger in the right lung. He heard Harold's cry and whirled around in time to see the insect pull free and fly out of sword's range.

At the same time Ben, being assaulted by the other insect, was able to twist fast enough to avoid the stinger. It missed by less than an inch. Ben thrust his sword into the insect's abdomen and leaned further to the left. One of the wings hit Ben in the face with a rapid flap, flap, flap. He brought up the short sword in his left hand and turning to the right while falling toward the ground he swung the sword around in an arc and severed the

stinger from its body. He fell to his left shoulder and held on to his right sword while the bug continued to beat its wings against the air. Ben sat up and flung the pinioned insect into the open field. It continued to flop around until Dahms ran over and cut it in half.

The insect that had wounded Harold, flew higher up and joined formation with the one that had acted as a decoy. They hovered for a few seconds as they appraised the situation. The other three insects were lying dead on the ground, blue ooze seeping into the soil. Finally, as if realizing they had done all the damage they could do and possibly discourage any assault on their nest, they flew back into the foliage.

Ben stood up and looked down at Harold. He could see his skin turning a light yellow and his muscles were twitching in uncontrollable spasms, and although Ben knew he was in agony there seemed to be a slight smile on his lips. As his tongue turned black and started to protrude due to the swelling he simply closed his eyes and died.

Sam knelt beside Harold for a moment and placed his hand on his shoulder. "If I get out of this, I'll take care of your family," he said softly. "I'll also make sure that Hurd is taken care of."

Jos and Harold lie on the ground. Their bodies were bloated, and their black tongues protruded from their mouths. Ben remembered something a religious man once said. 'When we're finished with our human suits, we leave them behind and move on to a better place.' Ben hoped he was right.

"Which way?" asked Rennie as he looked at the two paths.

Ben studied the tree, then the pond. "Remember what you said about always going to the left," he said.

"I'm not sure it's the right way," replied Dahms, "since we've already encountered the major threat in this zone it might not matter which way we go. And quite frankly as I look at the pond I keep imagining poisonous snakes or a carnivorous underwater creature who could inflict a deadly wound."

But Ben knew better, and he started for the pond. "If you look under the tree you'll see a worn spot in the grass as if something is running around beneath it. Personally I'd rather not meet it face to face."

Dahms considered it for a moment. "I see your point," she said.

"That's right," said Sam as he stroked his red mustache and glared at the tree.

"I'll try this way first," said Ben. "If I don't make it through the pond, then you'll know to go the other way."

"You'd think the giant insects would have been enough for this zone," said Sam.

Ben stopped at the edge and peered into the water looking for anything big and monstrous, or anything small and suspicious. "Each zone becomes more difficult," he said. He slapped the surface with the flat of his sword a couple of times causing the bugs to skitter away from the turmoil. The green slime rose and fell in ripples, but nothing else moved. It was too murky to see deeper than a foot from the surface, so he stuck his sword through the slime and quickly agitated the water. Still nothing happened. He drew his short sword, and with a sword in each hand he stepped into the pond. As he forged ahead the little pond dropped off, becoming deep, quite rapidly. After three steps he was already up to his waist and two more steps, up to his shoulders. He pushed his left foot forward and stepped down. The water was now slapping against his face and little bugs were scurrying to get out of his way. Green slime was clinging to one ear as he stretched his head and face upward to keep the water out of his mouth and nose. With his sword now under the water he probed around in front feeling for any unknown creature. He picked up his right foot to push it forward when something suddenly grabbed it and started to pull—not too strong, but enough to cause him to jerk his foot upward while striking down with his sword. He started to strike again when he realized his foot had simply gotten caught in a clump of moss.

He pushed his right foot toward the bottom and felt around, then started forward again. After ten yards, near the middle of the pond, the bottom leveled, and began to slope up. The mud on the bottom was slippery, which made walking difficult, but he finally emerged on the other side and stood dripping water and wiping slime off his shoulders and arms.

"It's all clear," he said.

Of the remaining four, Sam was the first to step into the pond. With the sword in his right hand he began stabbing the water in front of him. He edged his way toward the center of the pond keeping alert to anything that might want to eat him. Finally, as the pond became too deep for him to keep his head out of the water he sheathed his sword and began to dog paddle.

After he had gone another five feet Dahms stepped into the murky pond, and then came Gaal, followed by Rennie.

"The water's nice and cool," said Rennie. He splashed some of the water in his face to wash away the sweat.

Ben waited for them. And Sam had just reached the bank of the pond, and was giving Dahms a hand when a loud, high-pitched wailing scream brought everyone to a standstill. They quickly turned and looked at the trees

near the far edge of the pond.

A hideous six-foot monstrosity covered with shiny, grey scales came crashing out of the bushes next to the tree. Its jaws opened wide showing large, yellow teeth with fangs protruding down from the top row.

Ben raised both swords getting ready for the attack.

Sam pulled Dahms from the pond and joined Ben just as the thing started running at them.

"A sword won't penetrate that hide," he yelled. "Aim for the eyes."

The beast came to a sudden halt. Around its neck was a metal collar, a blue-green sheen in color. From it a long chain extended and disappeared behind the tree.

Gaal and Rennie stepped onto the bank.

"Only for those who take the other path," said Gaal.

"Looks like you were right," said Dahms.

Rennie didn't say anything. He was still shaken. His face was white and perspiration began to drip from his forehead.

Ben watched as the monster's jaws snapped shut and then opened again. Hiding behind his tree waiting for the right moment to jump on his victims, he had undoubtedly eaten some of the unsuspecting runners. "He's probably developed a taste for humans," said Ben.

Sam said, "In my opinion that thing's too ugly to keep on living." And before anyone realized what he was doing, Sam charged the beast at a full run.

Dahms held her breath for a second, then yelled, "What the hell are you doing? Stop!"

Sam could see that the beast was still at the end of the chain, stretching it tight. Without realizing it the beast was making himself completely defenseless.

Sam jumped in the air and ran his sword through the beast's eye and into his brain. He stepped back rending the sword free. He looked toward the ceiling. "Import another one of these," he yelled.

The beast fell heavily to the ground with blood spurting from the eye socket.

Ben looked toward the rafters as a crackling voice came over the loudspeaker.

It was Hurd, and he was angry. "May your sister rot in the Zi pits. That Yulni cost me one hundred thousand tal!" There was a slight pause, then, "I'm going enjoy watching you die!" The loudspeaker clicked off.

Dahms patted Sam on the back, and then to the group she whispered, "There's a good chance Hurd won't be watching us die."

"You must know something," said Sam, "because that's the second time you're made reference to us making it through, but I won't ask, and as for Hurd, his time will eventually come. It might not be my doing, but someone will take him out."

Chapter Thirty-Four

Rennie was the last one out, and as the door to the safety chamber slid shut Ben looked ahead. The path traveled for a short distance on level ground, then it began up a steep incline and entered into a pitch-black cave. It was embedded fifty feet off the surface of the run. The hole was punched into the bottom of a cliff, which was made of a black, glistening material—some type of rock. It would be impossible to climb the cliff above the cave, which meant they would have to go into the cave and face whatever was inside.

Dahms started up the trail with Ben behind her, then came Gaal, Rennie, and Sam.

As they walked along Ben sheathed his short sword and took the handbeam from his belt.

"Now we know what the lights are for," said Rennie with a laugh.

"Probably won't matter," said Sam. "Some demon in the cave will be lurking in the shadows behind a corner, just watching for a light, and while he's eating you I'll get away in the dark."

Rennie started to laugh, however, the seriousness of the idea must have struck home, because he became somber and quiet as he trudged along.

It didn't take more than five minutes to get to the cave. The path was quite smooth and manageable with no unexpected obstacles nor creatures to bar their way. Dahms turned her light on, as did Ben and the other two, then she stepped through the entrance.

Ben was sure it wasn't the cool breeze blowing gently through the opening that made Dahms shudder. He

looked over her shoulder as she shone her light ahead looking into the depths of the tunnel. The light disappeared into the blackness.

Dahms took a few steps and stopped, "My light is not enough to cover all the darkness."

From top to bottom the cave was a mere seven feet, but the pattern of the light from the handbeams was small in diameter. "Yeah," said Ben. "You shine yours at the bottom, and I'll shine mine at the ceiling."

The combination of the two lights lit up the periphery of the tunnel, and they started forward again. The light reflected off the black material of the cave in sparkles like the moon off black waters.

They walked slowly, their running shoes making no sound against the surface of the tunnel floor, and whenever there was a phantom noise from ahead Dahms would stop and strain to listen while peering intently into the blackness.

As they progressed further into the bowels of the small mountain the light from the entrance grew dimmer. And the blackness crowded in behind them.

"Look!" yelled Rennie, pointing with his light.

Dahms, Ben, and Gaal turned and followed his beam with their eyes—expecting the worst, but a few feet in front of Rennie, where Dahms, Ben, and Gaal had just walked, lay a shiny object on the floor of the cave, glittering in the light.

"I already saw it," said Dahms.

Rennie bent over and picked it up. "A Zen I crystal," he said. "Why, it's gotta be worth a fortune. And look. There's more."

In the light ahead of Dahms the floor was strewn with shiny crystals. Most of them were small, but some were the size of a man's fist. As the light hit them they glimmered throwing rainbow patterns on the walls and ceiling and bringing an eerie colorful brightness to the dark tunnel. Their scintillating colors portrayed their elemental combination as the real thing, Zen I.

"Leave it," said Dahms. "It's a trick."

"Can't be," whined Rennie. And then he said. "It's not a trick. Remember how they left the handbeams. We needed them, and we'll need these later."

"It's a trick," repeated Dahms. "Hurd is luring you into a trap." She turned and started down the tunnel with Ben and Gaal following.

"It's not a trick," laughed Rennie.

Ben could hear Sam as he stepped around Rennie, "You're a blithering idiot," he said. "You can't hold your sword, the light, and the crystals all at the same time. Not unless you're three handed."

Dahms slowed her pace. "Something, soon," she said.

"Yeah," agreed Ben. He could almost feel it in his bones.

As Rennie fell further behind, Sam caught up with Ben. "Let me in front," he said. "Without a light I can't see the floor." Sam pushed his way past him.

Abruptly, and without warning, they walked into a large empty chamber. Dahms came to a halt so fast that Sam nearly ran up her backside. He turned at the last split second and stepped beside her while grabbing her shoulder to keep from tripping over more Zen I crystals.

Ben stepped to the other side and together their lights quickly circled the room, exploring the corners, the ceiling, the walls, and the floor. The room appeared to be empty, but it was so wide it was difficult to see the wall to the far left. The black rock sparkled in the light.

"Watch carefully," said Gaal. "There must be something in here."

Ben followed the circling lights exploring the interior of the room, but after a few minutes he concluded there was nothing lurking in the darkness.

"Considering the size of this room," said Sam, "I would have to assume it was constructed for some sort of beast."

"Yes," agreed Dahms, "but for some reason, it's no longer here."

Sam stated the obvious, "Maybe it's because we took the left hand path."

Ben focused his light on the far wall. "That's the way out," he said. The vague form in the distance portrayed a door.

"Probably," said Dahms, "but let's not be hasty." She made one last sweep with her handbeam. "Okay, move toward the door, and Gaal, you watch our backs." They proceeded cautiously into the room, swords advanced, watching for anything untoward. Their feet made no sound on the smooth floor, as they walked softly and slowly forward. No longer were there crystals strewn about.

They were in the center of the room when they discovered two more doors in the back wall—that made three, one to the right, one in the center and one to the far left. The doors were smooth and glimmering as the light from the handbeams reflected back and formed sparkling circlets of radiance on the ceiling and the floor. Upon closer scrutiny as they approached, they discovered the doors were transparent allowing them to see through and to the other side.

"Hurd likes transparency," said Ben.

The door allowed entrance into a small chamber with transparent walls on two sides and another door on the back side—not transparent.

"It must be a trap," said Gaal. "The door will shut us in. The chamber will fill with a poisonous gas, and we'll die."

"No," said Ben. "That's not congruent with Hurd's way of thinking. He wants the sport of the hunt, the conflict, and a fight to the death."

"That's right," said Sam.

The four of them stood silent, staring at the chamber.

"There's no other way," said Dahms. "Except the way we came in, and that's not an option."

She stepped up and hit the palm switch with the butt of her sword.

"Wait," said Sam as the door slid open. "Let's use the door to the far left." He pointed toward the far end of the chamber.

"Of course," said Gaal.

They walked to the far end of the chamber until they came to the door, and again Dahms hit the palm lock. The door slid open. She hesitated a moment as she looked inside inspecting the ceiling, the floor, the sides, and the crevices with her light looking for anything out of the ordinary. But there was nothing to see. So, she stepped into the chamber.

After a moment, and seeing that nothing was happening, Sam stepped in behind her.

Gaal was about to follow, but was halted in his tracks when the transparent door slid shut in front of him. He was startled at first, but after he regained his senses, he kicked the palm switch with his foot. Nothing happened so he kicked it several more times. Finally, he lunged against the door with the full weight of his body, but the door stood firm.

"It won't do any good," said Ben as he grabbed Gaal's shoulder.

Sam started shouting, but they couldn't hear what he was saying, so Sam pointed to the next chamber indicating the only alternative. Gaal made a face, and Ben agreed. "We waited too long to step into the chamber," said Ben. "Now we have to travel a route more difficult."

Just then, a small light shone from the distant tunnel. It was far enough away that Ben couldn't see who it was, even though he knew. "Let's go," he said. And they started toward the next door.

As the light came closer, they could see Rennie's smiling face

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Sam was yelling at Ben and Gaal when the door on the back side slid open.

"Door's open," whispered Dahms as she grabbed Sam's arm to get his attention. After letting go she stepped quietly into the next room.

She peered into a chamber, noting it was about thirty meters in each direction, and as she looked up she saw a ceiling which was domed and had a dim light hanging down with just enough of an illuminating glow to cast grayish-black shadows from objects in the room. There were boulders, rocks, and more crystals were lying or piled up in an unsymmetrical fashion. In the middle of the room small Zen I crystals were piled in a circle which looked to be about two feet in diameter. The light from the ceiling penetrated the crystals throughout the room and created rainbows, which emanated a spectacular display of colors in all directions.

"I don't like the looks of that," said Dahms pointing at the circle of crystals. "It looks like a nest." She strained to see what was inside the circle, but the lighting and the distance made it difficult to see over the rim.

Sam stepped beside her, and the door slid shut. "Into the monster's lair," he said. He advanced into the chamber hunched over and walking slowly toward the pile of crystals. His walk was silent—careful not to disturb any of the rocks strewn about the floor. There were no other doors nor tunnels leading into the chamber, and no visible vents.

Dahms followed warily in a semi-crouched position. Her sword was extended in her right hand with the

handbeam in her left. She made ready for any monstrosity that might come bolting out of the shadows. Cautiously as she and Sam moved forward they searched for a few minutes looking behind boulders, but they found nothing. Finally, Dahms stood erect and shone her handbeam around the room. She knew something was there.

Three red lights, tiny and brilliant and shaped in a pyramidal pattern, appeared above one of the boulders to the right about three paces from the circle of crystals. The red lights blinked off, then on, then started quickly toward the runners, and whatever it was, it made a high-pitched squealing noise as it ran. Dahms saw the thing first, and reached over to push Sam out of the way just as it launched itself at them. A flying black shadow flew through the space where Sam's head had been a moment before and landed several meters past the two of them.

Dahms had a momentary, nightmarish glimpse of a fuzzy black creature with numerous legs and two fangs protruding from its mouth, like two scalpels ready to cut into flesh.

It turned as it hit the floor. It watched. It waited and then it backed up as if it were tempting them to follow.

As Dahms got a better look she could see it was a spider-like creature with fangs. It was a foot and a half in height, like a small dog, but unlike a small dog it had eight legs, four on each side from which hung its bulbous abdomen supporting a small, scrunched face in the front.

"Now where did Hurd find this thing?" hissed Sam in a contemptuous tone.

While watching the black spider-like thing Dahms took a quick glance at the crystal nest and saw several little creatures, all black in color, scurrying about. "Oh God," said Dahms.

"Yeah, there's five of them," said Sam. "And there's no fury like that of a protective mother."

The thing took another step back.

"Let's spread out a little so we don't hack each other with our swords," said Dahms.

Sam took a couple of steps to the right. "Keep your light on it or we'll lose it," he said.

Just then one of the babies climbed onto the rim of the nest, and that was enough to send the mother into a frenzy. She rushed at Dahms with an appalling speed. As Dahms jumped sideways she turned and swung her sword in an attempt to wound the creature, hopefully mortally, but her off-balanced position produced a rotation in her wrist, and she hit the creature with a flat edge of the sword. At the same time she was falling toward the floor and had to catch herself with her left hand and straight-arm. She quickly jumped up, but her light went spinning away and didn't stop until it hit the wall about twenty feet away. It fell into a pile of rocks sending its beam of light at an awkward angle toward the ceiling.

They both lost sight of the creature.

"Damn," said Dahms, "that thing's fast."

"Yeah, just like the giant bees. Hurd wants to make sure we have a challenge."

Dahms peered intently where she had last seen it, then she started toward the light.

"Where are you going?"

"I have to get the light."

"It's too dangerous," said Sam. "It's possible this creature is smart enough to be waiting near the handbeam."

"It's our only chance," she replied. "We have to have that light."

"I'll go," said Sam.

"Stay where you are. I'm closer." Dahms worked her way toward the far wall where the light was shining toward the ceiling like a beacon summoning all the creatures in the dark. She bent over to pick it up and heard a rapid clicking sound coming from behind her, but even without turning to look she knew it was the spider. She quickly grabbed the light and shined it on the monstrosity. She could see its teeth gnashing rapidly and there was a liquid dripping from its fangs. Unfortunately the thing was close enough that Dahms could smell a foul odor, probably coming from the dripping liquid.

She knew she could not save herself this time. The creature was too fast and too close.

Its body started bouncing up and down on its long spindly legs making ready to pounce while it continued with the rapid clicking of its jaws and teeth. Its glowing, red eyes were concentrated on Dahms with the intent to kill.

"You little bastard," said Dahms pulling her dagger from its sheath, "I'm taking you with me."

Just then Sam started shouting in order to distract the thing. He ran toward the crystal nest holding a large black rock above his head, and heaving it up and down, and up and down. He threatened the nest in the center of the room.

Hearing the noise and seeing Sam, the creature quickly lost interest in Dahms and bounced off the rock flying through the air at least twelve feet before it landed on the ground. It ran a few feet; then sprang again

flying another twelve feet. It scurried toward the nest in an attempt to get there—to protect her babies.

Sam heaved the rock. It arced up, then fell into the center of the piled-up Zen I crystals. Little black legs flew up and out.

Paying no attention to Sam the creature ran to the nest. It stood on its four back legs and started working frantically with the other four to get the rock off the top of her babies.

Sam raised his sword and brought the edge of his blade down in a slicing motion rendering the black spider-thing into two parts. A greenish liquid oozed from its body and ran slowly into the nest. Sam brought his sword down again vanquishing the one remaining baby.

Dahms sheathed her sword and dagger, retrieved the handbeam and walked over to the nest. She looked down at the dead creatures, and then she looked at Sam. "Your quick thinking saved my life," she said.

"What the hell," said Sam, "we're all in this together." Sam was still thinking about Harold and his family. And he was angry.

"I don't care," she said.

Dahms watched as Sam gave her a strange look, then he said, "You would have done the same for me."

"I don't care," she said again.

"It's becoming obvious there's more to this conversation than the fact that I helped you out of a jam." Sam paused, but only momentarily. "You know," he said, "on the remotest of possibilities that we should get out of this alive, I'm going to take you out on a date." Sam looked into her beautiful eyes, then pulled on his mustache. A wry look crossed his face. "You know," he said, "if I thought for a hundred years, I probably couldn't think of anything dumber to say in a situation like this."

"I don't think it's dumb," she said. She grabbed him by the arm and, pulling him closer, she bent down a little and pressed her lips to his. She kissed him long and soft. Then realizing that Hurd was watching them, she pushed him slightly away and whispered, "We'll finish this later, and the possibility of us getting out of here is not that remote," she paused and looked around, "but we've got to find a way out of this room."

Sam grabbed her and kissed her again.

"I'm sure Hurd is loving this," commented Dahms when their lips parted.

"Like you said, 'I don't care.'" Sam kissed her again, then letting her go, he said, "But you're right about one thing—we have to get the hell out of here."

As they looked around, it became apparent that the way out wasn't going to be easy to find. The door they had come through wouldn't let them out. There was no palm switch. But even if there was, and even if they got through the door, they would be going back the way they had come.

They started searching the walls for secret niches, but there were none. They started moving boulders, and it wasn't long until Dahms found the right one. It was a large boulder and it took a great deal of effort for her to move it, but as she rolled it aside, she saw a hole in the floor.

Watching intently she shined her light into the gaping blackness only to be momentarily blinded as bright reflections were thrown back. *Water*, she thought. And as she looked into the light, memories started to flood back, and suddenly she was on Trandon—a planet with rivers, lakes, seas, and oceans. There was so much water that it was even found in the sky, vaporized . . . clouds. She remembered, they were called "clouds" and they floated high above as the wind gently pushed them along. There was so much water that it even ran through the towns, little streams or rivers, and some towns were completely surrounded by water, sitting on land . . . called "islands" in the middle of the sea. And she would never forget one night while on a boat, she looked back and saw the lights from the city reflecting off the water. It was so beautiful it made her want to drink it all in and just stay there forever. Someday, she knew she would go back to Trandon and maybe live out the rest of her life there.

She shook her head, breaking the reverie and looked over at Sam in the eerie shadows as he was pushing a large boulder to one side. "Over here," she said. "I found the way out."

She bent down, kneeled next to the hole with her light still shining on the water, and peered into the depths. She could see to the bottom, which ended about eight feet straight down and then curved toward the back wall.

Sam walked over and looked at the hole. "It's just big enough for one person," he said. "If it's a dead end, we won't be able to turn around and the swim back."

"Yes, but as far as I can tell it's the only way out."

Sam paused. "Damn," he said suddenly.

Dahms looked at him apprehensively. "What?"

Sam reached down and pulled out a cigar, which he kept between his waistband and his stomach. "I need

something to wrap this in."

Dahms flashed an angry look at him. "What the hell are you talking about?" and then realizing the absurdity of a man's list of priorities she smiled and finally laughed.

"You might think it's funny," said Sam in a desperate tone, "but this is my last cigar."

Dahms sobered up. "Let's go," she said, "you can get another cigar at the next safety station. Dahms started to dive into the water.

"Wait." Sam grabbed her arm. "I'll go first." He chewed on his cigar for a moment and then threw it on the floor. "You know if it's a trick we'll probably drown down there."

"Yes. But I remember Ben saying Hurd wants the sport of the battle."

Sam looked disgruntled. "Okay," he said. "But if I come to a stop, you back up as fast as you can." He sheathed his sword and stretched out his hand. "Let me have the light."

She handed it to him, and after he secured it to his left wrist with the small elastic band, he dove head first into the water.

Dahms was quick to follow. She dove into the opening and started pulling—hands against water—swimming hard. She kept up with the vague outline of Sam silhouetted against the light of the handbeam. She quickly found that the swimming was difficult in the narrow confines, so she began using her hands on the bottom to propel herself forward. And even though she had increased her speed in this manner she was almost out of air by the time she saw the end of the passage. There seemed to be no way out as the light ended against the wall. But the burning in her lungs told her there was no turning back. As Sam increased his speed, Dahms propelled herself faster and when Sam turned and started in an upward direction, Dahms was quick to follow. She had to get out of this water before she passed out.

She was beginning to feel fuzzy when Sam reached a hand, grabbed her by the arm, and pulled her out. She took a long, deep breath, then started breathing hard and fast. It felt good. The air cleared her mind. She stood up and swept her wet hair to the back of her head. Still panting she used the light from handbeam to study the room. "Do you see anything?" she asked.

"Nothing dangerous," he replied. He shined his light to the left. "There's an open doorway over there." And then he swung the light in the other direction. "And over there, you can see two cylindrical objects which appear to be metallic."

He walked to them and looked down. "Rusty. And I bet it's something we're going to need in the next zone."

Dahms bent over and picked one up. "A tank," she said. "And look, it has a mouthpiece." There was a long hose attached to the top of the tank and on the end of it was an odd shaped piece of rubber. "You see, you put it in your mouth like this," she shoved it in and then pulled it out. "And you breathe. It's for breathing underwater."

"So, I guess it's not going to be just a short swim like the one we just took." He bent over and picked up the other tank.

While holding the light with his left hand he thrust the tank under his left arm, and pulled his sword out of its sheathe. "Hurd's waiting," he said.

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Ben watched as Dahms and Sam left the transparent chamber and disappeared through the doorway. Before the door slid shut he tried to see what was on the other side, but the room was too dark.

Ben and Gaal started for the next chamber, and Rennie met them half way there.

"Look at the size of this one," said Rennie. He held up a Zen I crystal bigger than the size of his fist. It sparkled in the light of the handbeams.

"It's going to be your downfall," said Gaal. "Get rid of it."

"I'll just hang on to it a while longer, then if I find I can no longer carry it I'll throw it away."

"You don't think Hurd actually plans for you to get out of here with it, do you?"

"You never know what might happen," said Rennie with a big smile on his face.

Gaal shrugged his shoulders. "It's your choice," he said.

"Actually, it's not his choice," said Ben. "Once we get into the next room we're going to need every available sword hand, which means," and Ben was talking to Rennie, "once we're inside you have to put it down until we've killed whatever is waiting for us."

"I can do that," said Rennie.

They walked to the chamber, "Once this door opens we have to get inside quickly before it closes on us." Ben didn't want any of them to have to enter the room on the far right.

"I agree with that," said Gaal.

Rennie seemed to still have stars in his eyes. "You got that, Rennie?" asked Ben.

"Yeah," said Rennie, "get in quickly. I got it."

"Good." Ben slammed his hand to the palm switch.

The door opened and Ben moved in, quickly followed by Gaal, then Rennie. When the door slid shut, they waited for nearly a minute, then the door to the next cavern slid open.

Ben hooked the handbeam to his belt and with a sword in each hand he walked ten feet into the cavern and made a three hundred and sixty degree turn observing everything in sight. The room was approximately thirty meters deep and forty meters wide. The ceiling was domed with a light fixture hanging down casting a dim light throughout the room and illuminating a dirt floor and rocks of all sizes, including boulders. It appeared it was a special light effecting the Zen I crystals, causing them to paint the room with a myriad of rainbow colors. Because of all the colors it was difficult to see into the shadows. In the middle of the room rainbows were being cast by a circle of small Zen I crystals, and amidst the colors there was something moving.

With a short sword in his right hand and the handbeam in his left, Gaal stepped beside him. "See anything?" he asked as he shone the light around the room.

Ben pointed at the circle of Zen I crystals with his sword. "Movement over there," he said.

Gaal looked for a moment. "Yeah, I see it."

Just then Rennie, unsuspecting of anything, stepped into the room and brought attention to himself by holding the large Zen I crystal, which threw a dazzling display of colors in all directions. It lit him up and the entire area around him like a colorful spotlight on a performer. He seemed to be transfixed by the beauty of the colors when a black, furry creature about three feet long with more legs than Ben had time to count, and three, red-glowing eyes flew out of the shadows near the door. It landed on Rennie and buried its fangs into his neck.

Rennie let out a scream. He dropped the crystal and his handbeam and started clawing at the creature. He screamed another few seconds, then the scream was cut short by a gurgle, then nothing. Instantly a filmy glaze covered his eyes, and he stood frozen like a corpse on a winter's night.

"Damn," yelled Ben as he rushed to Rennie. He raised his short sword over his head and with a downward stroke he cut through the middle of the creature. The bottom half fell away to the floor, but the top half, with the head and with the fangs still buried in Rennie's neck, lay against his chest with a green ooze running out of it and down Rennie's stomach. The top four legs were still pushing against Rennie's chest.

"My God," said Gaal as he ran up beside Ben and was staring at Rennie.

Ben turned. "What the hell are you doing? Keep a watch. There's probably another one of these bastards close by."

Gaal quickly flashed his light around the room.

At the same time Ben used the flat edge of his sword --- sliding it between the creature and Rennie's neck. He put his hand on top of the thing, and then with a heave of the sword he popped the fangs loose and flung the top half of the dead, but quivering creature aside.

"There's no helping him," said Ben looking at Rennie's ghostly colored face. "He's already dead. The only thing we can do now is help ourselves."

Rennie's corpse fell backward and landed on the uneven surface of the floor.

"Put your back to mine, and we'll keep a watch for any more of these creatures."

"I already saw something," said Gaal. "Over there by that ring of crystals, which I'm sure is a nest. See that boulder on the right? I saw three red lights blink off and on a couple of times, then they disappeared."

"Okay," said Ben. "Back to back, let's make our way over there. Keep your elbow bent, but your sword out and ready to strike. And keep in mind that these creatures are damned fast."

They had only taken a couple of steps toward the nest when the thing came flying out of the shadows directly at Ben. Its three red eyes were blinking, and its fangs were moving up and down making a rapid clicking noise.

Ben moved fast. He brought his sword up. But damn, the thing was already three feet from his face. He quickly leaned to the left, hoping that Gaal would sense his movement and do the same, and then he brought his short sword in his left hand around to kill it. As it flew past his head his sword sliced through the air and cut off the two hind legs. They fell to the floor and started to twitch.

Gaal was still standing straight, but the force of Ben's sword misdirected the thing just enough to cause it to

careen past Gaal's shoulder by six inches. It flew three paces beyond Gaal, landed on the ground, and disappeared behind a boulder.

"What the hell!?" yelled Gaal.

Ben turned and started to the left. He pointed ahead and to the right with his sword. "Split up," he said with a growl.

Gaal started toward the nest as Ben came in from further back.

After a minute of walking slowly toward the center of the room Ben could see that Gaal was nearer to the nest. "Wait up!" yelled Ben. "If it attacks, we need to be close together."

Gaal came to a halt as Ben picked up his pace. He was only ten feet from Gaal when the thing vaulted itself to the top of a four foot boulder, then sprang at Gaal.

By instinct Gaal brought both hands up—his sword was ready to strike, and the handbeam was shining a light into the thing's eyes, which seemed to blind it momentarily. It was enough of an edge that Gaal was able to thrust his sword forward and run it through the thing's abdomen. The propelling force at which the thing was flying through the air caused it to slid to the hilt of the sword. Gaal let go just in time as the fangs snapped at his wrist.

The creature with the sword sticking through it fell to the floor. It tried to rise upon its legs and got half way, still trying to get at Gaal. With most of the weight on the left three legs it started going around in circles.

Ben picked up a large rock and threw it down on top of the thing crushing out its life. He bent down and retrieved Gaal's sword and handed it to him. "That's probably the last of them, but just in case, let's spread out and search the rest of the room."

After finding no more creatures, and after looking under the boulders for another twenty minutes, Gaal finally found the way out. "Over here," he called.

Ben joined him and peered into the small opening. Water sparkled with the rainbow colors.

"It must be the way out," said Gaal, "since we haven't found any other way. And by the way, I don't know how to swim."

"Can you hold your breath?"

"Yeahhhh."

"In a tunnel that small you won't have to swim—just use your hands against the bottom to propel yourself forward. Think you can do that?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Follow me." Ben sheathed his swords and dove head first into the water. He pushed his hands against the tunnel and shot toward the bottom. After eight feet it turned until it was running parallel with the floor of the cavern. It traveled another twenty feet, then curved upward.

After Ben climbed out he reached down and gave Gaal a hand out, then he looked around and spotted a tank. "I hope you're a fast learner, because it looks like you're going to get a quick course in scuba diving." he said.

"What?"

Ben pointed. "A scuba diving tank," he said. "And I'm sure we're going to need it."

"Oh, crap," said Gaal.

"Yeah, Hurd's a real sweetheart. Grab it, and let's go."

As they were exiting the small room Ben was hoping that he and Hurd would meet up again. When they stepped into a large tunnel Ben was holding the handbeam with his left hand and his narrow sword with his right. He looked in both directions

"Which way?" asked Gaal.

Ben heard a noise and held up his hand. He waited and listened. Suddenly he saw a light coming from the right. "Quick, turn off your light." As Gaal was complying, Ben turned off his own, then stood silent while waiting.

After a few moments he heard foot falls coming their way, and then a light put them in the spotlight. A voice called out, "It's Dahms. Gaal, is that you?"

They turned their lights on. "Yes," said Gaal. "I see you got through the chamber of spiders."

"Spiders? We only had one," said Sam as they joined with Ben and Gaal.

The four of them were dripping water.

"Where's Rennie?" asked Dahms.

"The spider was attracted to the Zen I crystal he was holding, and it quickly attacked him," said Ben. "He didn't make it."

"Damn," said Dahms.

Sam stepped closer. "Where's your other tank?"

"We only found one."

Suddenly, to the right, they heard a peculiar shuffling noise, and then brilliant green lights appeared in the dark.

"What the . . . ?"

It didn't take Gaal anytime at all. "They're Gorgs," he said quickly. "We've got to get the hell out of here." He scrambled around the corner heading along the left hand tunnel as fast as he could go bending over and stumbling through the dark. Dahms was on his heels with Sam not far behind and Ben taking the rear position.

Ben had studied Gorgs in an archaeologist class in college. It was the professor's intent to prepare his students for strange and unusual creatures, which they might encounter on a dig in unexplored territories. "Always be prepared," he said. "It's not good to be killed unexpectedly by a horrible monster." He made his point by showing a movie of the Gorgs living in captivity.

The damn things were scary. They lived on some obscure planet in a distant part of the Galaxy, on an unexplored continent with dense jungles and low mountains full of caves. They were as tall as humans and the same shape, but their bodies were covered with thick heavy scales, which caused them to be slow moving creatures. Because of the scales and a thick hide underneath, it was nearly impossible to kill them, except with several shots from a phasor. Not even a phasor set on stun would bring down a Gorg. Their huge arms could rend a person in two with little effort. They lived mostly underground, but would come out occasionally at night to hunt food. Since they were carnivorous, and since they weren't selective, humans were on the list.

Gorgs were first discovered when an expedition of scientists went into the deep jungles of their planet to study the plant life in that region. During the night the entire group of men and women disappeared with no trace and no sign of a struggle. When the next group of scientists, along with a military escort, went to the abandoned campsite to investigate the strange and sudden disappearance, they put up a system of alarms and bright lights around the camp that would be activated if anything passed through the laser beams. That night it was the Gorgs' turn to be decimated as the military phasor fire opened on them.

Ben knew that without phasors they had no chance against the Gorgs. He followed behind Sam all the while listening as he could hear the sound of the Gorgs becoming fainter in the distance. He was hoping there weren't any Gorgs ahead of them when Gaal yelled, "I see daylight." And a moment later the four of them ran out of the tunnel and onto a ledge with a sheer cliff in front.

The safe house was to the right, and thirty feet below, lapping at the cliff was the water, which Ben had expected. The body of water extended a quarter of a mile to the other side where the next safety chamber sat on a white sandy beach.

"Look," said Sam. He pointed at a stone wall, which was in the water thirty yards from the cliff. It ran parallel to the shoreline. It stood about a foot out of the water and traversed the entire width of the lake. Another wall similar to the first was four hundred yards away, and in the body of water between the two walls something was swimming. And Ben had a good idea what that something was. He could see a number of large fins protruding from the water and moving slowly in random directions.

"What's that?"

"Sharks," said Ben. "A carnivorous sea predator found on ancient Earth . . . actually they're still found in the seas of Earth to this day.

Ben watched the sharks swimming with their fins breaking the water like a knife slicing meat.

"Carnivorous," said Dahms. "And you can bet Hurd keeps them hungry.

"Can they be killed?" asked Sam.

Gaal looked puzzled for a moment. "I'm not sure."

"They can be killed," said Ben, "but not with knives and swords."

Dahms shifted the tank under her left arm and put her right hand on Sam's shoulder. "I'd really like to get a drink, but I don't think we can risk the safety chamber. If the Gorgs get here while we're inside, we won't be able to get out."

"Yeah," said Sam. "I guess they aren't that far behind."

Ben noticed a look between Sam and Dahms and was wondering what else happened in the lair of the spider. *A strange place for a romantic hookup*, he thought.

"We've only got three tanks," said Dahms. "which means two of us will have to share one." She looked at Ben. "Since Sam and I are physically smaller than the two of you, it will have to be us. We'll be using less air.

"That sounds right," agreed Ben. "And if you run out of air, then you'll be sharing with me and Gaal.

Gaal frowned. "Share air? If you're talking about those tanks, I have no idea how use one of those things.

"As I said before, we'll show you how," said Ben. He dropped the handbeam over the edge of the cliff and watched as it fell the thirty feet. It made a small splash as it hit the water. "We're not going to need those anymore," he said. Then he said to Gaal, "Give me the tank. If you're not used to the water, you're not going to want to jump with it in your arms."

As he took the tank from Gaal he suddenly had a strange feeling that caused him to look over his shoulder. The Gorgs were out of the tunnel and coming toward them. Walking quietly they were not more than six feet behind—a trait of stealth and sneakiness, which the professor had forgotten to mentioned.

"Jump!" he yelled. And the next moment he was flying through the air.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Ben held onto the strap of the tank in one hand and the narrow sword in the other. He was soaring through the air like a parachutist who hadn't yet pulled the chord, speeding crazily toward the surface. Just before he hit the water he flung the tank away from him.

The water parted and closed quickly as he speared into the depths, then he slowed, and holding his breath, he kicked toward the surface. His head burst out of the lake. He spit water and sucked in a large breathe of air. He went under again and grabbed the tank as it was slowly floating toward the bottom. He came up holding the strap. He sheathed his sword.

Dahms' head popped through the surface of the water. "Yuk," she said spitting a mouthful. "It's salty."

Just then Gaal shot through the surface like a bullet through a mirror, and then, as if in slow motion, he came to a stop and fell back toward the surface. His arms flailed outward and started flopping up and down to keep him from sinking into the depths. "Help me," he said rather urgently. There was calmness in his voice, but not in his eyes. "Help me. I can't swim."

"What the hell do you mean, you can't swim?" asked Sam who had just surfaced a few moments before.

Gaal's head disappeared beneath the water, but Ben could still see his eyes, which were wide open, and his mouth, which was turned down in a look of horror. His arms kept flopping up and down, but he wasn't making any progress.

Ben reached over, grabbed him by the chin, and pulled his head out of the water.

Sam was several feet away treading water. "What the hell do you mean, you can't swim?" he repeated.

Gaal coughed out a mouthful of water and took a deep breath. Then breathing easier, he said, "It's not like there are oceans and lakes on Ar where a family can take a picnic lunch and teach their kids to swim."

"Ever hear of the public swimming pool?"

"Yeah, for the rich."

"Enough of this foolish banter," said Dahms. "Let's get to the wall and then we'll decide what we're going to do." She turned and started swimming.

Ben followed with Gaal in tow.

They reached the wall at the same time.

"Hang on to the wall," said Ben as he let go of Gaal.

Sam was swimming slow and grimacing as he made his way toward them. "Last week," he yelled out, "at this time I was happily at work, drinking coffee and punching numbers into a computer. Sure, I was part of the underground, and my thoughts were frequently on the overthrow of Hurd, a most despised man who has plunged the majority of the city population into poverty, and near starvation; and sure, I've taken chances in the past by smuggling arms and attending secret meetings in the underground rooms, and sure there have been many rebels who have been caught and either sent to the run or the pits; sure it can happen to others, but it can never happen to you—and then it does. And here I am."

"Won't do any good to complain" said Dahms, and then, as Sam grabbed hold of the wall, she asked, "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong?" He glared balefully at the ceiling. "What's wrong?" He repeated. "We're in a city being run by a maniac. We're in a lake full of fish that want to eat us. And we have a friend who can't swim. And you ask me 'what's wrong?'"

"No. I mean what's wrong with your arm."

"Oh. . . . Yeah, that too," said Sam. "I should have let go of the tank before I hit the water. The damn thing wrenched my shoulder, and it hurts like a bitch, but I'm going to pretend it didn't happen. With three zones left it could mean my downfall." He handed his tank to Gaal and grabbed the wall with his right hand. "Hold the tank while I strap it on my back." Sam slipped his good arm through one of the loops and then gingerly slipped his left arm through the other one. He grabbed the two straps, pulled them around his chest, and fastened the buckle.

Ben had taken classes and had scuba dived many times on his home planet. He hefted the tank above his head, slipped his arms through the straps, and let the tank slid down his back into place.

"Looks like you're ready to go," said Sam.

"Yeah," replied Ben. "Can hardly contain myself."

Dahms was holding the third tank as she held onto the wall. "I remember that certain species of sharks are extremely aggressive when attacking their prey. And I'm sure that Hurd chose the killers. So, can we swim underwater with those sharks?"

"No," said Ben. "There must be another way." He propped his elbows on the wall and pulled himself high enough that he could look into the water on the other side. "I don't see anything except a lot of hungry sharks," he said as he continued to watch. "We wouldn't last a minute in there."

"I'm sure you're right," said Dahms. "If this zone is anything like zone two, then there will be another way."

Dahms told Gaal to turn around, then she helped him put his arms through the loops. He turned to face her and she buckled the straps. "You have to put this in your mouth, and when we're underwater I'll be swimming next to you to help you along."

"I don't think I can do it," said Gaal. He didn't look happy.

"Would you rather swim with the sharks," she said indicating the other side of the wall with a nod of her head.

"That would be impossible since I can't swim."

Sam sounded frustrated. "Look," he said, "the main difference between a good swimmer and a beginner is a good swimmer isn't afraid to get his face wet. So, just get it in your mind that you love getting your face in the water, and you're already past the beginning stage."

"You're so full of shit," retorted Gaal.

"No. Really," replied Sam. "Just get it into your brain that you don't mind getting your face wet. That's all there is to it."

Dahms looked a bit amused by Sam's twenty-second swimming instruction, which was meant to take Gaal from the beginner's level to the intermediate level. "Well maybe that's not quite all there is to it," she replied, "but actually swimming under water is easier than swimming on top, because the tank will be supplying the air."

Gaal's face went white at the idea of it. "You must be joking," he said.

"We're not joking," yelled Sam. "By God man, you've got to do it, or stay here and shrivel up like a prune in this salt water."

"He's right," said Dahms. "We don't have the time it takes to teach someone how to swim, but from what I've seen, you're a natural athlete. I mean you have the physique and the coordination of a good athlete. You've done well in battle, and you have the courage. So, now you need to get the right mental frame about swimming. Just relax, and we'll help you."

Gaal looked at Ben. "You said you'd teach me how to swim."

"I said it would be a quick lesson, and you've had it. Besides, they're right—when you're under water you don't have to worry about having air. The only thing you have to know is when you want to go forward you put your hands in front of you, cup them, and pull the water toward you, and when you want to stop, keep your arms beside you. Think you can do that?"

"Yeah, I guess," said Gaal.

Dahms looked at the walls surrounding the lake. "You don't suppose there's a path that we can walk, do you?"

"No," said Sam. "If that were so, then we wouldn't need the tanks, and secondly this is a more difficult zone than the zone with the snakes." He paused a moment, then said, "Maybe there's a trapdoor on the bottom of the lake."

Ben was still propped up on the wall and was thinking that Sam's theory sounded plausible. "Yeah," said

Ben. "Let's swim along the wall going to our left, of course, and look for a tunnel or a trap door on the bottom of the lake. There has to be a way around the sharks. I'm sure Hurd wants to make a sport of it without us getting eaten right away."

Ben was still propped up on the wall watching the sharks when suddenly one of them turned and started swimming toward him. At first he didn't think anything of it, but when he realized it was speeding up he yelled, "What the hell!" He didn't know whether to tell them they were being attacked or not. And then the damn thing slammed into the wall and knocked him and the others into the water.

Rocks broke loose from the top creating a ragged edge. The shark swam out thirty feet, then turned and made another run at the wall. It shook again as the shark slammed into it. More rocks broke loose. A gap started to form at the top.

"Damn, that's one hungry fish," said Ben. "I think we better go."

They started swimming to the left helping Gaal as they went.

They had only gone a short distance when Sam shouted out, "There. It looks like a metal door."

"Must be the way," said Dahms. She took Gaal's mouthpiece and handed it to him. "Put this in your mouth and blow hard. That'll get the water out of the lines, then take in a deep breath. If the tank is working, you'll be able to breathe freely." She looked at Sam. "Since your shoulder hurts, maybe I should wear the tank."

"You think we have the time for this discussion?"

"Not really," said Ben. "But there is one more thing you need to tell Gaal."

Dahms gave Ben a 'what?' look.

"Equalizing the ears."

She grimaced. "You're right," she said. She looked at Gaal. "It looks like it's thirty or forty feet to the door. As you're swimming down you'll feel a pressure on your ears, and at that time you have to pinch your nose and blow real hard to equalize them."

Gaal grimaced. "Are you crazy?"

"Damn," yelled Sam. "Are you a man or a sissy?"

"Alright," growled Gaal. "Let's go."

"Yes," said Sam. "Let's go."

Ben looked down the wall when he heard a loud crashing sound. The top of the wall broke loose where the shark slammed into it for the third time. The rocks came tumbling down, and it swam through the barrier.

"I doubt that Hurd planned this," said Dahms.

"Yeah," said Ben, "but he's probably enjoying the hell out of it."

The four of them bent at the waist and went under, propelling themselves through the glassy water toward the rusty door.

Ben kept his eye on the shark as they swam down. The large grey beast turned and started toward them.

Ben kicked harder and drew his sword. They were almost to the door when he turned to watch it.

Sam grabbed the handle and started pulling, but the door was either too heavy or rusted. He signaled for Gaal and Ben to give him a hand, and when the three of them heaved, the door swung slowly open.

Ben grabbed Dahms' shoulder and motioned for her to hurry as he pointed at the shark, which had increased its speed and wasn't more than twenty meters from them.

The shark slowed its speed a little and started making a strange side to side motion as it came in for the kill. Its mouth was open displaying jaws with large, white teeth.

Ben had heard that hitting a shark on the nose with your fist would cause it to turn and swim away, but he knew there would be no hitting this one—it was too large and too hungry.

There was only one thing he could do, and he hoped it would work. When the shark was in striking distance Ben used his sword and stabbed it on the snout.

The shark turned quickly and swam away. After twenty meters it turned around and started back.

Ben twisted around and saw that the others had gone into the tunnel. He calculated the size of the opening with reference to the size of the shark. You big bastard. You won't be able to follow me in here.

He swam through the opening and sheathed his sword. Keeping his left hand outstretched in front of him he propelled himself into the semi-darkness. The tube went down about ten feet and made a sharp turn toward the center of the lake. After he had gone another twenty feet he could just barely make out the form of Gaal struggling to get down the passageway using his hands to push against the bottom.

Gaal swam another ten feet, then disappeared as he turned upward and swam out of sight.

When Ben made the turn and swam out of the passageway he found himself on the bottom of the lake. In the

water with the sharks.

Ahead, about ten meters he could see Gaal and another twenty meters Dahms and Sam were sharing air.

Ben started after them. He had swam no more than fifteen feet when one of Hurd's ancient Earth sharks suddenly appeared making that same strange movement with its head. Ben pulled both swords simultaneously from their sheaths and waited.

It was only a few feet from Ben when it slammed into something hard and unyielding. It swam a short distance away, and attempted its attack from another angle, but the results were the same.

Ben sheathed his short sword and with his arm outstretched he swam toward the side until he felt a hard, clear-plastic wall between him and the main body of the lake. It appeared they were in a long transparent tube, which was acting as a barrier between them and the sharks. It would keep them safe, at least, from whatever was outside the tube.

After another forty meters Dahms and Sam came to a halt. When Ben got closer he could see why—the tube forked, which meant they had to decide which way to go. But, of course, left was the only choice.

Another shark slammed into the barrier.

Dahms started to her left, which was no surprise to Ben. They swam a hundred yards and came to another fork. Again Dahms chose the left.

Ben had heard about Hurd's pride about being left handed. He said that left-handed people were smarter. And Ben was sure that in his egotistical mania he believed it. He just hoped Hurd hadn't given into a moment of reverse psychology.

After another two hundred yards Ben knew they were getting close to the other side of the lake, and none too soon, Dahms and Sam had already run out of air and had discarded their tank. They were using air from the last two tanks. It took a minute for Gaal to understand that he had to give up his mouthpiece for Sam to use. At first he was reluctant, but obviously he knew it was necessary, and he finally gave it up.

They had gone another fifty meters when Ben saw something in the near distance. It was a solid wall blocking the passageway.

So, thought Ben, *Hurd changed the pattern after all.* From the history, which he had studied in school, he had found that a monarchy was as good or as bad as the dictator who ruled it. Hurd, having set himself up as a dictator, could have done wonderful things for the city and for the people. With all the wealth accumulated from the Zen I crystals he could have constructed another dome making the city larger and alleviating the overcrowding. He could have built more schools and libraries (the smart politicians realize that a powerful country is only as powerful as the people are intelligent). He could have built more roadways and expanded the spaceport bringing in more trade. He could have developed better relations with the outsiders, thereby enhancing trade with them. And most importantly he could have encouraged the growth of the middle class by raising the wage base.

Instead Hurd had chosen the path which many dictators had followed throughout the history of the Galaxy. Indeed, he had become a fool in greed—the greed of power and money.

Ben looked at the blockade. He knew that the other three were thinking that they had come to their end. He took another drag off the mouthpiece and handed it to Dahms.

Ben was told that when Hurd was first coming into power, one of the council men spent time with him trying to make him understand wisdom and benevolence; and especially the importance of intelligence. Keep the populace educated and keep your city strong. For a while it seemed Hurd was learning, but then greed crept in, and Hurd chose selfishness over the good of the people. *What a fool he is,* thought Ben.

He watched as Sam, obviously out of desperation and anger swam to the wall and started hacking it with his sword. A big chunk of the material was loosed from the wall and fell slowly through the water landing gently on the bottom of the tube. It took the four of them only a moment to realize they might be able to get through. Ben, Dahms, and Gaal joined with Sam, and they started hacking the wall with their swords.

Soon they had broken a small hole through to the other side. *That damned Hurd,* thought Ben, *he stayed true to form.*

The four of them kept hacking almost frantically as they realized time was running out. They never stopped for a moment's rest and only quickly would they hand the mouthpieces back and forth for more air.

The hole seemed to be growing too slowly. With his short sword he started hacking faster, but the more he hacked the more it seemed it was useless work. The greater the physical activity, the more the air he needed, and now it was almost gone with the hole only being half the size they needed to get through.

Ben was thinking they had come to their end when a snout and part of the jaws of a shark protruded through

the opening and snapped at his arm.

Damn! thought Ben.

The shark pulled back, then crammed its head further into the hole trying to get at Ben. His jaws opened as wide as he could get them in the small opening, then shut, then opened and shut several times as if on automation. They opened and shut, opened and shut, opened and shut. It reminded Ben of a child's toy he had once seen in a museum, which was designed like a pair of false teeth. Wind them up and they would go click click click rapidly for at least a minute.

The shark gave up and backed out of the hole.

A moment later the huge fish swam with full force at the hole. The wall shuddered and started to give.

What the hell, thought Ben. He unstrapped his tank and gave it to Dahms. Then he swam to the top of the wall and waited for the next attack, which came quickly. As soon as the monster's head appeared through the hole with a crashing force, he rammed his sword through the top of its skull.

Blood clouded the water and before Ben could withdraw his sword the thrashing of the shark brought down the wall. Ben, being at the top of the tube, was safe, but Dahms, Sam, and Gaal had to swim quickly to the ceiling as the shark started thrashing toward them. He swam down the enclosed hallway crashing against the sides of the tube, swinging his great head back and forth.

Ben didn't wait to watch as it disappeared into the murky passageway. He swam over the rubble only to find another wall about twenty feet away. It had to be a trick, if it wasn't, they were doomed. He searched the floor and found a trap door partly covered by mud and algae.

Dahms caught up with him and started shoving the mouthpiece in his face.

He took a drag of air, which proved to be difficult indicating that the air was almost depleted, then he pointed at the trap door and the four of them grabbed the handle and swung it open.

It was dark below, but Ben was confident that this was the way out. He motioned for Dahms to go first, which she did, but she surprised him when she unstrapped her tank and handed it to him. What was her reason? He didn't know, but he had to be close to her when she needed air. He followed, closely.

She went down the tube, which after ten feet made a sharp u-turn and finally pointed up. At the top she swung the metal door open and propelled herself out of the tunnel.

He expected her to wait for a final drag of air, but she didn't. Instead she swam for the surface, blowing bubbles as she went.

Damn, he thought, *she knows how to do a free ascent. Now where did she learn to do that on Ar?*

Sam swam beside Ben and pulled on his arm, and when Ben looked at him, Sam shrugged his shoulders and pointed at Dahms.

A little difficult to explain right now, thought Ben. Knowing there were still a couple of breaths of air left, he handed the tank to Sam, then started toward the surface while blowing bubbles.

When he broke the surface, Dahms, instead of swimming for the shore was still treading water waiting for the others.

"Where did you learn to do that?" he asked.

Just then Sam's head popped through the water.

"It's a technique I learned when I was on Trandon. Some friends took me diving, and they showed me how to ascend from the bottom by blowing air."

Sam spit water, let go of the tank, then said, "Well you scared the hell out of me when you took off like that. I couldn't figure out what you were doing"

Just then Gaal broke the surface.

"You were right," yelled Gaal interrupting their conversation. "It is easier swimming underwater." His arms started flopping and just before his head went under he managed to cry out, "A little help, if you don't mind."

Dahms grabbed him by the shoulder, and the four of them made their way to the beach.

[Chapter Thirty-Six](#)

The large windows of the safety chamber looked out upon another scene of greenery with tall trees, small bushes (but not as abundant as in zone three), flowers, and small rolling hills covered with grass.

It wasn't dense with jungle all around, and there wasn't any perceptible life milling about or hiding, waiting

to attack its human prey. There was nothing flying, crawling, or slithering. It was a peaceful scene with serenity and beauty abounding. Damn if it didn't remind Ben of a picture he had seen in an ancient Earth history book, which portrayed a family in the country with food, drink, lawn furniture, and games, enjoying a picnic. Looking out the window of the safety chamber at the landscape, in spite of its look of serenity, he knew this would be no picnic.

"By God," said Sam, "only two zones left." He was rubbing his left shoulder. "They say each zone is more difficult than the last." He paused for a moment. "But I say 'nothing could be worse than that last zone with those big, frigging fish.'"

"I felt I was entombed," added Dahms. "In both of the last two zones we were confined to small spaces. And the last one was the worst because we were confined to a small space filled with water."

"Yeah," agreed Gaal as he looked out the window. "But look at the scenery of the next zone. This time there's nothing but meadows, trees, some shrubbery, and open fields."

"That's right," said Sam. "And if I die out there, at least I won't feel claustrophobic."

"When you're dead, you're dead," said Ben.

"We aren't going to die." Dahms made the statement with a confident voice.

Ben gave her a look. "You keep saying that, but people keep dying. I hope that whatever it is you're not telling us is going to happen soon."

The door slid open, and they stepped out.

Ben scrutinized the hills knowing that something was lurking out there, something waiting to take their lives.

They started slowly up the path watching for whatever it was. They climbed over a small hill and started down a slight incline, and as they rounded a bend they came upon a man sitting on a bench reading a book.

"Humans' most dangerous enemy," said Dahms.

"Yes," said Sam.

The man looked up, then put the book down on the bench and stood up. He was about five foot nine in height and slender of build. He was wearing a brightly colored, red and gold suit with large lapels. A brown belt circled his waist with a sword hanging from it. He was wearing brown boots, and on his head was a gold and red hat with a long, red plume sticking out the left side.

He took his hat off his head and swept it in front of him as he bowed. Then he straightened up and said, "I'm surprised. I've been working in the run for more than a year now, and you're the first runners I've ever seen. The zones before this one must be most difficult."

"That they are," said Dahms. "But as you can see we made it through, which means, for whatever reason, success is on our side. And now I'm looking at you, and it occurs to me that you're our next obstacle. Am I right?"

The man was hesitant. "Yes," he said in a whisper. It was obvious he didn't want Hurd to hear him. He continued in a soft voice, "but I never thought it would come to this. It has never been my intention to kill anyone."

"But we all have swords," said Dahms, "and there are four of us and only one of you. Do you really think you can kill all of us?"

"Quite easily," said the man. "But I don't want to."

Ben decided he had heard enough. He stepped out from behind Dahms. "I know you," said Ben. "Jimie Benz. You placed twenty-third in the Galactic Games."

The man took a step back. The back of his knees caught on the edge of the bench, and he had to quickly readjust his balance to keep from sitting down. "And I know you," he said as he straightened himself up. "Professor Benjamin Hillar, the greatest swordsman in the galaxy. What the hell are you doing here?"

"I had a run-in with Hurd."

"It's not right," said Jimie.

"Why?" asked Dahms. "Because now you know you can't beat us?"

"No!" said Jimie. "Ben Hillar is a celebrity. It's not right that Hurd would put him in this kind of peril."

"Does that mean you're not going to fight us?" asked Dahms. "Hurd won't like that."

"I don't care what he likes." Jimie was talking in a normal voice. "When I explain that no one can beat Ben Hillar in a sword fight. He'll understand. And then I'm going to put in my resignation."

"Fine," said Dahms. She started toward him on the path. "Wait," he said. "Before you go I have to warn you that there is an archer stalking you from behind. So, keep a watch out for him. And the next man you meet will be an expert in the dagger throw—he placed ninth in the Galactic Games. After him there will be two men

together—one an expert in daggers and the other an expert in the sword.”

“Thanks for the warning,” said Dahms. And she started up the path.

“Damn,” said Jimie as Ben passed him.

“Yeah,” said Ben.

Ben, Dahms, and Sam were walking side by side when they reached the top of the hill and looked down. At the bottom and to the left of the path in a gully there was a large tree with big leafy branches. Small brown objects, which appeared to be nuts, hung in clusters from the smaller limbs. And many of them had dropped off and were covering the ground.

“Something moved behind that tree,” said Dahms in a quiet voice.

“Yeah, I saw it,” said Ben.

Gaal nodded his head as he stepped beside Ben. “Must be the dagger man.”

“Do you think he’ll know you?” asked Dahms.

“Oh yeah, he’ll know me.”

“Maybe he’ll let us go like the last guy did.”

Ben nodded his head. “Maybe,” he said.

Just then the man stepped out from behind the tree. He was wearing a blue and silver tunic with a matching body suit. He had a leather helmet on his head with a blue plume sticking out the back. He was taller than most of the men seen in Newusa although an inch shorter than Gaal, at about six foot three, and his arms were long.

The four of them walked side by side down the path until they were twenty feet from the man.

Dahms looked at him. “Do you know our friend, Ben Hillar?” she asked as she eyed him up and down.

“Yes I do.”

“Then maybe you’ll let us go like the last man.”

“Jimie Benz? If he let you go, then he’s a fool. Hurd will send him to the crystal pits, or at the very least he’ll have him thrown in the city prison.”

“Better than killing needlessly,” said Dahms.

The man smiled and opened the cloak in front of his chest. He was wearing a vest with twelve daggers—six on each side. “Who says it’s needless?”

“So you have no respect for human life?” asked Ben.

The man looked at Ben. “I never did like you much,” he said. “It’s actually going to be fun watching you die. And more than that, I’m going to prove that the dagger is a more lethal weapon than the sword.”

“You sound a little jealous,” said Dahms. “What’s wrong—you never got the recognition that Ben has gotten?”

The man gave her an angry look. “If you keep jawing, we’ll never get this over with,” he said.

“Spread out,” said Ben. “At least one of us should be able to get through.”

“Optimistic,” said the man as he pulled a dagger with each hand from the vest. “Unrealistically optimistic.” He held them in a throwing position.

“We all attack at the same time,” said Ben.

“Yeah. Come on,” said the man. He took a step forward raising both hands in the air with the knives in a throwing position. And that’s when the unexpected happened. The man’s foot came down on a little brown, nut. It rolled under his boot causing his leg to kick high in the air. He fell backward losing his grip on the daggers as he tried to break his fall with his hands. His cloak flew upward, and as he crashed to the ground it floated gently down and landed on his face.

“Fatal mistake!” yelled Ben. He and the others rushed forward.

The dagger man realized he was in trouble. He swept the tunic off his face and tried to regain his feet, but before he could get further than a crouch there were four swords cutting through his chest.

Ben leaned over to use the dagger man’s cape to wipe the blood off his sword, but as he did he felt the whiff of an arrow like a baby puffing against his face as it sped past his head and stuck in the tree.

“The archer,” yelled Dahms. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

Without looking behind to see where he was, the four of them ran up the hill and down the other side.

“The archer will be wary about coming over the hill,” said Ben. “So let’s get going before he catches up.”

Ahead of them was a series of small hills, more like rolling mounds, and then a large tree about fifty yards away. “Another tree,” said Sam.

“Yeah, and you know what’s behind it,” retorted Gaal.

“Yes,” said Dahms almost in a whisper. “A dagger man and a swordsman.”

When they were twenty yards from the tree two men stepped out from behind it. The man on the left was wearing a black tunic draped behind a black body suit with a black helmet adorning his head. A black mask covered his face leaving openings for his eyes and nose only. He had a sword hanging from his belt on his left hip.

The other man was also wearing a mask, but it was every color of the rainbow as was his suit. He was wearing a vest with twelve daggers.

Sam pulled his sword from its sheath with his right hand and stroked his mustache with the other one. "I bet you're surprised to see us," he said.

The two men said nothing. They waited.

"What, no chatter?" Sam's tone was bitter and sarcastic. "The last one was full of chatter. But alas, now he's full of holes."

Ben took a step forward. "I'm assuming you both placed in the Galactic Games, which means you know me. So, I'm asking you to let us go."

Still, they said nothing. The dagger man pulled two daggers from his chest—one for each hand. The swordsman drew his sword. And they stepped apart.

"I guess not," said Ben.

The four of them spread out. "Go for the dagger man first." Ben was wishing he had a shield. He drew both swords. His only chance was to deflect one of the daggers, but he knew his timing would have to be perfect. One deflection would be enough time.

The dagger man raised his hand making ready to throw, and that's when a wooden shaft with feathers sprouted from his shoulder.

Blood curled down his chest. He dropped his daggers clutching his shoulder in agony. He fell to his knees and cried out in pain.

Ben looked behind. The archer was no more than a hundred meters away.

"The archer caught up, and he missed!" yelled Sam. "And damned lucky for us."

Ben started for the swordsman, but before he had gone two steps the man threw down his sword and ran away.

"It almost seems too easy," laughed Gaal.

They took off running for the safety chamber.

[Chapter Thirty-Seven](#)

Ben retrieved an energy bar, sat on the couch and started eating it. Gaal pushed a button on the water dispenser, retrieved a bottled-water, and started drinking it. Dahms stood looking out the window, and Sam stepped up to the counter and pulled a cigar out of a box.

"These are damned expensive cigars," said Sam, "but they're not Mithians. You know, a blackened, Mithian cigar is the most exhilarating, legal, non-narcotic, stimulant in the galaxy, and right now, after all the crap we've been through, I'd like nothing more than to rest my weary bones while sipping on a drink and watching a movie on the screen. And then I'd light up a Mith, take a deep drag, inhaling and then exhaling, letting the smoke curl slowly through my nostrils and into the air. "Damn," he blurted out, "Right now I'd give my left testicle for a Mithian cigar."

"You shouldn't have said that," said Ben. "You know how crazy Hurd is, and you know how he likes the 'left' of anything,—he might take you up on your proposal."

"I hope he's not that crazy," said Sam. He struck a match.

Ben grimaced. "Would you mind not smoking that it here?" he asked.

"You worried about your health? We probably won't make it through the next zone."

"Maybe living on Ar you haven't heard—the medical profession has a cure for lung cancer or for any cancer. So it's not my health I'm worried about. I just don't like the smell of those things, and I don't like breathing the smoke."

"Okay," said Sam. "But I don't want to wait." He went to the door, hit the palm lock, and as the door opened he stepped outside lighting his cigar as he went.

Dahms retrieved an energy bar and started eating it.

The three of them remained silent for several minutes—they were too physically tired, too mentally exhausted, and too depressed about the deaths of their fellow runners to say anything.

Finally, Gaal put his empty bottle in the holder on the arm of his chair. "Only one more Zone," he stated. "And even then, according to your information, we won't be free."

"Don't be so sure," said Dahms.

Ben knew it was about time to leave the safety chamber, so he stood up and looked at Dahms, and said, "You keep making references to our getting out of this place. Would you mind being a little more specific?"

Dahms put her fingers to her lips. "Not now," she said. "We don't want Hurd to know any more than he needs to."

"Yeah," said Ben.

Just then the soft, feminine voice told them it was time to leave and the door opened.

Sam was about ten meters from the chamber. When he saw them coming out the door. He stomped his cigar in the dirt and motioned them over. As they formed a group he said, "I was just thinking about the time I stole twenty-two Mithian Cigars out of Hurd's desk. You know Mithian Cigars, being shipped from another planet many light years away, are extremely expensive and very difficult to acquire, and when I learned that Hurd had purchased two dozen of them, it became my duty to liberate this most precious commodity from this tyrant. And believe me I had no compunctions about doing it. As it turned out, it was easier than I realized. I waited until Hurd was in a council meeting, then I sent a phony memo to Hurd's secretary—sending her on a wild goose chase. I slipped into his office, confiscated the remaining cigars, and slipped out.

"That was you," said Dahms. It was the first time since Ben had met her that she laughed. "That's great," she said, as she continued to chuckle.

"Hurd was furious," said Sam. "For weeks he stomped around different floors of the tower, questioning everybody in sight, but he never found out who did it.

"Before I die," he said, "I'm going to tell that bastard it was me who took his cigars. And if I don't make it through the next zone I'm going to yell it up at the rafters. But if I die too quickly, and don't have time, and if one of you should make it through, please tell him it was me, okay?"

"It'll be my pleasure," said Dahms as she turned and started up the path.

When they topped the small hill, they came to a halt and searched ahead for the last obstacle. Whatever this monstrosity was, it was so deadly they had to keep it locked behind a barrier. A short distance ahead of them was a tall transparent wall, at least forty feet high with a sliding door, and on the other side was a dirty, brown path leading straight across the last zone to another door, which was the exit from the "Run."

This section was flat and nearly barren with no bushes, no grass, and nothing to slow them down when they made their run for the door. All appeared safe, until they looked to the far right where a single tree rose from the barren land. Its trunk seemed short in relation to its wide-spreading, gnarled branches, which ran parallel to the ground and radiated out nearly forty feet. A purplish fruit was hanging from the smaller limbs. Beneath the tree lie six Toral napping in the shade.

"I should have known the last zone would be impossible," said Gaal. "Hurd's not going to give anyone a sporting chance."

"Yes, but we know that two runners made it."

"It seems to me," said Ben, "there must have been three, and while the toral were tearing one of the runners apart the other two made it to the door."

"Probably right," said Dahms. "My information never told me how they got across this zone."

"That has to be right," said Sam. "So, I see it like this. When we go through the door we'll run as fast as we can for the exit." He pointed across the zone to the last door. "When the lead Toral overtakes us, I'll turn and stand my ground, delaying him as long as possible. That should give the three of you enough time to make it through the door."

"Impossible," whispered Gaal. "They'll attack all of us."

"The leader always attacks first," said Sam. "The rest of the pack may be as much as two or three seconds behind. That should give you enough time to make the last twenty or thirty yards."

Dahms stood silent.

Gaal looked at the Toral. "I know why you have chosen Dahms to get through to the door," he said. "But why me? Why not you?"

"You can run faster," said Sam. "And that gives you a better chance."

"I don't think so," said Gaal.

"What do you mean you don't think so? You have longer legs and I've seen you run."

"That's not what I mean."

"What do you mean then?"

Gaal frowned. "It's simple—if you go down, we go down together."

Sam was quick to retort. "Save that sentimental slop for your girlfriend," he snorted. "This is not a matter for phony heroism. This is about life or death. Your life." He stopped ranting, and said, "Life or death. You have to realize that we're soldiers in combat. And one of us has to get through." He looked at Dahms, smiled an insidious smile and tugged at his mustache. "Get through to Hurd for the rest of us. Do you understand?"

"Yes," said Gaal.

"If I were the fastest runner here, I wouldn't hesitate. I have a great desire to get my hands around Hurd's throat. But I'm not the fastest. Do you understand? Do it for the runners. Do it for the people."

"What about me?" asked Dahms.

Sam gave her a puzzled look. "What about you?"

"Do you think I can run faster than you?"

"Women are usually slower than men, but you have long legs, and I've seen you run, so I would say we're about the same. But if you think I would let a woman stay behind and die for me, then I can tell you that you're wrong, and that you don't know me very well."

"Oh, I know you," she answered.

Sam looked at Ben. "And you, . . . you don't even belong here. You're not even a part of this rebellion."

"I am now," said Ben.

"I'm glad to hear you say that, and I hope you mean it. I hope you bring Hurd down and bring him down hard. But for you to do that you have to get out of here. And I'm fairly sure that you're the fastest runner of the four of us."

"Whatever you say," said Ben knowing he wasn't going to leave a fellow combatant behind to die.

"Anything else?" asked Sam.

No one said anything.

"Good, then let's go." Sam started toward the door. "The only thing I regret, and the only thing that makes me angry is that I won't get to see Hurd and his evil empire crumble upon its corrupt foundation and fall to the pits of hell.

Sam hit the palm switch and as soon as the door slid open the four of them started running. Ben was in the lead, and Dahms quickly passed Sam, but Gaal was steadily overtaking her. Sam fell a full second behind, then two, then three.

They had gone about forty yards before the leader of the Toral looked up. He snorted angrily and in an instant was on his feet. Quickly he was running in great strides across the barren ground, digging talons into the sandy soil, and throwing it into the air as he ran. Dust clouded the air and trailed as he quickly sped toward the humans.

The other five Toral jumped to their feet and began the chase.

Ben, Sam, Dahms, and Gaal ran another twenty-five yards before the lead Toral came bearing down on the trailer. It was then that Sam whirled around and jumped to one side striking out with his sword. He raked one edge of it across the beast's forearm.

The beast hadn't anticipated Sam turning and attacking. He ran three strides past Sam before he halted and turned. He rose up on his hind legs and bellowed out a base growl. It was so loud it shook the ground.

The other Toral stopped thirty yards back and waited for their leader.

The lead Toral dropped down with the intent of springing forward and striking with his huge paw in anticipation that his foe would turn and flee.

But instead of jumping back, Sam held his ground, and then the unexpected happened. Ben suddenly appeared out of the dust. And closed with the beast. This surprise tactic threw the beast into a quandary. And it was just enough of a split-second pause to give Ben the advantage. He stepped in ran the point of his sword into the beast's chest and drove it to the hilt.

The beast staggered back, and then slowly collapsed as if in slow motion. His knees buckled against his will. His head dropped toward his chest, and in a languid motion he laid down in the dirt.

"What the hell are you doing here!?" yelled Sam. "We had a plan."

"That was your plan, not mine," said Ben as he stood holding his short sword in his hand.

Sam looked around, expecting to see Gaal and Dahms exiting the door to freedom, but instead he saw them

standing not more than ten feet behind him. "What the hell, doesn't anyone follow orders?"

Dahms ran over to him and grabbed Sam's hand. "It wasn't supposed to happen this way," she said. "We were supposed to have had a little help. I don't know what happened."

"There's no help now," said Sam. "You should have run for the door like I told you."

o o o o o

Hurd watched in awe of the woman and the three men. Never before had a runner excelled as these four had today. It was the first time in the history of the run that a Toral had been slain with a sword, or, as far as he knew, in the history of Ar. Together these four warriors had gone through six zones and a good deal into the seventh. Two or three of them could have made it to the last door, which, of course, would not have opened to freedom, but rather a squad of patrollers would have been ready to take them to a secret cell in the city prison—at least it would be better than death in the pits.

He frowned. He stroked his mustache solemnly. It was terrible that these four incredible athletes had to die. Well, maybe not Ben—the scoundrel that he was. But the other three, if only they had been on his side. They would have made great warriors in his army. And the fight they put up, and there was even romance for the viewers. This was the greatest day the run had ever seen. Probably no one would ever do better. And now the end was about to come.

It occurred to Hurd if he could stop it, he would give them an easy job in the pits, keep them alive until they could see that his rule was right for the people, but it was too late, the other Toral were already speeding toward their prey.

Ben was gripping his short sword—his other one was buried in the lead Toral's chest. Gaal was standing beside Ben waving his sword back and forth—a city patroller—how could he have become disloyal? Dahms ran over and was holding Sam's hand. Hurd knew there were only a few seconds left.

And then he saw something dangling in front of the screen. For a moment he was puzzled. "What . . . ?" he started to say.

Then he realized what it was and jumped out of his seat. "Where the hell did that rope come from!?" he yelled.

Of course, none of the councilmen answered.

"The rebels have infiltrated the stadium!" He was in a fit of rage.

o o o o o

Suddenly there was a rope hanging in front of Ben's face, then three more appeared out of nowhere with the ends falling to the ground. Ben looked up and saw nine men in the rafters.

"At last, they're here," yelled Dahms.

"By God if they aren't." Sam grabbed a rope and told Dahms to go. Just then two red streaks came from above and knocked down the two Toral in the lead.

"That was a little too close," Dahms yelled while looking up. "What the hell took you so long?" She grabbed the rope and started up.

A voice yelled down from the rafters, "We had a problem with the guards."

Another red streak and one more Toral went down.

Sam grabbed a rope and started to climb, but fell back to the ground. "I can't climb with this arm," he shouted.

"Tie the rope around your waist." Dahms yelled.

Ben took the end of the rope and pulled it around Sam's torso. He tied it off and looked up at the men standing on top of the rafters. "Haul him up."

Sam suddenly shot up like a puppet on a string.

Gaal was going up one of the other ropes hand over hand and moving fast.

The stairway to freedom, thought Ben. He had just started up the rope when three city patrollers came running through the exit door. Two of the patrollers took aim with their phasors and squeezed the triggers. Blue bolts streaked the air bringing down the last two toral in stun. At the same time the other patroller started shooting at the men in the rafters. Red and blue streaks lit up the air as the rebels and the city patrollers started shooting at each other. Two of the patrollers were hit and went down either dead or injured, Ben couldn't tell

which. He was half way to the rafter when he saw the last patroller take aim.

Crap, thought Ben. The blue bolt hit him in the chest. He slid down and down and down. He landed on the ground. He couldn't move, but he could hear the commotion going on around him. And then he heard Sam shouting.

"We have to get him," he yelled.

"More patrollers coming through the gate," yelled Dahms. "Let's get out of here."

"He didn't leave me when I was fighting the toral, and I can't leave him now."

"If you go back down there, Hurd's men will have you. Let's go. We'll do what we can for him later."
And that was the last Ben heard.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Young Sven enjoyed the cool mountain breeze and the warm sun as he stood on the rise watching Dorce, his father, below working in the open pit mine. A few moments before he had been playing hide and seek with some of the other children bounding through the forest, laughing and running, hiding and being very quiet.

It was little Karla, the youngest of the group at eight years of age, who had found him and tagged him out. Now he was resting as she looked for the other children.

The sound of the picks hitting the ground and churning up the dirt was like a continuous string of fire crackers, ratta tat tat - ratta tat tat, with no hesitations. The 53 men of the Bear Clan would work all day uncovering, cleaning, and packing away the crystals into the leather bags. An hour before the sun went down they would send the children home and lead the mule train down the trails to the Pike where they would unload the crystals into transports to be rushed away to the spaceport next to Newusa.

The mining of the crystals was never done with phasors. There was something about the rays which could damage the crystals making them useless and unsellable.

One of the children, Erik, sprang from the underbrush and ran for home base—a large boulder near the bottom and to the left of the open pit. He was the last one in and Sven would have gone down to join the other children in another game, but they had been playing for several hours, and he was getting bored.

He was just thinking about joining the four boys standing on the other side of the pit when he saw a red ray flash through the air and strike Borg in the back. At that moment everything started moving quickly. Borg, Erik's father, looked down at his chest where something red was running from the front. With a stunned look on his face he slowly dropped the pick and fell to the ground and died.

And then red rays seemingly came from everywhere. Twenty-three of the Bear Clan miners were down before they even knew anything was happening. Sixteen were dead before they hit the ground and seven were mortally wounded.

The rest of the miners ducked behind boulders or ridges—anywhere they could hide from the phasor bolts. Most of the children, including Sven, just stood in a state of stupefaction, watching in horror as their fathers were being killed. But little Toby, a nine year old, started running toward Jask, his father, who was hiding behind one of the boulders.

Jask stepped out to gather the boy into his arms, but a red ray bore through little Toby's back. Blood spurted like a fountain from his chest and little Toby pitched to one side. He landed with his back and shoulders flat on the ground, but his hips were twisted in an unnatural position. His eyes were staring into space.

Jask stood in horror for a moment. Tears came to his eyes, and finally he drew his phasor and started a suicide run—run, swerve, fall and roll, jump to the feet, swerve, fire the phasor, run swerve, run swerve, run swerve, fall and roll . . . His phasor cut through a tree taking off the head and shoulders of a hooded enemy. Run, swerve, run, swerve, fall and roll, jump to the feet, his phasor bore through another tree taking out another hooded enemy. Red rays were striking all around him. Run, swerve, run, swerve, run, swerve his phasor took out another, but just as it did a red ray hit him in the shoulder spinning him to the ground. Three more rays hit him in the torso. It was a relief as he died; the pain of watching his young son being murdered would vanish with his death.

The only remaining visible targets were the children standing near the forest frozen in fear. Some of the fathers stood up and yelled to the children to run, but it was too late, phasor fire came out of the woods, killing in a bloody spectacle and littering the ground with small corpses.

The phasor fire stopped and the hooded men and women then started moving through the forest in a circuitous direction toward the top of the pit. They needed to get a better angle on the men hiding behind the boulders and the ridges.

Dorce, Sven's father, looked up and saw him standing motionless at the top of the pit. "Run Sven, run," he yelled.

His father's voice brought him out of his shock. And just as he started to turn he heard a twig snap behind him.

His hand fell to the phasor which was fitted snugly in its holster on his lower abdomen and angled sharply down toward his left side. All the Mountain Men and women wore their phasors for fast and easy draw—a design which had saved many lives over the years.

Just like we practiced, he thought. *All those hours---just like we practiced.* He remembered his dad telling him that if it ever came time to shoot a man, when you look into his eyes just keep thinking, 'it's just another target.'

His phasor was out in an instant as he whirled around. And as he pulled the trigger he thought, *it's just another target.* The phasor bolt hit the hooded enemy full in the chest ripping his heart into two.

He stood staring at the man as blood poured from his chest onto the ground. "It's just another target," he said out loud.

He turned and looked back into the pit. How could he run away and leave his father to the mercy of these hooded monsters? The other clans were too far away to get help.

He hunkered down until he was in a hunched position and then quickly ran to a boulder about twenty yards down the side of the pit. The boulder was small, but so was Sven and he hid behind it easily.

He heard a noise from further down. He peeked over the top of the boulder and saw a hooded man coming toward him. The man's attention, however, was focused on the men in the pit. The man aimed his phasor at one of the clansmen and started to pull the trigger, but Sven fired first. His bolt hit the man in the leg and he went down cursing and yelling in pain and agony. Sven fired again, with true aim, and the man lie still.

More hooded monsters were in the woods coming up the side, firing in the pit at the few remaining miners. Sven's father took a hit in the stomach and went down so violently his phasor went spinning several yards away into the dirt.

There were only three miners still firing at the hooded enemy, but they were killed quickly in the cross fire coming from both sides.

o o o o o

Sergeant Priskin stepped out from behind a tree, ran over to the edge of the open pit mine, and looked for anyone who might still be alive. That was the last one, Captain." He looked around. "By the Gods of ancient Earth, I can't believe how many men we lost.

The Captain stepped out from behind a tree deeper in the woods. Alright Sergeant, he yelled, get our wounded and our dead to the pack train and take them down the mountain. The rest of you get to work packing the crystals. He walked to the edge of the pit and took a phasor bolt full in the throat. One of the wounded miners had feigned death and when the time was right he rolled on his side, aimed his phasor and took out the leader. Red phasor bolts from all over the forest riddled the man in an instant.

The Sergeant looked down at the Captain. By the Zorstras curse, another one down.

Sergeant Priskin started making his way to the front of the pit as another Sergeant by the name of Basker and the rest of the hooded men and women came out of the woods.

Basker walked over to the Priskin. "Looks like you're in charge."

Priskin looked at him. "Yeah, I guess so." He paused, then said, "Well let's follow the Captain's last command."

"Right." Basker started barking orders while the Sergeant walked toward the back of the pit looking for crystals. He knew better than to try to smuggle a crystal past Hurd, but it was still fun to hold all that money in one's hands. He saw a spectacular splay of colors toward the back of the diggings. The crystal fractured the sunlight into a myriad of colors throwing a colorful pattern upon the boulders nearby.

Priskin picked up his pace and made his way toward the crystal. He thought it must be plenty big judging by the color spread.

Dorce was lying on his side with blood slowly oozing from his abdomen. As Priskin started to step over

him, Dorce's hand shot out and grabbed Priskin by the ankle throwing him off balance. He started to go down, but before he did Dorce jumped up and with his left hand he jerked the hood off Priskin's head and face, and then with both hands as the two of them hit the ground, Dorce started choking the life out of the sergeant. Three phasor bolts hit Dorce in the back puncturing his lungs and burning through bone. Blood splattered all over Priskin's chest and face. He pushed Dorce off of him and jumped up wiping away the blood.

"Damn! don't these guys ever die?" Priskin started randomly shooting at the bodies around him and then at those further out. He kept shooting until his phasor pack was drained of energy. He pushed a button on the side of his phasor and dropped the energy pack to the ground, then he stooped over, retrieved Dorce's energy pack, and slid it into his own phasor.

"Hey Priskin," yelled Basker. "If that guy had had a phasor, you'd be another body count by now."

"That's real smart Basker. Let me say it again 'Basker.' Why don't you just tell anybody out there who might be hiding in the woods what my name is?"

Just then Sven peeked his head over the edge. "You're bad men. You're bad men," he cried. "You killed my dad!" He took a shot at Priskin but missed—wide right, then he jumped up and ran into the forest.

"Okay Basker, you're the one who yelled out my name—go get him.

"What?" Basker looked at him with an amused smile on his face.

"I said, go get him."

"What for? He's just a kid."

"He knows my name, thanks to you, and he knows what I look like."

Basker laughed. "So, what. Who's he going to tell . . . Hurd?"

"Look Basker, you said yourself, I'm in charge, and I'm ordering you to go get that kid."

I don't care if you are in charge. I've got better things to do, like pack the crystals and get the hell off this mountain. If you want him so bad, you go get him."

Priskin glared at Basker and walked toward him. Softly he said, "Okay, I will. And when we get back you're going on report."

"Fine," replied Basker. "Happy hunting, and if you're not back by the time we're ready to go, we're going without you."

Priskin jumped over a few of the bodies and scrambled up the side of the mountain toward the forest where he had last seen the kid.

o o o o o

Sven ran along a path that wound its way around the trees all the while climbing steeply up the mountain. He moved quickly knowing that death could be following. Soon he bolted out of the trees and onto bare stretch of land, which extended about a half a mile and then directly ahead was a copse of trees and just beyond that a vertical cliff. As he came to a stop he could hear two men below yelling at each other. He didn't care. He was scared and wanted to get home. He started out at an easy pace up the rocky incline. His father had taught him that if you move too fast on this kind of terrain, it would make the rocks slide under foot, which in turn made the trek that much harder and in the long run slower as it oftentimes caused a person to fall down.

When he got to the copse of trees he entered a few feet in, turned around, and sat down to rest while watching to see if anyone was following. He looked off to the left. He knew these mountains like he knew his mama's face (and his late papa's). If he were to walk to the left, straight as a phasor bolt, for three quarters of a mile, he would come to the path that would lead him home or to any of the other villages.

But he knew he wouldn't be going home. He had to go to the home of the Unifier—Everette, the man who would know what to do about this horrific even.

After a few minutes Sven was beginning to think no one was coming, but as he stood up the man called 'Priskin' bolted from the cover of the forest below. His feet started pumping rapidly as he attempted to go quickly up the mountain, but the rocks started sliding and slowed his progress. Priskin almost fell on his face several times before Sven decided he had seen enough.

He made his way through the trees to the other side of the small forest and started toward the cliff. He knew it would be foolish to make his way to the path. The man being twice his size would catch him before he could make it to the nearest village.

The sun was just above the horizon, casting long shadows, and bringing darkness along this side of the mountain. Without much trouble Sven found what he was looking for—a vertical crevice in the cliff. It

extended several hundred feet straight up until it ended in the plateau at the top.

The crack was big enough for him to slide through, but not big enough for a grown man.

He put the phasor in his right hand and side stepped with the left side of his body into the crack, and continued in this manner for fifteen yards, until the rocks under his feet began to incline steeply. He climbed in a side step fashion for another ten yards up the nearly vertical crevice, and then came to a halt. He knew Priskin could never reach him here, but if Priskin took a couple of shots with his phasor at about a twenty-degree angle he could possibly hit Sven. So, Sven waited and listened.

After a few minutes he heard Priskin calling out. "Where are you, boy? I just want to talk to you."

A few moments later Priskin called out again. "Are you in here?" His voice echoed through the crack. Priskin aimed his phasor into the dark and fired, but it was too low.

Sven knew he was in a bad situation. He could go further up, in fact he could go all the way to the top, but Priskin would hear him, which would make it easier to locate the correct angle and fire.

Sven aimed his phasor at what he guessed to be four feet from the bottom of the crack and fired.

He heard a thud and then something that sounded like a phasor clattering on the rocks. It lasted for a few seconds and then stopped.

He waited, listening. If Priskin was pretending, he could easily shoot Sven when he came into sight. On the other hand Sven couldn't wait here all night. It was starting to get cold and his mountain coat was lying on a boulder near the pit.

So, he continued to listen as he made his way down the crack toward the opening and toward what he was hoping would be a dead man. His dad had talked often about being brave; especially necessary for survival in the mountains, and now was one of those times. He was either going to die or he wasn't.

As he stepped out of the crack he saw the man lying on the rocks - head sloping down and face up. There was a hole where the phasor bolt had gone through the left eye, through his brain, and out the back of his head.

Sven stood staring at the man for short while. Finally the cold, which was getting more intense with the passage of every second, reminded him he had to go to the villages and go quickly.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

It was three nights later, and the turn out for the meeting included every clan in the Borgus Mountain Range. As Rayz Moonmaid, of the Raven Clan, looked around she saw Clan Chieftains, who in past times having had vowed death to each other were now sitting together, talking, laughing and actually building what seemed to be a comradery. For centuries, the clans had been warring with each other over boundary rights, hunting territory, water rights, stealing of women, and more recently mining territory. And if these were all resolved they would fight over petty squabbles—anything for a hateful fight. But tonight, here they were, sitting together in peace for the first time in history—for the first time since their ancestral fathers and mothers took to the mountains. And they were here because Everette, known as Everette the Unifier, had raised a fury over the merciless slaughter of innocent children.

Rayz knew that if things didn't go right, if just one chieftain reverted to his old ways, this meeting could turn out to be an exploding powder keg. Could Everette, the giant man of the mountains, pull this off? Could he keep the hatred of Hurd burning so fierce that they would stay unified? She damn well wasn't sure, but she was for it if he could do it.

The giant lodge, which Everette had built specifically for this purpose, had filled up quickly. Because many of the wives, husbands, and relatives of the chieftains had come along, which Everette hadn't counted on, all the seats were taken. This forced other chieftains and their families to sit in the aisles or lean against the walls along the back and the sides of the room. There were still more people filing in—those who weren't chieftains nor related to chieftains, but had a desire to watch the proceedings.

Finally, Everette's assistant, Tosk, noting that all the chieftains were present, had to close the doors to keep others from crowding in.

Three years previously, when Everette started his unification process, Rayz had been the first one to sign a treaty with him, joining their two clans. She had become disgusted with the continual fighting and killing between the clans. So, when Everette came to her with his plans, she readily accepted, but with reservations. She doubted he could make it happen, but as it turned out, what she overlooked or underestimated was Hurd's

greed. Shortly after she had signed with Everette, Hurd started raiding their crystal transports on the Pike. Hurd damn well denied it when confronted, but everyone knew it was his Secret Police under his orders. And then three nights ago when he became bold enough to actually attack a clan in the mountains killing all the men, and the children too, well, that was like the crystal that broke the mule's back.

There were three hundred and four clans in the Borgus Mountains, and up until three nights ago Everette had only been able to recruit seventy-six of them. It could be that this greedy blow by Hurd might be his own fatal blow as every clan was now represented—some of the chieftains having had to travel hundreds of miles just to get here.

It's an impressive sight, thought Rayz.

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Everette, with Sven beside him, walked through the door. His huge frame lumbered down the aisle while Sven hurried, his little legs churning—almost running, to keep up with the giant. Everette lifted the boy into his arms as if he were a rag doll, then stepped up onto the stage and walked to the podium.

The Chieftains and the rest of the crowd started stomping their feet, causing a rumble like an earthquake throughout the lodge, shaking the walls and alerting the mountain people outside that the meeting was about to begin. They started clapping their hands and whistling to let those on the inside know that they were there to support their get together. Everette smiled, but the look on his face portrayed amazement. *These people really do want peace,* he thought. *But it took a common enemy to overcome hundreds of years of traditional rivalry.*

He set Sven on the floor and raised his hand to quiet the crowd, but they kept on stomping, clapping, and whistling. It was like someone had finally brought them to that place in their minds where they could have brotherhood and sisterhood with the other tribes of the mountains.

He raised his hand again, but the cheering became even louder.

"Kinsmen," he shouted out in a booming voice. "Kinsmen, let us begin the meeting."

But the raucous continued.

These people would certainly be out of place in an elegant Newusa nightclub, thought Everette. He looked down at Sven and noticed he looked scared as if the raucous crowd would attack and kill them like the hooded monsters in the forest. Everette walked over to the side of the stage, got a chair and brought it back. He set it slightly behind and to the left of the podium, then he lifted Sven into the air and sat him in the chair. There was a big smile on his Everette's face, and he patted Sven on the head letting him know everything was all right.

Three nights ago Everette had been home lounging in his big chair in front of the fire when he heard a tapping at the door. It was so slight that at first he thought it was the wind, but then it occurred again. He lumbered to the door and opened it. There was little Sven shaking and cold, waving his phasor in his right hand—his skinny little arm going back and forth. "I killed three of them," he whimpered. "I killed three of them."

At first, Everette was stunned and just stood there. Then he looked around to see if anybody was with the boy.

"I killed three of them," he whimpered again and again.

Finally, Everette leaned over and picked the boy up holding him to his chest.

"I killed three of them," he said again.

"It's okay, boy. It's okay." He hugged him tighter to his chest. And then he felt the cold coming off his bare, little arms. So, he took him over to the fire and called to his wife. "Robin, come quick and bring a cup of warm mead."

"I killed three of them."

"It's okay, boy. It's okay. It's okay." He gently rubbed his head and started rocking him back and forth as if he were a tiny baby.

Robin came into the room and seeing the boy in Everette's arms she hurried over to them. She held the cup of mead toward the boy. "Here son you drink this." But he didn't see it.

"I killed three of them," he said.

"Oh, my," said Robin. She set the cup of mead on a table. "Here, let me have him." And she held out her arms.

As Everette handed him to her she said, "He's freezing. Get him a blanket." She sat Sven in the chair next to the fire and picked up the cup of mead. "Here, now you drink some of this." She held the cup to Sven's lips,

and he took a sip.

Everette came back with the blanket, put it around him, and tucked it in.

Robin held the cup to his lips again, and he took another sip. "They killed my father," he said. And then he bent his head and began to sob.

"There, there," said Robin. She pulled him to her, hugging him tight and patting him on the back.

After a while he calmed, and Everette asked him what his name was.

"Sven," he answered in a shaken voice.

"And what Clan do you belong to?"

"The Bear Clan, but my father and all the men are dead."

"What!?" exclaimed Everette. "A Clan would never kill all the men in another Clan. Who did this terrible thing?"

"They were monsters wearing hoods." He was angry and crying at the same time. "And they killed little Toby and my brother and all the other children.

The realization of what and who sank home, and Everette was suddenly experiencing so many emotions he didn't know which one to exhibit. He was sad for the children and the men of the Clan. He was furious that Hurd could do such a thing. He was glad that he now had a villainous deed with which to unite the Clans. But in the end he realized that most of all he was grief stricken.

The crowd had finally quieted.

"It's okay," he said to Sven. "I'm with you now and everything's okay." He stood up, turned to the podium and looked down at the Chieftains. Did he start with a greeting? Or an opening commentary? No. He shouted out, "And who do you think did this terrible deed?" His voice boomed through the lodge almost shaking the windows.

He glared at the Chieftains.

It didn't take an instant, but Rayz shouted back, "Hurd."

And then a chorus of other voices shouted out "Hurd."

"That's right. And if we don't do something about it, he will continue to kill us until there are no more of us left alive." He paused as the crowd began to growl. "Are we going to let him get away with it?" Everette was still shouting.

"No!" came the angry shouts. Men and women were jumping to their feet and shaking their fist. They started stamping their feet, and they kept yelling, "No!" over and over.

Everette raised his hand and held it there for several minutes until the crowd quieted again. "Okay then," he used a normal tone of voice, but continued to emphasize his words. "It's time for us to unite and become one nation."

Rayz jumped up and shouted, "Who will join the seventy-six?" And, of course, everyone knew she meant the seventy-six clans, which had already joined the unification under the leadership of Everett.

One of the chieftains jumped up and yelled, "I will!" And then a neighboring Chieftain, who had been warring with him for as long as he could remember, jumped up and yelled, "Me too!"

Shortly thereafter all the Chieftains rose, almost in unison, and shouted out that they wanted to join.

"Okay," shouted Everette over the din. "All of you who are new members come up to the table and Tosk will show you where to sign the Unification Agreement."

There was a ruffling, scuffling sound and a roar of whispers as two hundred and twenty eight Chieftains, minus the Chieftain of the Bear Clan, started crowding their way to the front of the stage. Everette thought if their pioneer ancestors could see them now they would be proud. Their children's children, many generations removed, were putting forth the effort to stop the senseless killing and to build a mountain nation bringing with it a better life for all the mountain people.

Tosk looked up at the first Chieftain. "If you want to read it first, there are three pages." He flipped through the three pages and pointed at a blank line beneath another Chieftain's signature. "And then sign here."

"I don't need to read it. Give me the pen." He snatched the pen from Tosk's hand and signed the document.

And that's the way it went. All the Chieftains signed the document without reading it. But as each one turned to leave Tosk handed them a copy of the Unification Agreement.

It took about an hour and forty-five minutes of torturous standing around or sitting before the last signature was collected. Some of them, for something better to do were reading the document, but most were constantly shifting in their seats and snorting. Mountain people weren't used to sitting this long elbow to elbow in a small cramped space with nothing to do.

"Now that everyone has signed the document unifying every clan of the Borgus Mountains we can . . ."

"Just a moment," said Clint, Chieftain of the Beaver Clan as he stood up. He spoke almost softly and those near him had to strain to hear what he was saying, and those further away only heard a mumble.

Everette stopped speaking and looked at Clint. "Did you say something?" he asked.

"I said, 'just a moment,'" said Clint a little louder. Clint had always spoken softly because he never found a need to talk loud. He was only a few inches shorter than Everette and just as big in the arms, legs, and chest. "It says here," and he pointed to the document, "that you're the temporary leader of this Unification Clan."

"That's right," said Everette.

"Well, you know what they say: 'a leader without the honor of battle is a leader who might in cowardice dabble.' And I therefore challenge you to the Clan's creed of leadership by submission or death."

"But that's what we're trying to get away from," snorted Rayz as she stood up and glared at Clint. Everyone knew Rayz preferred not to fight when possible, but they also knew that when she went into battle she unleashed a fury that few could stand against.

"Nevertheless, it is the Clan's creed and it must be answered."

There were nods of agreement amongst the other Chieftains. "He has a right to challenge," said Penz, Chieftain of the Roach Clan.

"That's true," said Everette, "but most of you have forgotten or perhaps have never known of the battle of the Earth Chieftains of ancient times." He pulled a book off the shelf under the podium. "This book was handed down to me by my father, and to him by his father, and so on for a hundred generations." He thrust the book into the air for all to see, and then he slammed it down on the podium. "In this book it tells much of the history of many of the countries of Ancient Earth and especially a country called the United States of America." He flipped through the pages. "Here," he said as he picked up the book and pointed at a page. "This is where it tells how they chose their Chiefs." He set the book down. "They used a different kind of fighting—a kind of fighting where no one gets hurt, at least not physically, and it's called voting." It was going to be difficult to convince the chieftains that this was the best way to settle disputes. They all knew that Newusa used voting to elect their city councilmen, and look at the mess they were in. "Voting lets you choose the Chief you want without having to kill anyone." Everette started speaking louder and his deep baritone voice rumbled through the lodge. "You get to save your killing for the enemy. You get to save it for Hurd and his murderous police force."

The Chieftains, their wives, husbands, and the other spectators, jumped to their feet and started cheering and stomping their feet. The vibration in the floor and walls was so great the ceiling lamps began to sway and documents and various knickknacks began to fall off the shelves and onto the floor. Everette held up the book and yelled, "Death to Hurd! Death to the murderer of children!"

The floor began to rumble and the walls shook violently and eventually the latch on the front door broke away and the doors popped open. Mountain people rushed in to join the clamor until not another soul could fit. And others outside pressed their faces to the windows.

Finally, the crowd quieted, and those with chairs sat down, all except Clint.

"Actually," said Everette "it's a lot easier to vote and less painful." The crowd was upbeat now and easy to control. They started laughing raucously at Everette's last jest.

Rayz jumped up. "I nominate Everette for leader of the Unified Clan." She looked around at the other Chieftains and raised her axe. "And that better be the end of the nominations."

The crowd started laughing and stomping their feet.

"I'm glad you realized she's just joking," said Everette. "Actually, we welcome more nominations." He waited for at least a full minute, but no one said anything.

"In that case," said Rayz as she raised her hand. "I vote for Everette as leader of the Unified Clan."

On her last word, every hand in the lodge went up, including Clint's. And as the noise died down Clint looked at his wife and said, "By God, that was easier." And again everyone started laughing.

"That's it," said Rayz. "You're the leader." And she sat down.

History had been made—a positive event, which would bring peace and unification between the Clans, but now they had to deal with Hurd. "We need a council of war," said Everette. And the first person he appointed was Rayz, followed by Clint, Tosk, and seven other Chieftains.

"And now I will call this meeting to an end, unless someone can think of something which can help us."

"Death to Hurd," yelled one of the Chieftain's wives.

"That's not much help," replied Everette, "but I'm sure we all agree." The mountain people got up and

started filing out or bunching into small groups to talk.

"I need the members of the war council to meet with me here on the stage."

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Everette sat in his chair at home next to the fire. The meeting of the war council hadn't lasted long. They still didn't have a solution for the scent, however Everette did inform them that the rebels had a spy on the inside, and they were hoping it wouldn't be long until they could use this man to penetrate the tower.

Chapter Forty

Ben looked into the eyes of the cat—sparkling green with a slight cast of yellow—the hypnotizing orbs of a magnificent creature. They danced back and forth in observation of the shuttlecraft and the prisoners disembarking. His penetration was keen and denoted a superior intelligence. His mouth was closed, and two long fangs could be seen running vertically from the upper jaw down the sides of his lower mandible and piercing the air three inches below. His fur was a dark golden color, but wherever the shadows played across it, hues of reddish brown in the subdued light created an eerie three-dimensional projection of disproportionate features. (Obviously Nature's way of frightening his enemy, as if he weren't already frightening enough). His claws were at least three inches long in accordance with the size of his huge paws. And, as Ben thought back, he realized that (with the exception of the long saber-toothed-like teeth) here was an Ancient-Earth mountain lion, only three times bigger. From the ground to the top of his ears he stood six feet tall.

Ben stepped off the shuttlecraft ramp and onto the plastic spaceport landing area wondering if at any moment someone was going to run up to him and yell, "Surprise," and then explain to him that the whole damn thing was a joke. But he knew it wasn't going to happen. By some quirk of fate he had gotten pulled into a political usurpation, which would probably result in his death. He felt quite lucky that it hadn't already happened, because he knew Hurd wanted it.

Off to the right and in front of him was a raised platform on which three men and the cat were standing. They were a crew to wring angered mirth from Ben's mind. Two of them were stern looking, as if they were born at the age of forty and had always had hard lines creasing their faces. It was like the people he had met once in awhile whom he couldn't imagine as children. The other man, the one in the middle, was fat, not as obese as a Monsorian farm pig, but fat nevertheless. He had jowls hanging from his face and a large stomach bulging against his body suit. His chubby little hands were attached to his fat little arms, and sloping down behind his waist protruded his fat butt. But in contrast to his fat torso and upper extremities were his two little toothpick legs. How do they keep him from toppling over? Ben wondered.

"Put your toes on the white line and face the warden," commanded the guard who was standing in front of them. He was pointing at a line painted on the landing area about ten yards from the shuttle. It ran parallel to the platform on which the cast of fools were standing (or were the prisoners the cast of fools?).

Reluctantly, Ben moved forward and did as the guard had told them. From the corner of his eye he could see the young attractive woman, who had sat across from him on the shuttle, stepping off the ramp and moving toward the line. Her long brown hair hung behind her shoulders. Her large bosom projected firmly against her white body suit. She was short in stature, but he could tell by her motions that she had class. How the hell did she get here? he wondered.

Next to the young woman was another prisoner which Ben had taken note of—not because of his golden colored skin, his coal black hair, nor his unusual facial features—Ben knew of several planets in the Federation which had societies of people with these physical characteristics, and even though he had never seen them in person, he had seen them on the viewer. Some of the top models came from these planets. No. It wasn't because of his looks, it was because of his aura of fierceness. Ben knew this man was a courageous warrior. He was a man Ben would never want as an enemy.

Ben faced the front and noticed about a hundred yards to his left, parked on a raised landing area, there were two G15 Federation destroyers sitting peacefully, reflecting weak rays from the sun. *They must have brought the Galaef in one of those*, he thought, *and I bet they won't leave until they have taken care of him.*

Standing there and looking around, Ben found himself thinking about the horrible stories the Newusians had

told him about the prison pit. It wasn't a good remembrance considering the outcome. Many of the prisoners were dying of starvation, which came on quickly because they were worked sixteen hours a day with very little food. But some of the others died when they were whipped to death by some terrible monstrosity which had been imported from another planet. The stories were probably grossly exaggerated, but he had no doubt that death came quickly in this prison.

The next prisoner to step off the ramp was Em. That vacant look was still there. He walked almost mechanically as though living in a dream world. He was unable to sense the meaning of life. He always did what he was told. He listened. He watched. He felt. Ben was sure he could taste and smell, but for some reason his brain couldn't put it together. What had gone wrong? Why hadn't this man recovered from suspended animation? Must have something to do with the length of time he was in the casket. Ben watched as the hulk of the man moved toward the line. If this man were truly a link with the past, he could be invaluable for the advancement of science. What was Thorne thinking? No one had ever undergone suspended animation for more than forty years and survived.

I don't know why I'm worried about it, thought Ben. *I'll probably be dead within a couple of months, or sooner.* Looking straight ahead Ben was forced to look at the cat. He noticed that the cat's tail began to move quickly from side to side, and now Ben was more interested in the cat than thinking about his forth-coming doom. From what Ben could remember about cats, tail wagging was a sign of anger or excitement.

Without the notice of the three men on the platform, the cat crouched down until his belly almost touched the black-formed plastic. At first it looked as though he were going to lie down, but then his large claws, as thick as Ben's fingers and tapered into razor sharp points, snaked out of their sheathes and dug into the platform. In one graceful leap he bounded over the railing, landed on the pavement, and headed straight for the prisoners.

The fat man's look was one of shock, and he started stuttering as he tried to say something. One of the men standing next to him leaned forward and grasped the railing with both hands. There was a look of consternation turned to horror on his face.

The good-looking woman prisoner, who was standing two spaces down the line, gasped in fear. She must have felt death was coming.

Another bound and the cat was in front of the prisoners. He walked slowly down the line all the while staring intently at the Aeolian Master. His manner gave no clue as to his intent.

Ben spun around to watch. *By the Zorgs of Zozorstra*, thought Ben, *what's going on here?* The cat emitted a loud rasping noise. Ben, at first, thought that the low rumble being emitted from the cat's throat was a growl, and at that moment, he anticipated the worst, but as the cat started rubbing his head across the front of Em's chest and shoulders, he realized the cat was purring.

The cat rubbed Em so vehemently he almost knocked him off his feet.

Regaining his balance, Em reached up and started stroking the cat's neck. He scratched him behind the ears and then rubbed his cheek on the cat's furry face. It almost looked as if Em was going to smile.

And the cat, seemingly in Nirvana, acted as though he had finally found his long lost companion. He continued to rub his body against that of Em's, and the base purr rumbled like a song of joy from his throat—so strong and deep it almost shook the ground.

Just then Ben heard an angry, trembling voice from the platform. He turned his head in time to see the fat man, with chubby cheeks—red from fury, stomping his foot on the black-plastic platform. His words sputtered like a clicking ratchet and fine droplets of spittle sprayed from between his fat lips. "Get back here!" he finally yelled audibly. "Get back here. You, you, you, you're making a fool of yourself."

The cat ignored him and continued to revel in his new found friend. He opened his mouth and a long, red tongue lashed out licking Em's neck and face. He raised his right paw and placed it on Em's shoulder and then licked him again.

The fat man became angrier. And as his fat stomach jiggled up and down from the stomping of his foot on the platform, it seemed to Ben that this absurd show, as comical as it was, was merely a performance being put on for the benefit of the new prisoners. But then the fat man exploded with wrath. He grabbed his phasor from its holster and with a scowl on his face he took careful aim. He shot a blue bolt, which struck near the cat's hind paws.

Startled from the unexpected shot the cat jumped from the side of the Aeolian Master into a low crouch. His eyes glared resentfully at the fat man, and his claws gripped the surface in readiness.

The fat man's face whitened, and he reholstered his stunner. "Please come back," he said in a low, nervous tone.

The cat rose from his crouched position and leisurely walked back to the platform. He crawled under the railing, turned, and laid down facing Ben. He started preening himself. His red tongue protruded in a licking motion as he washed his furry paw. *Why are you staring at me?* he asked Ben.

Ben ruminated for a moment, then scowled and looked around to see if the cat was talking to someone else.

"Stand at attention!" yelled a guard from behind.

Ben said something derogatory under his breath and turned to face straight ahead. He tried to look the cat in the eyes, but the cat was still preening himself. "Are you talking to me?" asked Ben audibly.

"Of course I'm talking to you!" yelled the guard. He walked up behind Ben and thumped him on the head with his bully stick. "Another outburst like that and you'll be working extra hours. Now shut up and stand at attention."

Ben was tempted to take the guy's toy away from him and shove it someplace undignified, but he knew better; so instead he sucked in his stomach, stuck out his chest, and raised his head a little higher.

You don't have to speak out loud, said the cat. He laid his chin on his paws, blinked his eyes a couple of times and then closed them.

Just say it in your mind.

Mental telepathy? asked Ben silently, but speaking it with his mind. He was surprised that he could hear the cat. He contemplated for a moment. Telephore Six was the only planet in the Galactic Empire upon which a quadruped intelligence had evolved. It was the only civilization, on a whole, that used mental telepathy for communication. *But I thought,* said Ben mentally, *only psychics could tune to a cat's telepathy.* This could be very interesting. Ben wanted to sit down, relax, sip on a drink, and have a long chat with this cat, but it wasn't going to happen, not now anyway, and maybe never.

Only thossse with whom I choossse to speak can hear me, said the cat. He grinned mentally.

How many others are there? asked Ben. His feet started to hurt from standing in one spot so long.

Only you and one other, said the cat nonchalantly.

Only me and one other? asked Ben. He was surprised, yet he felt a certain amount of pride that the cat had selected him.

And your friend, added the cat pointing mentally at Em. *But hisss mind isss confused. It'sss difficult to communicate with him.*

Ben acknowledged the fact that Em's mind was confused, and then changed the subject. *Must be quite tranquil,* said Ben, *not having to talk to anyone.*

Yesss, replied the cat. *It's a happy placce.*

But do you understand people when they speak out loud? asked Ben.

Oh yesss, said the cat. *If it's Komotu.* He curled his long, golden tail beside him. *But it'sss easy to ignore them, even ass you are now ignoring the warden.*

Ben suddenly realized that the fat man had started talking to the prisoners. Ben had been so engrossed in his conversation with the cat that he couldn't bring to mind the warden's first words.

You can relax now, said the cat affably. *The warden commanded the prisoners to be at easse.*

Ben looked around and noticed the other prisoners were standing in a relaxed manner. Only one of them was even looking at the warden. The rest of them were scrutinizing the space station or the cat or the other two men on the platform.

Ben folded his arms in front and repositioned his feet.

". . . and I want you to look upon me as your father," said the warden. Saliva appeared in the corner of his mouth while he was talking and started to run down his fat chin. He reached up with the back of his hand and wiped it away. "I am here to look out for you, to protect you as if you were my children." He smacked his lips together. "Yes, you are my children," he said in a fatherly tone.

The cat opened his eyes half way and looked at Ben. *It'sss the same speech every time,* he said. He raised his head and started licking the small patch of white fur centered in the middle of his chest.

"I want you to be happy as long as you stay here with me in my home." His fat little hands stubbed out at the surroundings.

Absurd, said the cat calmly licking his fur, *nobody ever leavess here, unlessss it'sss in a plastic box headed for the incinerator.*

Has anyone ever escaped? asked Ben knowing what the answer would be, but hoping for the opposite.

Not yet, said the cat. He stretched out a paw and began licking his upper arm.

Might as well try, said Ben. *There's nothing to lose, except that which we're going to lose anyway, our lives.*

"And I will make every effort to see that you are happy," said the warden. He stretched his arms out interlocking his fingers and resting his hands on his stomach. "But if you're naughty," he unlocked his hands and pointed a finger in shame, "then I must punish you." He locked his fingers again and hung his head in sorrow.

And now he'll tell you how, commented the cat.

The warden unfolded his hands and gestured toward one of the guards standing near the platform. "My guards carry whips," he said. "And they use them to spank bad little boys and girls." He nodded at the guard. "Show them Lachish."

The guard raised a short, synthetic leather whip into the air and brought it down hard on the surface with a loud cracking sound.

The warden winced. His fat jowls quivered back and forth. "Or if my children are lazy and won't do their chores, the guards must use their stinging sticks." He nodded to the same guard. "Show them Lachish," he said.

The guard raised a long slender electric prod in the air so that all the prisoners could see it.

"And I won't tolerate my children becoming rebellious." The warden became angry at the thought of it. His mouth drew tight against his jowls. "If they do, then I must use the burning lights." The warden paused. "My assistant will explain," he said as he pointed to the man on his left.

The man stepped forward and glared down at the prisoners. "We have phasors located every twenty feet on the wall above the prisoner yard and the pit." He stopped talking a moment as he pointed toward a thirty-foot wall in back of the platform. "Inside the prison yard and connected to the outer wall, there's a fifty foot tower which is manned by five guards twenty four hours a day. His hand darted out indicating the prisoners. "If there is any trouble or rebellious action which constitutes an emergency, the guards in the tower will switch on the phasors. The phasors will automatically fire random shots into the prison yard." The man stepped back.

"And then, of course, we have Roqford." The warden pointed at the huge cat lying next to him. "On order he will kill any naughty child."

The woman two spaces down shuddered as she looked at the cat.

Roqford opened his huge eyes and casually glanced at the prisoners. *The only naughty child I would ever kill,* said Roqford, *isss the fat one standing next to me.* He started licking his other paw.

Ben became curious. *If you're not here to serve the warden, why are you here?*

The cat's mental smile was languid and leisurely. *I'm a prisoner like you,* he replied. *Three yearssss ago I was convicted of cat slaughter on Telephore Six, my home planet. I was sent to one of the Galactic prison planetsss.*

Ben noted Roqford's unusual indifference toward the story. *Did you kill the other cat?* he asked.

Only in self defenssse. He stretched his neck out and laid his head on his paws again.

Ben shifted the weight to his other foot. *How did you get here?* he asked. Somehow, he thought the cat's luck had been diminished along the way.

The warden had heard I wasss on the prison planet, and he sent for me. Roqford mentally made a clicking sound as if quickly forcing the air from between his cheeks and his teeth. *He thought it would be cunning to ussse me asss a scare tactic for the prisonerssss. He threatensss to send me back to my small cage if I don't cooperate, or if I get out of line.* Roqford smiled sardonically. *But he won't.*

"Now that we have dispensed with the unpleasanties, my children," continued the warden, "I shall explain what you have to look forward to." He smiled benignly. "Unlike the last warden," he said in a serious tone, "who made his children work sixteen hours a day," an expression of being appalled swept across his face, "I will let you work only fourteen."

There never was another warden, said Roqford in the middle of a huge yawn.

He's lying? asked Ben.

Quite frequently, said Roqford taking the time to lick the back of his paws and clean his whiskers. *He'ssss afraid of a prisoner uprising.*

He must be paranoid, said Ben. *This place appears to be guarded like the Crystal Palace of Geord.*

He'ssss just naturally nervousss, replied Roqford.

"And once a week," the warden went on, "all my children will get a complete day of rest."

Running out of workerssss, said Roqford in a weary tone. *So, they just recently started the day of rest.*

"And once every six months you will all receive a new body suit."

Never happenss, said Roqford. He stood up on four paws. *The speech isss finished,* he said. He jumped off

the platform and began to walk toward one of the crossover tubes that led to the other hemi dome.

The warden didn't pay any attention to the cat. Instead, with his right hand extended, he indicated the man on his left. "This is Kenley," said the warden. "His official title is 'Warden's assistant.'"

Kenley took a step forward.

"He will now give you a tour of our home and then you will have the rest of the day off, time to get moved in and make yourselves comfortable." He turned toward the steps, but hesitated and then turned again to the prisoners. "Oh," he said, "if you should have any complaints give them to Kenley, and he'll do what he can to take care of them."

He'll take care of them alright, said Roqford half way down the tube.

Chapter Forty-One

The room was small being no more than twenty feet by twenty feet. The walls, the floor, and the ceiling were made of metal—a cold, bluish steel. The room was barren of furniture or knick-knacks with only a bin next to a counter off to the left and six racks of drab-gray, prison-issue shirts and pants directly ahead. Ben stood in front of the other prisoners and waited.

"Okay," said the guard, "take off your clothing, everything except your underwear. And then find a uniform that will fit." He pointed at the racks. "And keep whatever shoes you have on. We don't issue shoes or boots, so you better make them last."

Ben stripped off his clothes, which he threw into the bin, then he found a uniform to fit and as he was getting dressed he watched the other three male prisoners. Ben didn't know two of the prisoners, and he had never seen them except on the prison transport, but he was sure he would find out plenty about them in the next few weeks. Em, of course, he knew. It was outrageous that Thorne would throw this man into prison. Even this usurper should know that Em could help scientists find the answer to suspended animation, plus answer the question as to why he was known as the God of the winds.

While the others were getting dressed Em stood in front of the racks, not moving.

One of the guards pulled his bully stick from a strap on his belt and started toward him.

"Wait," said Ben.

The guard turned toward Ben and with an angry look on his face. He slapped the bully stick in the palm of his hand, then took a step forward.

"I'm not being disrespectful," said Ben. "And neither is he," he said pointing at Em. "He's a little slow in the head, if you know what I mean."

The guard eased up.

"I'll help him get dressed," said Ben as he stepped toward the racks. He picked out a uniform that looked big enough, then helped Em out of his body suit and into the shirt and pants.

When everyone was finished, Kenley, the guard in charge, led Ben and the other three prisoners up a flight of metal stairs and along a metal walkway. The two other guards, with their phasers drawn, followed from behind.

Kenley stopped in front of a barred prison-cell and pushed a button on a remote control device, which he held in his hand. Looking at a sheet of paper he called out, "Em," as the barred-door slid open. "Step in. This will be your cell from now on."

Em just stood there with a blank look on his face.

"Em," called out Kenley in an angry tone. He was looking at the four prisoners not knowing which one was Em.

Still no response.

One of the guards walked forward with his 'stinging stick' in the ready position.

Quickly, Ben grabbed Em by the arm and led him into the cell. "Like I said, 'he's a little slow.'" he said to Kenley. He left Em and stepped out of the cell.

Kenley nodded, with a sour look on his face. He turned and started down the metal walkway. He passed four cells before he came to a stop. He pushed the button and the barred door slid open. "Keegan," he yelled out.

A tall, good-looking man with a good build and muscular arms stepped into the cell.

As the door slid shut, Kenley turned and walked to the next cell. He pushed the button. "Samsung," he said

in a calmer voice.

Ben recognized a tone of respect in Kenley's voice, and he knew why. It was Samsung's aura, which would bring forth a modicum of fear and respect from any man or woman when talking to Samsung. His presence gave you the feeling that if you weren't polite to him, he could and would kill you in an instant.

Samsung stepped into the cell.

And now it was Ben's turn. Kenley led him to the last cell on that level.

As Ben stepped through the doorway and into the cell, the barred door slid shut behind him—enclosing him like an animal in a cage. *Crap*, thought Ben. A loud clunking noise reverberated throughout the room when the magnetic coupling locks were activated and engaged, locking him into the small room and into a new, but not a desirable way of life. Ben looked about him and noticed a set of metallic framed bunk beds to the right and a set to the left. Both were attached to the sidewalls, and both had a man on the bottom bunk snoring loudly. There was a small metallic toilet to the right against the far wall. He noticed the wall contained a barred window, which looked out over the prison yard. What the hell have I gotten myself into? A most absurd turn of events.

From the top bunk on the right, a baldhead atop a face with dark, sunken eyes popped up and peered over the edge of a thin, tattered mattress. "Lookie here," said the face, "a new one."

Ben ignored him and walked over to the window and looked out just in time for an unexpected scene. Thorne, surrounded by three prison guards and four of the Galaef's elite bodyguard, was walking across the prison yard. Come for his little meeting with the Galaef. Perhaps a mind melt is in the making.

Ben wondered how much longer the Galaef would be alive. For some reason Thorne needed Myra in order to take control of the Galactic Federation, but he didn't know from which planet she came. He needed Taul to tell him, and that probably meant he would be alive until Thorne found her.

"What's your name?" asked the face from the top bunk.

Ben remembered Thorne had said it would only be a few days, so he must be confident about finding Myra rather quickly, and with the resources of the Galactic Federation at his command his optimism appeared to be realistic.

"So, an unfriendly sort, eh?"

"Not really," said Ben. He turned and saw a scrawny fellow-sitting upright in the top bunk. "I just have a lot on my mind . . . my name's Ben, and what's yours?"

"Name's Hilo," said the face, and he rolled off the bunk, swinging his right foot to the bunk below, but stepping lightly so as not to disturb the snoring man. From there he stepped to the floor. "Listen," he said, "you're new here, so it's only right I fill you in on the program." The man spoke in a soft, but nasal voice.

"Program?"

"You know . . . how things work in this joint. If you're smart and you do things right, you can live for a long time around here . . . especially now."

Ben thought it ironic that this man would consider the process of staying alive under horrible conditions a 'program.' At the university they had programs which included an itinerary of coursework leading to a degree, or an outline of athletic courses leading to an event standing, or a sequence of events at a concert or a theater performance, but there were no programs for staying alive as long as possible under insane circumstances. It occurred to Ben that in some bizarre way it might be a program. It would certainly be a learning process; especially if he survived it.

"What do you mean especially now?"

Without hesitation Hilo said, "Two and a half months ago they started giving us a day off once a week, and then three weeks ago they started feeding us a cooked meal on our day off."

"Why did they do that?"

Hilo answered a question with a question. "How many new prisoners came with you today?"

"Four men and a woman."

"There's your answer," said Hilo. "Prisoners are dying too fast. Too many empty bunks, not enough men to mine the crystals. The workforce used to be two hundred strong, but now we're down to just over one hundred. I guess the rebels are getting smarter—not getting caught as much."

Ben noticed Hilo said 'the rebels' instead of 'us rebels,' but he figured it was just his way of talking. "Well then, I guess that's lucky for us."

"Damn straight it is." Hilo took a cigarette and a lighter out of his prison-issue shirt pocket, stuck the cigarette in his mouth and lit it up. He took a long drag and then blew out a cloud of dull blue smoke.

One of those stinking Arian cigarettes, thought Ben—with the tobacco grown in hydroponics plants. Ben had had the unpleasant experience of coming in contact with that thick, stinking smoke on numerous occasions. "I'm surprised you can smoke in here."

Hilo took another drag, and then as the smoke curled out of his mouth, he asked, "Why not? It's not like they're worried about our health. At least, not on a long term basis."

"What I mean is where do you get the cigarettes?"

Hilo flicked his ash on the floor. "I have a mama on the outside who sends me cigarettes once a month. She even sends me food, what little she can spare."

Ben contemplated for a moment and then his eyes met Hilo's. "It's okay for people on the outside to help you?"

Hilo paused considering the underlying reason for this question. "Oh, I know what you're thinking," he said. "You've been listening to those rumors in Newusa about being imprisoned in the pits, and then you die within a couple of agonizing months . . . right?"

"Well, . . . yeah, that's what I heard."

With a big smile on his lips causing creases to appear all over his face Hilo said, "But that's not true. There are prisoners who have been in here for almost two years. Oh, it's a fact a lot of prisoners die due to overwork and small rations, and there are those who die from accidents and knife fights, but it doesn't have to be that way. If you do it right, and if you have someone on the outside to help you, you can live a long time." He paused, and then said, "I do everything I can to stay alive, and as long as I'm alive I have my hopes that the rebels will take control of the city so we can get out of this place."

Ben had people on the outside. Problem was they were too far away and it wouldn't be possible to get word to his parents nor his brother nor Lyil on the Computer planet nor anyone at the college.

He turned and looked out the barred window again. I wonder what Lyil is doing. The sun was starting to set, and the lights above the prison walls and those in the pit, which was about forty yards from the prisoner's barracks, had been turned on. He could see a large elevator shaft extending down the right side of the pit and spaced every forty feet there was a small platform held by cables, which were extended from a winch.

Hilo snubbed his cigarette butt out on the bunk bed frame and threw it in the toilette. "We eat at noon every Sunday," said Hilo. "Too bad you weren't here sooner."

"It's alright," said Ben. "I ate lunch on the Commander, the . . ."

"The Federation flagship?"

"Yeah, that's right. How did you know?"

"Oh, well, . . . I just keep up on things." Hilo changed the subject by asking, "Does that mean you're not a rebel?"

"Hell no, I'm not a rebel." Ben glared out the window.

"That don't make sense. If you're not a rebel then how did you get here, murder or something?"

"Had nothing to do with murder. It seems I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time," answered Ben.

"Not a rebel and didn't do anything wrong—don't make sense."

Ben shrugged his shoulders. "Has something to do with politics and right now it doesn't much matter." He looked over the prison wall and then pointed his finger out the window and asked, "What's that hue coming over the prison wall?"

Hilo walked over and looked out the window. "Oh, that's the light from the Employee's City. It's a couple of miles from here. And those lights just to the left—that's the warden's house."

"And what's that door on top of the wall?"

"There's two cross-over tubes that come from the warden's house directly to the prison yard; one on the ground and one from the third story of his house to the top of the prison yard wall. That door is the entrance to the top cross-over tube."

Ben considered this piece of information for a moment. "I'll keep that in mind for a possible means of escape—maybe later on."

No no, said a leisurely voice.

Ben turned to Hilo, "What do you mean, 'no'? Haven't you ever thought of escaping?" he asked.

But Hilo gave him a funny look. "I didn't say anything," he said.

And with that Ben realized who it was and turned back to the barred window. *Is that you, Roqford?* he asked mentally. He hadn't gotten used to this cat stepping into his mind without warning and speaking as if he were standing right next to him.

Yesss, it isss.

"Do you want to escape?" asked Hilo.

Best not to answer, said Roqford.

"Not really. I already love it here." And then to Roqford, *Where are you?*

I'm in the warden'sss officcce, replied Roqford. *It'sss where I usually spend the night.*

That's at least a hundred yards away. How can we communicate so far?

Roqford gave a mental grin. *Telepathy is lessss restrictive than mechanical speech. It hasss a range of up to three milesss through any kind of material object found in thiss plane of existencce. In other wordsss, he went on, through any kind of solid object, yesss, but not through certain forcce fieldsss and not into subspacce, or any other plane of existencce.*

"I know you're just kidding," said Hilo. "Nobody loves it here."

"Well, I'm glad to know that," said Ben to Hilo, and then to Roqford. *Now tell me why I can't talk to this guy.*

He'sss one of the warden'sss plantsss.

Ben could imagine Roqford lying on the floor or on a big couch licking one of his paws. *Stoolie?* asked Ben.

What? asked Roqford nonchalantly.

Nothing, just an old Earth term. What do you mean 'one of'? Are there more than one?

"Look," said Hilo deciding not to wait any longer for a reply, "if you ever decide to make an escape you let me in on it, okay? Cause I want to get out of here too. Okay?"

"Yeah, sure," said Ben.

No, there'sss just one at a time, but he usess four of them and switchess them out every six monthsss.

Hilo pulled out another cigarette and lit it up. "I better explain how it works around here," he said.

When his six monthsss are finished, he'll go back to Newusa and live in comfort for a year and a half, then he'll be back.

"Food pellets are used like money."

Ben pictured the warden sweating in his sleep having nightmares about prisoner uprisings—the prisoners taking over the prison and threatening to disrupt his comfort and pleasurable way of life. If the situation was out of control he would have to call in Hurd's city police and maybe Thorne's air force and then he might lose his job.

"Know what I mean?" asked Hilo.

"Yeah," answered Ben.

Yummmmmmmmm, said Roqford.

Yum? asked Ben. He was a little confused by this statement. *What do you mean, yum?*

"Now with food pellets you can buy a most important commodity," continued Hilo.

Nothing. Just Yummmmmmm, life isss good.

I used to think so, said Ben. *But I really couldn't agree with you at the moment.*

There was suddenly an emptiness.

Roqford?

Roqford?

No answer.

Roqford?

No answer. Roqford had fallen asleep, and it felt to Ben like there was a void in his grey matter.

Ben turned and faced Hilo. "What would I want to buy around here?"

"Why, protection, of course." Hilo paused and then continued. "Everybody belongs to a gang. There are eight of them, but you have to pay to belong by giving the gang leader two food pellets everyday."

Ben gave him a wry look. "The way I understand it we don't get enough food as it is, and now you're telling me I have to give some of it away for protection?"

"Look, it's only two a day. You agree to it, and I'll talk to my leader and get you into our gang.

"I don't have a mama on the outside, so forget it. I'll start my own gang."

"Can't," said Hilo matter of factly. "The gangs are all established." He shook his head in a knowing manner. "And if you don't join one, you're going to end up with a shive in your back."

Ben smiled ruefully. "Now there's a term I haven't heard before, and I'll bet it's an ancient Earth term."

"Doesn't matter. You'll find out what it is soon enough."

Chapter Forty-Two

Taul looked out from behind the bars in his small prison cell. What he saw was an oblong antechamber with two beds, a refrigerator, and an open door, which led to a bathroom. There was an assortment of other furniture used for living accommodations. Two of his elite guard were hurrying to and fro setting up surveillance and communications equipment on the counter along the side of the east wall.

It was like a storm of dreadful events which had brought him to this place, without so much as a pause in this attempted take-over. He had been bound and hooded and then whisked away to some place he knew not where, but he knew from the hum of the engines he was being transported in a G15 destroyer. Finally, he was brought to this small cell. The handcuffs and the hood had been removed, and now he stood in disbelief as he watched two of his own elite guard who were obviously part of the usurpation. One of them was his chief security guard, Mordrous and the other was Frostadeem.

For the first time in his life he was concerned about his own well-being.

As he watched these two men going about their business, he realized they must have been offered something astronomical, or something unbelievably valuable. The Galaef's elite guard were a group of computer chosen men picked, above all, for their psychological scores in loyalty. Whatever had turned them into criminals, he could not imagine, but because of this scenario he knew that if he used strong-arm threats against them, they would not work.

But, on the other hand, what else could he do? "Do you men understand what you are getting yourselves into?"

They ignored him and went about setting up the equipment.

"Release me at once" he ordered in a commanding voice.

They continued to ignore him

"Do you not hear me?" he yelled in frustration. "You must help me against Thorne and his evil plot. Only then will I spare your lives and the lives of your families."

Mordrous stopped what he was doing and walked to the Galaef's cell to confront him. "Sir, we hear you very plainly, and we understand the seriousness of the situation, and in spite of that, we have orders that if you persist in talking to us, we are to bind and gag you."

The Galaef became furious. "Damn you," he yelled. "I will see to it that you and your families and all your relatives are thrown into the Zi pits."

Mordrous shuddered at the thought of it. "Sir," he said, "you must become quiet, or . . ."

The Galaef was still furious. "Whatever happened to the phrase, 'Elite and loyal to the end?'"

Mordrous pulled his phasor from of its holster. "Sir," he said as he pointed it at Taul's chest, "this is your last warning. You must not say another word."

Seeing the phasor, the Galaef quickly became quiet and sat down on his bunk to mull things over. How could Thorne pull this off? There were too many failsafe systems, too many obstacles to overcome in order to depose the ruling Galaef and take over command of Galactus VII and the Galactic Armada. How could he have devised a plan which would override all the computer's failsafe systems? How could it be possible?

It wasn't possible. The computer would never give him command of the Galactic Armada. Or, had he found something that would make it so?

The Galaef sat there for two hours trying to figure out what had happened, why it had happened and where it was going to take him.

An hour later Mordrous and Frostadeem had finished setting up the equipment and were standing next to the far wall talking in whispered voices.

Just then the door to the small building opened and Thorne walked in. He was alone.

As he approached the small prison cell Taul stood up and peered between the bars.

Thorne sneered. "You're a fool. All these years I've been planning to take over as Galaef, and you never once noticed or suspected my actions. Always too busy positioning and repositioning the warships in the armada and too busy with planetary heads of state and too busy resolving squabbles between planets and then the latest and most ludicrous—you ran off to this nowhere planet to chase a myth. Now you see your folly. Don't you?" he growled in contempt.

"I see your folly," said Taul with a venomous threat. "I see that you're attempting a feat which cannot

possibly succeed. You and all your cohorts will fail. Even if you kill me, you cannot succeed."

"You took the thoughts right out of my mind," retorted Thorne. And then he whispered in a low voice, not wanting the guards to overhear. "Not only will I succeed, but I will kill you, too."

Taul was taken aback by the sincerity and ruthlessness in Thorne's voice. "You can't succeed," he said again in a more subdued and tentative voice. He suddenly realized Thorne wouldn't have gone this far if he didn't have a scheme which propounded reasonable success.

"Success is already assured. Even Myra knew it, and that's why she fled," said Thorne stiffly. "Which brings me to the reason I'm here, and why you're still alive." His mouth twisted slightly. Apparently it aggravated him that his plan hadn't gone exactly as it should have. "I need to know which planet Myra is from, and if you tell me and I find her with relative ease, then your death will be quick and painless, but if you lie to me, and I have to use the information extrapolator, and if I have to wrench your brain apart to find what I need to know, then your death will be long and horrible."

Taul began to suspect that Thorne had discovered Myra's secret job description. Still he was puzzled. All Thorne had to do was check the computer files. As second in command he had the authority to do it. "Why do you want her?"

"Let's not play games. You know, and I know she is the bearer of the ring. So, let's have it. Where is she?"

"I can tell you where she comes from, but that doesn't mean that's where she went."

"I'll worry about that. You just tell me her home planet."

The Galaef wasn't interested in being part of a mind melt. And besides the three or four weeks that it would take for them to find her might be enough for him to get free; especially if he could work on the guards. "Okay," he said. He looked Thorne straight in the eye. "She's from a planet called Rignon of the solar system Jag."

"You think I'm some kind of fool," yelled Thorne in a loud, booming voice. "Tell me now, or I will order the equipment needed to turn you into a mindless idiot."

Taul started to look surprised and started to protest when in the same instant he realized that Thorne had already checked out the planet Rignon, probably several months or several years back, and that was why Taul was still alive. Suddenly, Taul realized that Myra's documents had been falsified and never discovered. He wondered what the hell was going on with the security checks. Nevertheless, it was this instant of realization that saved him from a mind melt and certain death. "You're right. You're right," answered Taul. "I'm so used to telling people where she's from, it just slipped out." He stepped closer to the bars as if he was about to tell a secret, when in actuality his mind was racing to figure out the planet which would be reasonable for her origin and at the same time the most inaccessible for Thorne and his cohorts. "The truth is," he said in a low voice, "she's from a small planet called Rison in the Prim solar system. We keep it a secret," he continued as his mind kept racing to keep the lie going, "because she's from a race of people who have special mental powers, and we don't want it to get out to those who might use these people for selfish purposes."

"You and all of your advisors are a bunch of idiots," said Thorne. "And, by the way, just on the off-chance that you escape from the prison—give me your ring."

"It won't do you any good. It only works for me."

"You're so stupid. Didn't I just say, 'in case you escape?' The odds of you ever getting back to Galactus are almost nil, but just in case, I want to make sure you have no way of getting into the computer complex. I don't want you to give the computer orders to keep me out. So hand it over."

Taul took the ring off his finger and held it out to Thorne. As he took the ring Taul said, "You know you can't succeed. There are too many fail-safe systems." Speaking these words made Taul feel more confident. It was like giving himself a pep talk.

Thorne started for the door, then stopped and over his shoulder said, "You're the biggest idiot of them all." And he left the building.

Chapter Forty-Three

Samsung stepped into the cell and stood looking at the wall with the barred window as the prison door slid shut behind him.

Although Samsung appeared calm on the outside, his mind was seething with anger on the inside, and it

wasn't because he was in prison. He wouldn't be in this situation if he hadn't been banished from his homeland two years earlier.

From the time he had been a young child his honorable father had trained Samsung in all forms of combat. And though his father's favorite form of combat was archery, and though he encouraged Samsung to follow in that direction, it turned out that Samsung's favorite was the ancient form of hand to hand combat known as 'karate,' and he excelled at it. By the time he was fourteen years of age (Galactic Federation time) he had already become the champion of his age group in Newnippon. From there he steadily grew in expertise and physical strength. And in this growth he came closer to his goal of becoming Grand Master of Newnippon.

Samsung's father allowed him the freedom to follow his greatest desire, and finally, at the age of thirty-two, for the first time he was allowed to enter the Grand Master competition. And much to his pleasure he was seeded number six out of thirty-two contestants.

In the first round he easily defeated the number twenty-eight seed. In the second round he faced the number 20 seed, which was also an easy match. In the third round he faced the number four seed, which wasn't so easy. The match went all three rounds with Samsung winning by decision rather than a knock-out or an inescapable hold. This win placed him in the semifinals where he should have faced the number two seed, but there had been an upset when the number sixteen seed beat the number eight seed, and then went on to beat the number two seed, so, instead of facing the number two seed in the fourth round he sparred against the number sixteen seed.

This man turned out to be very fast and very good at defending kicks and punches, but more than that he was in the zone. He beat Samsung in the first round, and it wasn't looking too good in the second round either. Samsung, in his mind, searched for the answer going back through all his training, finally he decided on a judo move. He faked a kick, which caused his opponent to step back and bring his right arm down and across in a blocking motion. Before this move was completed, Samsung stepped forward and did a three hundred and sixty degree turn bringing his right arm out as he turned. He grabbed his opponent's wrist and with a bending motion he threw the man over his shoulder and onto the mat with such force that he was stunned. At that moment Samsung rolled him over and got him in a neck-breaking hold. The match was over.

After watching this match most of the experts concluded that Samsung was good enough to win the title.

As he waited in his corner he looked across the ring at the reigning champion, Tanaka. He was only an inch taller than Samsung, but his muscles were honed to a fine-chiseled look, and his build was massive. It occurred to Samsung that such a massive chest would be detrimental when speed was necessary, but for this champion it wasn't. He was extremely fast.

It pleased Samsung that most thought he was faster than the champion—maybe he was, but he would not underestimate Tanaka, after all he had been the reigning champion for five years.

When the referee dropped his hand in the middle of the ring, signaling for the match to begin Samsung noticed that the champion did not come out of his corner as fast as usual. Something wasn't right.

As they began to spar he noticed that Tanaka's reflexes were a slight bit slower than normal. As it turned out, with this advantage Samsung easily defeated Tanaka in the first round, and he became the new reigning champion.

However, it was a short lived championship. The judges also noticed the slowed reflexes and started an investigation. First they had Tanaka's blood analyzed and found the presence of Nismazolex—a drug which slows the chemical action of dopamine, in the brain, thereby causing a slower reaction time in physical coordination. Next they discovered the presence of this drug in the tea Tanaka had drunk just before the match. And finally, while Tanaka's blood was being analyzed other investigators were searching the locker room. They had each of the contestants open their locker. And there in the back corner of Samsung's locker they found a small vile of the drug.

Samsung protested claiming that he had been framed that someone had picked the lock and placed the drug in his locker. The investigators considered his objection and had the lock microscopically examined, but they found no evidence of the lock being picked, and since Samsung was the only one who had a key, they concluded that he had perpetrated this crime so that he might win the championship. Samsung protested again stating that the lock had been picked by a professional.

A twelve man committee was formed to determine guilt or innocence—only one of the twelve thought he might be innocent. He was, therefore, stripped of his championship and publicly disgraced on the home viewer when it was announced that he had cheated.

Two days later a messenger from the Emperor delivered a message which stated that he had dishonored

himself and his family, he therefore had two days to get his affairs in order, and then he must leave Newnippon forever.

He called his wife, Akiko, to him and explained to her that some villain had framed him, and that he had been banished from the city. "I have confidence in you," he said. "You are a competent woman. I want you to take over our clothing business and keep it prosperous until I return. And believe me when I say, 'I will be back.'"

With a tear in her eye, Akiko bowed courteously. "I will, my honorable husband. And I know you will be back, for I know that you did not commit this foul atrocity."

Two days later Samsung left Newnippon and headed for the Borgus Mountains and the villages of the Mountain People. He could not go to Newchin—the Japanese people and the Chinese people of the two city nations hated each other. He would not go to Newusser. It was too far away, and besides, he didn't trust the Russians. He would not go to Newusa—they were living under a terrible dictatorship. That left only the Mountain Nation.

He drove his four wheel drive Navigator to the Borgus Mountains. Along the way he passed several groups of toral. They gave chase, but they could not catch him. After several hours he started up a slight incline, which quickly became a steep incline. The road leveled out in a number of places, but became steep again. Finally, he came to the village of Everette the Unifier.

He had heard of Everette who attempted to unify the Mountain Nation by bringing the clans together under one ruler. He admired Everette for being dedicated to making the Mountain Nation a better place to live. He, therefore, decided to give his allegiance to this man.

Samsung parked his car in an open field and walked to the nearest house. He knocked on the door and waited. A moment later a big busty woman with blond braided hair opened the door. She was at least a foot taller than Samsung.

"Yes," she asked looking down at him.

"Madam, I am looking for Everette the unifier."

She stepped out on the porch and pointed. "His is the third house down on the right," she said.

"Thank-you," answered Samsung.

"Think nothing of it," she answered. She watched as Samsung left her house and walked down the road.

He wasn't sure if Everette would accept him into his clan as he was unfamiliar with the customs of these people.

He knocked on the door. A moment later a woman, this time only six inches taller than Samsung, opened the door and asked, "May I help you?"

"Yes madam," answered Samsung, "I would like to talk to Everette the Unifier."

"You can call him 'Everette,'" said the woman, and then she called out, "Everette, someone is here to talk to you." And then to Samsung she said, "Please come in." She opened the door wide and stepped aside.

As Samsung stepped into the house, she closed the door behind him and went into the kitchen. A moment later a giant of a man entered the room. "Hello," said Everette in a booming voice. "What can I do for you?"

Samsung bowed and then straightened up. "Most honorable sir," he said, "I have come to you in my time of need. I will be honest with you, sir. I have been banished from my home in Newnippon by my Emperor. Now I have no place to live. I have come to ask if I might live in your village, if I might pledge my allegiance to you and your clan?"

Everette laughed. "I have never met a man so courteous. What is your name?"

"My name is Samsung."

"Well, Samsung you have my permission to join our clan, and more than that you can stay with me and my wife until our clan is finished building your cabin."

And with that Samsung and Everette formed a bond of friendship which grew stronger everyday until they became the best of friends.

Two years later when taking a shipment of arms to the rebels in Newusa Samsung was shot by a stun ray in a subway tunnel. Sam rushed toward him in an attempt to carry him back to the exit, but it was a foolish decision as Sam was also shot down.

Everette seeing it was hopeless to try to rescue his two friends, rushed up the ladder and escaped into the plains of the toral.

Now, here he was. Most would think he was in a bad situation, but Samsung knew that someday he would return to Newnippon.

Chapter Forty-Four

The noise in the confined area of the pit, approximately three hundred feet across, wracked Ben's ears with an agonizing drone of constant clamor. It was almost deafening with the thudding and clanking of fifty-eight picks hammering the dirt in random, and the shoveling of dirt into the dirt-carts, the loading and unloading of the crystals, and especially the machinery used to haul the crystals up the side of the two hundred foot embankment. But the most painful to Ben's ears was the cracking of the whip as much too often the end of it came down on a prisoner's back bringing moans and whimpering from the unlucky stiff beneath it.

"Over here," shouted one of the pickers above the loud din. He wiped the cold sweat off his brow and gestured at a sparkling crystal-point, which was peeking up from beneath the dirt.

Ben lifted the handles and pushed his crystal cart with the one rubber tire toward the man. As he came to a stop he noticed only part of the crystal was showing. "It's not uncovered," he said.

"Look, all you have to do is brush off a little of the dirt and pick it up."

But Ben knew better. There was no telling how big it was, and he wasn't going to be fumbling around trying to dislodge a crystal. "Take another swing at it," he said with a growl.

"By the Zorgs," retorted the man. He slowly lifted his pick and with a heavy downward swing he popped the crystal loose. "Happy?" he asked sarcastically.

"Yeah, ecstatic," said Ben. He bent over, picked it up, and threw it on top of the other crystals. The cart was full enough, so he started wheeling it to the nearest unloading station.

Ben stopped next to the conveyor belt and started dropping crystals onto the small-lipped platforms, which were rising slowly one after another toward the top of the pit.

This was Ben's third tormenting day working as a crystal loader in the open pit prison mine on the Jamarl Plains of Ar, or as Ben always referred to it as the Jamarl Plains of Mars. It hadn't taken him long to get familiar with the routine, and to discover who and what was a threat to his life, and who and what wasn't.

The first morning, when he fell into formation for roll call along with the other prisoners, he set his eyes upon the largest monstrosity of a man he had ever seen, at least nine feet tall (so much for the rumors being exaggerated). His huge frame, which was composed mostly of muscle with only a small roll of fat hanging over his brown-leather belt, must have weighed more than seven hundred pounds. There was a long black beard, which hung down from his Piltdown looking face and lay in waves upon his huge chest. Later, Roqford told Ben that this giant, Og, had been imported by the warden to intimidate the prisoners. And intimidate he did. He loved to use his whip on any prisoner who did not do as he was told or who was slacking off, not doing his job.

Every morning the warden with Roqford by his side would stand on the top walkway of the prison wall and watch the prisoner's roll call. Near the wall to the warden's left on the ground floor and forty meters from the pit stood twenty guards at attention. The lieutenant with a sergeant beside him waited for the order from the warden to escort the prisoners to the elevator, which would lower them into the deep hole.

That first morning, the prisoners, with Ben in their midst, slowly shuffled out of the cell blocks and made their way to the plastic assembly area. There were three hundred numbers painted and circled on the dark plastic. It was the responsibility of the prisoners to find their assigned numbers, step within the circle, and come to attention—no talking, whispering, or moving about.

Og would make sure you followed the rules.

Ben walked over to his number, 101, and stepped into the circle. To his left was the rebel prisoner, Keegan, who had arrived with Ben and the others. To his right was Viella, and then Em was to her right. Finally, Samsung occupied circle number '104.' During the next several weeks the five of them, including Em, but not really since he wasn't aware of his surroundings, were going to become close friends in a hostile environment.

The prisoner in front of Ben turned slightly and said over his shoulder, "That's going to be your number for the rest of your life, unless someone else dies first." And then he laughed a quiet, hysterical laugh.

Just then the door of the guard's cross over tube opened, and the duty officer with four other guards walked out with Og trailing not far behind. All the prisoners became very quiet. It was Og's routine to stand in front of the prisoners during roll call and crack his whip after the calling of every name. It was as if he couldn't wait to get into the pit and start whipping prisoners.

"Ben Hillar," yelled the officer that first morning.

"Here," said Ben as he raised his hand.

Crraaaack went the whip.

The duty officer looked at the list. "Today you will be a loader and from this day forward, unless you are told otherwise. . . . Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," grumbled Ben.

Crraaaack went the whip.

Ben was learning quickly how to stay out of the way of the whip.

The next three days were uneventful with the exception of the gang leaders who were threatening his life if he did not join a gang. Ben ignored them. He knew it was a protection racket, which put more food in the gang leader's mouth. He had seen the same premise in many of the societies throughout the galaxy, and especially some of the societies of Ancient Earth. There were many different social groups, which were formed under one guise or another and proposed to be a necessary or wonderful happening, but in actuality was formed to put more money or wealth into one or a few individual's pockets. Politicians were especially good at it. And even more interesting were the gangsters who made no pretense about it, but actually came right out and said it was a protection racket. Funny that this was considered illegal while it was all right for the politicians to do what they were doing. A loud crack from the whip and a groan from one of the prisoners brought Ben back from his reverie. He looked over in time to see the man fall heavily to the dirt. The man quickly dragged himself up and started working, knowing that if he didn't he would feel another lash. *Many prisoners have been beaten to death*, said Roqford.

That's nice, said Ben in response. He wheeled his cart in the opposite direction, saw a crystal lying in the dirt, and bent over to pick it up.

The man who had uncovered it leaned over and in a low gruff whisper said, "Join a gang or die."

Ben revealed no sign of perturbation, but stood up and tossed the crystal into the cart. He had none of the fear nor trepidation that these gangsters were trying to instill in him. Ben looked him in the eye. "What's your name," he asked.

"Rodde," answered the man still whispering.

"Well, Rodde," said Ben with a demeaning tone, "it makes no sense to me that you were once a brave rebel in the city trying to overthrow a tyrannical self-seeking ruler who has no concern for the welfare of the people, and now here you are a cowardly prisoner who is willing to kill another man for a few food pellets."

"We do what we have to," said Rodde, "in order to survive, so we can get back and break Hurd's neck."

"That's no excuse for killing a fellow prisoner," said Ben in a contemptuous voice.

"You're no fellow prisoner. You're an offworlder."

"You think I don't want to break Hurd's neck as much as you?" Ben growled.

Rodde started to reply, but a huge shadow fell over the two of them as if a mountain had been moved between them and the sun; and then Rodde stiffened suddenly as he was slammed to the ground. A loud crack from the whip reverberated the air. "No slacking," boomed a voice which sounded more like a sonic boom.

Rodde, with blood trickling from a welt across his back, quickly pushed himself from the ground and started swinging his pick in search of crystals.

Ben stood in tense anticipation waiting for his turn. He waited for the whip to come crashing down on his back, bringing excruciating pain, but it didn't come. He slowly pushed his cart away looking for crystals while the realization finally came to him that Og only whipped the crystal pickers.

Another freezing day under the dim summer sun, said Roqford.

Yeah, replied Ben, *if this keeps up I'm going to have a real nice tan*. Ben had gotten used to Roqford unexpectedly intruding into his mental makeup, and Roqford did it quite often. Roqford slept a lot, but when he wasn't sleeping he was talking to Ben. Ben had asked him why he wanted to talk so much. And Roqford had replied that he had asked himself that same question, but when no answer came he realized that it didn't matter. As long as they were comfortable with the chatter, what difference did it make?

And, indeed, the chatter was comfortable as it kept Ben's mind off the idea that he might be spending the rest of his short life in this prison.

Two days after Roqford first entered his mind came an even more pleasant event. Roqford asked Ben, *Isn't it only fair, since I look through your eyess that you should look through mine?*

It was an unassuming question for which Ben knew Roqford awaited an answer. *What?* answered Ben.

There was a little mirth in Roqford's mental voice. *It'sss quite simple*, he replied. *Since you're in my mind, all you have to do isss concentrate on my vision.*

Where are you?

I'm in the warden's office, and right now I'm looking at him.

And all I have to do is concentrate . . . And just like that Ben was looking at something fat and fuzzy. It looked blurry, but it was definitely fat and fuzzy. And then Ben realized what the colors were. He didn't want to say they were distorted, but they were different from the way he perceived them through human eyes, and as he looked at the fuzzy guard next to the office door, he realized that all humans were fuzzy looking. There was a strange colorful light emanating from around the body, which sometimes radiated five or six feet into the air. Later, when Roqford was outside, Ben noticed that even the ground was different. It wasn't a drab greyish-brown color, instead there were varying colors shining with different intensities from different areas. Ben assumed there was significance to this, but he wasn't sure what it was.

After a few practice sessions Ben was able to distinguish the shapes and especially the humans. Even though the warden didn't look like the warden, there were distinguishing colors which differentiated him from other humans and with Roqford's eyes he would recognize the warden anywhere, even in a crowd.

It was later that day Ben wondered about Roqford's nose. If he could see through his eyes, why couldn't he smell through his nose?

Why not? replied Roqford.

And just like that a myriad of smells inundated Ben's perception. Potent, almost overpowering smells which distinguished the warden from the guard from Roqford from the furniture from the walls from the rug from the floor. The smells were exciting and alive and for the first time in his life Ben knew there was a reality that existed beyond the human senses. It was so alive and exciting that Ben could hardly tear himself away. In fact, he quickly learned he could use Roqford's nose even when Roqford was asleep.

Because Ben had to keep a watch on the things around him, especially when he was in the pit, he was unable to use Roqford's vision except for short periods of time. Roqford's smell, however, Ben explored quite frequently, during most of his waking hours.

As he picked up another crystal, he could smell the warden, but a few feet away.

The sun had crept past the edge of the pit and the sergeant of the guard, who sat on a platform thirty feet above the floor of the pit, stood up and blew a whistle. The prisoners stopped whatever job it was they were doing and set their tools on the ground. Suddenly the noise, which continually pounded in Ben's ears, ceased, except for the shuffling sound of the weary prisoners as they made their way to the elevator platform.

At the top of the pit Ben fell into a single file formation with the rest of the prisoners, and they started walking in a disorderly, but linear fashion toward the cells in the maximum-security wing (which was actually the only wing).

They had gotten about half way around the pit when a gruff voice yelled, "Ben Hillar, step out of formation."

What now? wondered Ben. He was tired and wanted to fall face forward into his bunk.

A guard with corporal's stripes on his sleeve walked up and stood in front of him. The man was Ben's height, with the same build except a little more massive through the shoulders and chest. His nose was a bit too large and bent to the left indicating he had been in at least one nose-shattering fight. He had thick lips, and his face supported a black beard and mustache. All in all he was a mean looking son of a bitch.

Ben would have never expected a look of amazement on such a face, but there it was. The man asked, "Are you theeee Ben Hillar?"

"Ever since I was born," replied Ben.

"I mean, are you the Ben Hillar who placed fourth in swording in the Galactic Games?"

Since swording was not a popular sport on Ar, it never occurred to Ben that he might be recognized, especially in the pit, but as he looked at the eager smile creeping through the guard's beard, it seemed his fame might be beneficial. "That's right," he said.

"After I heard your name at roll call this morning I couldn't believe it was you. I went back to the barracks and got my swording magazine with your picture in it. . . . And I'll be damned it's really you."

"Yes," said Ben. "It's me."

And then the guard grimaced. "How the hell did you get in here?" he asked.

"To sum it up succinctly," said Ben, "I was on an archaeological expedition in Newusa and had the misfortune of running into Hurd."

The guard gave him that knowing look. "Yeah, he's a real bastard." He looked around to make sure no one was listening and then started talking a little softer. "Listen, there's a Lieutenant of the Guard called Sharpie. She's a great fan of swording and on numerous occasions she has talked to me about your matches at the

Galactic Games. Damn, she's not going to believe me when I tell her. She's absolutely not going to believe it." He paused in thought, and then said, "But when she does, I think we can help you get through this hellish ordeal. The least we can do is to get you light duty. So, you just stay safe, okay?"

"Sure," said Ben. He was beginning to see a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel.

"By the way, my name is corporeal Jobbe."

"It's good to meet you," said Ben.

"Indeed," said the corporeal. "Now, you go back to your cell, and I'll be getting together with you in a day or two." The guard turned and walked toward the entrance of the cross-over tube.

Chapter Forty-Five

Lieutenant Sharpie looked down the long dining room table at the merrymakers—drinking, eating, singing, talking, and basically making a lot of noise. She reached out with her fork, stabbed another toral steak, and plopped it on her plate. As she cut into it with a knife she looked across the table at her friend and long time lover, Curt, the Captain of the Guard, and winked at him.

He winked back and gave her that look like 'what are we doing after the party?'

She wasn't sure she was in the mood. So she smiled back and took a bite of her toral steak.

She didn't care too much for the warden and didn't know anyone who did, including Curt, Captain of the Guard. Maybe Roqford liked him. The warden was always doting on him, giving him everything he wanted. Even now as Roqford lay in the front left corner of the room there was a platter of toral steaks and potatoes in front of him.

But if Roqford liked the warden there was never any indication of it.

The warden had taken over the prison pit when it first started under the direction of Hurd. And over the years, being naturally paranoid, he was continually reading the records of the prisoners, looking for anything which might indicate that a particular prisoner had the astuteness for escape or for organizing a riot. "He has every room of every building on the compound and even those in the Employee City bugged," Curt had once confided in Sharpie. They were standing in the middle of the prison yard where there were no bugs. "He probably gets his kicks by listening in when we're making love."

The warden's light blond hair was mostly gone except around the ears. He was short at about five-nine and was carrying about two hundred sixty pounds. Around his stomach, which bulged through his body suit, was a wide leather belt with a holster and phasor on the right and a holster and phasor on the left.

Sharpie didn't care if he had all the rooms bugged, but if he was listening in while she was making love, that was disgusting not to mention an invasion of privacy. She didn't think he would do such a thing, especially since he was more interested in the prisoners, but the idea was still revolting.

No, it was a fact. She didn't like the warden.

She picked up the platter of greens and spooned a couple of heapings on her dish. She set the platter on the table, and then held up her glass. A servant rushed over and filled it to the brim with wine. As she took a drink she looked around at the room. She liked the wood look, the long wooden table capable of seating thirty, the wooden floor covered with toral skins, and even the walls made of finished wood slats. On the interior wall hung a painting of the warden and to the other side were large bay windows overlooking the lights from the spaceport in the distance.

Along the sides of the table sat the assistant warden, the other lieutenants, nineteen in all and even a few of the sergeants all dressed in their finest guard uniforms. It was a fact. She did like the warden's parties.

The warden raised his goblet, "Cheers, and to the good life," he said jubilantly.

The officers and the sergeants raised their glasses and echoed the warden's toast. "Cheers," they said and gulped at their imported wine. By the end of the night the wine would have them feeling good; except the Captain, who seldom drank, and Roqford.

The servants, under the direction of Jacob, the head servant, continued to bring in large platters of food, but the warden noticed they were getting low on wine. "More wine!" he yelled. It made him angry when the servants weren't paying attention to their duties.

A moment later a servant rushed in with a large silver platter of silver pitchers, set it on an empty corner of the table, and started pouring wine.

The warden tapped his goblet with his spoon, and as the clear crystal goblet rang in a high-pitched tone, the group became silent.

The warden looked at his group of officers and non-coms and then he said dryly, "Before we can get to the serious business of having fun," he paused and laughed. He thought he had made a pun, and he expected the others to laugh, which some of them did, perhaps not knowing why.

The warden's jowls shook in a lively fashion and then he continued. "As I was saying, we have to discuss some business concerning the mine." He looked at their faces to make sure he had everyone's attention. "Two things, actually." He frowned. "First, as most of you probably already know, we have a very important person being held in a special little cell block built by the Federation. They've locked this special prisoner in a private cell, and they're keeping his identity a secret. Even I don't know who he is. And because of this I don't want any of the prison guards talking to any of the Federation guards outside or inside the little cellblock at any time. The Federation guards will be dining, sleeping, and living in separate quarters. And if you hear any rumors from the prisoners, ignore them. You all know how exaggerated rumors can be." The warden picked up his goblet and drained its contents.

He waited a moment in expectance. Finally, he turned and gave Jacob, the servant who was supposed to be in charge of the other servants, a baleful glare.

Jacob quickly motioned to the servant with the wine pitcher. It was obvious to Sharpie that Jacob was most appalled by the incident, and she was certain Jacob would give Hasmaw a severe reprimand when the dinner was done.

But the warden wasn't unhappy for long. As soon as his goblet was filled he smiled and said with an air of authority, "Captain, I don't like keeping this person in my prison, but since I have no choice, I want to make sure nothing goes wrong. And therefore, Captain, I want you to continue to oversee this personally. You will make sure there is no contact between the prison guards and the Federation guards." He paused with a questioning look. "Understand?"

Almost as though muttering to himself, the Captain answered, "yes, sir."

"Good," said the warden. He smiled, and then frowned as he thought of the next topic. "Secondly, and I'm sure you've all noticed, there are two G15 destroyers sitting on the pad at the spaceport." Now he was getting angry. "You've probably figured out by now that they are here to protect our very important prisoner. The higher-ups have made it clear to me that they want no harm to come to him." The warden stuffed steak into his mouth.

Curt looked up from his plate. "Since those are Federation ships, and he's a Federation prisoner, why don't they move him to the Federation prison planet?"

The warden shook his head back and forth with his jowls flopping from side to side like a bulldog in rage. His mouth was full of toral steak, and his voice was barely audible as he said with a look of consternation, "I don't know." He gulped down his food and took a slug of wine from his goblet. "Nevertheless, he's here, and so are the destroyers, so let's make sure everything goes smoothly."

"As smooth as a cat's ass," said Curt.

Rogford opened his eyes and looked up at him. The other Lieutenants and the two Sergeants started laughing. Even Sharpie let out a chuckle.

The warden waved an impatient hand. The fact that his goblet was in it and he slopped wine on the table didn't bother him. "Captain, I want our computer techs to put lock-in instructions on those two destroyers. If there's any trouble I want our phasers to take them out."

Sharpie found the Warden's ignorance amusing. She was tempted to laugh, but didn't, for one does not laugh at the warden. "Federation destroyers carry a sonic bomb arsenal," she said. "If they decide, for any reason, to take over this prison, it would be wise not to stand in their way. Besides, do you want to take on the Federation?"

The warden scowled and reddened slightly.

Sharpie thought, *He doesn't like being corrected, but, at the same time, he's appalled to find out that those destroyers were carrying sonic bombs.*

"I know that," he shouted. "I just want to be ready for any unexpected occurrence. See to it first thing in the morning."

Sharpie looked at the Captain, and when she caught his eye she raised an eyebrow. She knew the warden was covering his ignorance and being stupid in the process.

She looked back at the warden and laughed. "Let's hope those destroyers never have a reason to become bad

little destroyers," she said in her mirth.

The warden shook a chubby little finger at her. "That's right," he chortled and then repeating himself, because he knew it was so successful the first time, he said, "And now to the serious business of having fun."

Chapter Forty-six

One by one and two by two the guests had finally gotten up and gone back to their barracks. The warden had gone to bed. The dishes had been cleared and washed, and everything put back in order. Finally, Hasmau was thoroughly reprimanded for his lack of attention during the party.

Now, Jacob, standing in front of the full-length mirror in his bedroom, stepped into a karate stance. It was the first time in more than three years. He remembered the thrill of the match, and he knew he was good at it. His instructor had told him so. He turned slightly sideways and quickly kicked his leg out and back performing a sidekick. He jumped and turned counterclockwise in the air with his foot kicking out and back before he hit the ground, performing the roundhouse.

He loved the sport of karate in spite of the fact that throughout most of the Galaxy situ had taken over where karate left off, making it almost obsolete. On Jacob's home planet, Altos, situ was the hand-to-hand combat of choice, but karate was still practiced. There were karate clubs here and there. There were a few tournaments. There were even championship matches with the winner being highly acclaimed and looked up to.

At the age of seven he became excited when he and his friends were talking about it in school. He started hanging out with a neighbor two doors down—an older man, Saul, who had once been a karate champion. Saul took him under his tutelage and taught him everything he knew. By the time Jacob was thirteen Saul told him he had the fastest movements and kicks he had ever seen.

Still standing in front of the mirror Jacob's left thigh raised parallel to the ground. His foot shot out and snapped back performing the front kick. He was just as fast with either foot. He thought back and remembered his father, Jonah, chastising him when he found out Jacob had become involved in the sport. "Why can't you be like your older brother, Edward," he would say. "Now there's a boy who's going to make something of himself. There's a boy who's going to follow in family tradition and be great at it."

And his brother Edward was worse than his father. "What are you? A stupid namsey pansy. You wanna be a sissy. You'll be a dead sissy when a situ man breaks you over his knee. And then your master will be dead too. And you will have disgraced our family name."

Jacob couldn't understand why everything had to be exactly as tradition dictated. Just because his grandfather used situ—did he have to do the same? His father thought so.

Jacob had come from a long line of menservants—as far back as the family tree extended, for at least a hundred generations. And it was his father's wish,—no, not a wish, a demand that his two sons follow in the family tradition.

And so he would, but was he going to quit karate? No. After several confrontations with his father, Jacob started sneaking to practice and tournaments. He would use every spare moment of his time at school doing his homework, and after school sneak off to his karate classes. Later, he would tell his parents he was at the library doing his homework.

By the time he was eighteen he was considered one of the best in his hometown, population of two million, but he never participated in any championship matches because of the chance his father might find out.

Jacob looked into the mirror and did a few more kicks and then several mock punches and a judo throw. *I've still got it*, he thought as he watched his moves in reflected harmony.

He remembered when his father found out he was still participating karate. He was a senior in college studying to follow in his father's footsteps as a manservant. He was taking a karate class, which, of course, he told no one. But his father came to school one day to tell him of a position opening up for a manservant at a very wealthy estate. He could still see the shock on his father's face when he walked through the door and saw his son in a karate stance—ready to match with an opponent.

They got into it right then, yelling and screaming at each other. It appeared to the spectators that they soon might be watching a real karate match. But the two of them finally stopped yelling and just glared at each other—father and son in a heated dispute.

The conflict was never resolved and that was the last time he had ever spoken to his father. After graduation

he decided to go off planet to get as far away from his problems as possible, which meant he had to get away from his father's chastisement and his degrading comments on his ability to be a superior manservant. He knew he was running away, and later he found out that there is truth in the statement that you can never run away from your problems. There will always be new ones. You have to learn how to deal with them. You have to learn that happiness is a state of mind and that you can have it when ever you want it. You will always have problems. But you need to confront them. Resolve them if you can. Keep yourself in a good state of mind. And keep on kicking.

Now he was sorry he hadn't made up with his father and taken that job. Many were the times when he thought he could have said, "Look father, I have learned Situ even as you asked. Karate is just an extracurricular activity which may help me if ever I need to defend my master."

They could have made up and surely his father could have gotten him this greatly sought after and prestigious job, which would have enhanced the family reputation. But no, he had to go running away, slinking off into space, to some obscure little planet by the name of Ar, simply because he was angry with his father and not man enough nor wise enough to stand up to this small problem, this small bump in the road of life.

Instead, when he came across the ad that the warden had run looking for a manservant, Jacob immediately put in an application, and ironically enough, since there were many applicants, it was his experience in karate that got him the job. He was the only one who put 'Will travel. Trained in hat, cane, phasor, karate, and situ' on his applications and for some reason it greatly pleased the warden. (Now he knew why. The warden was continually afraid for his life.)

He never thought he would be serving a man, actually a slob, whom he detested as much as this one. Fortunately, he had less than one galactic year left on his contract and then he was going to go home and apologize. He missed his mother, father, and brother.

But until then he would do the best job he could, and he knew that meant protecting the warden's life, even dying for him if he had to.

[Chapter Forty-seven](#)

It was the end of the fifth day, grueling and agonizing. Ben was once again filing slowly along in a single file formation around the pit and toward the cellblock with the rest of the prisoners. He had been working hard everyday, not as hard as the pickers, but hard enough to bring a continual sweat to his brow throughout the freezing fourteen-hour work shift. The loading, pushing the cart, and unloading the crystals at the bottom of the pit was tiring and his muscles had become sore. But it wasn't the work that caused him to feel tired and weak. In fact, he knew, as an athlete, that this kind of work would firm him up and put him in top condition for any athletic event. No, it wasn't the work. It was the lack of food. He was actually burning more calories than he was consuming with the ten measly food pellets they gave him everyday.

Shuffling along, he started to step over a rock, but instead kicked it out of the way at the last second. As he watched it roll toward the prison wall he noticed out of the corner of his eye two guards near the front gate. As he continued to watch, they walked through the lock and made their way toward the prisoners.

When the guards were close enough, one of them called out, "Ben Hillar, step out of formation."

Ben walked out of the ragged line of prisoners and came to a stop. It was the same corporeal who had talked to him two days ago, and with him was a woman with Lieutenant's stripes on her sleeve.

"Hello Ben," said the corporeal quietly. "This is Sharpie."

She looked closely at Ben's face. "Jobbe said you were a prisoner, but I didn't believe it—not until now." She paused. "It is you, isn't it?"

Ben started to say something sarcastic, but thought better of it and said, "If you mean am I Ben Hillar the fourth sword of the Galactic Games, then yes, it's me."

Sharpie whistled softly under her breath and then asked, "How did you get thrown into this rat hole? And don't tell me you were in the wrong place at the wrong time. I want a few more details."

Ben shrugged in obvious frustration and then said, "I came to Ar with the Galaef on an archaeological expedition. We . . ."

Sharpie's eyes started blinking rapidly. "The Galaef of the Galactic Federation?" she asked in shocked amazement.

"Yeah, and if you think that's interesting, then the rest of story is going to bedazzle your brain."

Sharpie didn't comment, except with a look of wonder, so Ben continued. "We found an ancient computer complex beneath the park in Newusa. Without having done the dating I can only guess it was built before the Nuclear Holocaust on Earth, which means it's probably somewhere in the neighborhood of seven hundred years old. Because of the myths surrounding the Aeolian Master I had theorized and written a paper that there would be some such complex somewhere on Ar and that in this complex we would find a man in suspended animation. Naturally, because of our inability to suspend a person more than forty years, I assumed this man would be dead."

"Naturally," said Sharpie.

"As it turned out, we did find a man in a suspended animation chamber, but he wasn't dead, and the time indicator on the readout was more than six hundred years."

"Damn!" exclaimed Jobbe.

Sharpie punched Jobbe's huge shoulder with her doubled up fist.

Jobbe gave her a startled look and then a look of recollection.

Sharpie said, "You know how I feel about swearing."

Jobbe frowned, "Sorry sir. It just sort of slipped out."

Sharpie looked at Ben. "Continue," she ordered.

"It is undoubtedly one of the greatest archaeological discoveries ever made, and there is enough work to keep fifty archaeologists and other scientists busy for the next five years. And finding a man who is still alive after all that time goes beyond incredible," Ben paused. He knew he couldn't stay in the cold night air much longer. "But I digress," he said. "The fact is, all the while, and unbeknownst to me and the Galaef, Thorne, the Galaef's second in command was planning to depose his throne and take over the Galactic Empire. And six days ago he did just that. In Hurd's office he made his move by dispatching the Galaef's personal bodyguards and stunning the Galaef.

"Now, this is where it turns out I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Since I was present when Thorne made his move, and since Hurd didn't like me because I refused to write a slanted history about his reign in Newusa, he decided to get rid of me, so first it was the run, and now it's prison, along with the Galaef."

"It can't be," said Jobbe.

"No one can depose the Galaef," said Sharpie almost in the form of a question.

"That's what we're taught, but Thorne has found a way."

Sharpie thought for a moment. "I knew we had a VIP prisoner in confinement, but I would have never guessed it was the Galaef."

"Yeah, and Em's here, too." The blank look on Sharpie's face prompted him to add, "That's what we call the man we found in the suspended animation chamber."

"By the Zorgs," said Jobbe.

"So he's here?" asked Sharpie.

"Yeah, he's the tall silent picker. He's so silent, you'll never hear him say anything. I think he never fully recovered from the extended sleep. If only we could have gotten him into a laboratory with modern medical equipment, we might have been able to bring him back. But now I feel it may be too late."

Sharpie wasn't referring to Em. "The Galaef is here?" she asked again. There was no doubt that Ben had astounded her. "Why is he still alive?"

"From what I heard between Thorne and Hurd there seems to be a problem with his plan. He needs to keep the Galaef alive until he can correct it."

Sharpie looked out into space for a moment and then shook her head bringing her back from the world of speculation. "If this man takes over, it could become another rotten dictatorship like Hurd's, except on a much larger scale. I'm going to have to give some thought to everything you've told us, but meanwhile you hang in there. I'm going to talk to the Captain, and we'll get you on light duty with a hot meal everyday."

She and Jobbe turned and walked away.

Ben started toward the open door on the near end of the cellblock. The guard who had waited while Sharpie talked to him had held the door open and was now waving Ben to hurry. Ben picked up his pace a little and when he passed through the doorway he started down the long cement corridor toward the metal staircase.

Just as he reached the top step he heard that familiar mental click which was becoming more frequent as of late. *Hello Roqford*, said Ben before Roqford could say anything.

Hello Ben. I couldn't help overhearing your conversation with Sharpie, and I was just wondering, if a

person or personsss were to help the Galaef escape and regain his throne would he give that someone or thossse someoness a Full Pardon?

I've never thought about it, said Ben, but now that you ask, I'm sure he would.

Does that mean he might or that he definitely would?

For you, Roqford, I guarantee he would.

Thank you, said Roqford, and he clicked off.

Chapter Forty-Eight

The officer's dining common was quite elegant with long, red draperies on the windows, its booths surrounded on the insides by leather seats, carpet on the floor, polished wood walls with pictures hanging on them, a half wall to the right separating the plush bar from the dining area, with mirrors hung in strategic locations making the room look larger than it was, which was unnecessary considering the room was large enough to hold one hundred and fifty people comfortably with no one having to stand.

As sharpie stepped through the doorway and into the officer's dining common she thought of the luxury and the good food, which the officers had as compared to the hard life and little food of the prisoners. The idea of it was appalling. Sharpie started across the floor feeling the soft Ragg carpet under her feet and wondering how long she could live the life of a prisoner.

She saw Curt sitting in the raised Captain's section—"for the Captain and his guests only." The waiters were scurrying back and forth, some clearing away the dirty dishes, while others were delivering dessert.

Her enlightening, but depressing talk with Ben made her late for dinner, but considering the circumstances, whether she ate or not had little importance. After all, she and everyone in this prison could be caught between two sides of a brutal war.

Curt had his back to her, but from the distance she knew it was him because he was the only one in the section.

Laskey, a small wiry waiter, was passing her as he hurried toward the kitchen. "The Captain's in his usual seat, Lieutenant Sharpie," he said.

"Thanks, Laskey. How's the food tonight?"

"As scrumptious as always," he answered over his shoulder.

Sharpie reached into her vest pocket and took out the small, disc-thin voice recorder, which she had used to record the conversation between her and Ben. She always recorded conversations whenever she believed it might be important to reproduce them later. In this case, she might be able to help Ben out of his predicament. She unplugged it and put the small microphone back in her pocket.

What was it they called her in officer's candidate school? Oh yes, Walkie Talkie—the legs with the recorder. She always recorded the lectures given by the professors in class, and sometimes she recorded conversations with other students. Sometimes they didn't like it. Hal had been one such student/officer to be. Of course, she could understand his concern since he had confided in her that he sometimes liked to dress up in a woman's uniform, put large fruit where the breasts were supposed to be, and parade around in front of a mirror. For some reason he believed if this information got out it wouldn't be good for his psychological profile.

When he found out that she liked to record conversations with friends, he confronted her about it, and she confessed to having recorded one of their talks. She had no problem erasing the disc and then giving it to him to do with as he pleased. After all, as she told him, she wasn't trying to get anything on him. She was just recording a conversation with a friend. Needless to say he didn't talk to her much after that.

After all these years she was still recording conversations, but this time it was of a serious nature, a matter of the highest order. The Galaef of the Galactic Empire was being held prisoner in their prison.

She paused at the bottom of the steps wondering if Curt would believe it. She thought not, but if he did, was there anything they could do about it? After all, they had been thrown into a game way over their heads. What did they know about Galactic politics? And if they got involved on the wrong side, they might end up in the pits, or maybe worse.

For the two years she had been working as a guard in the pits, she had seen what it was like, men and women being starved to death while doing slave labor. It was cruel and inhumane, to say the least. In a way, she was rooting for the rebels. She didn't know how it would affect her life and her career, but something had to be

done to change the political structure and to stop the cruelty being inflicted on these people.

She walked up the three steps and soundlessly made her way to the back of the Captain's chair, in which he was sitting. She leaned over and placed her arms around his neck and whispered in his ear, "I have information of the utmost importance."

He turned his head over his shoulder and looked at her from the corner of his eye. "Where have you been?" he asked.

I do love this man, she thought. She kissed him on the cheek, pulled up a chair next to him, and sat down. She leaned forward with her mouth next to his ear, and again whispered. "I've been with a prisoner who told a most frightening story." She pulled an earplug out of her pocket and stuck it in his ear. No one would hear the recording except him. "I want you to listen to this," she said. She placed the recorder on the table and turned it on.

"Walkie Talkie," he said under his breath, which brought a frown to Sharpie's face.

"That's right," she answered, "but this time you better listen carefully."

She sat with her arms folded on top of the table and watched as Curt listened to the tape. A year and a half ago she had fallen for this guy—a strong man with a stern and commanding air of respect. When it came to wooing her he was the typical male, relentless until he got what he wanted, and then he became aloof, showing her that he loved her from time to time, but not as much as she would like. It had happened to her before with another man, and she had seen it happen to her mother, her sister, and a couple of her girlfriends. It was as if men just didn't understand the female psyche or maybe they didn't want to understand. She remembered her grandmother once saying that the only man she ever met who wasn't a son-of-a-bitch turned out to be a dirty bastard. In spite of the swearing, Sharpie found there was more truth to this saying than she would like to admit. Nevertheless, she felt she had found a good man in Curt.

She saw Laskey walking around one of the tables straightening the centerpiece, which reminded her she hadn't eaten dinner. She decided to eat while she was waiting for Curt to finish listening to the tape, so she waved Laskey over. "I'm not real hungry tonight," she said. "Just bring me the soup of the day and a salad."

"Very good, Lieutenant," he said and hurried away.

A few minutes later Sharpie could tell Curt had finished listening to the tape because he pushed the repeat button on the recorder. He didn't show a reaction, but whatever it was, he wanted to listen again.

Just as he finished listening to it a second time Laskey returned and placed a steaming bowl of soup in front of Sharpie with a salad to the side.

Curt waited for Laskey to leave and then took the earpiece out of his ear and said, "This is bullshit. This . . ."

Sharpie raised her hand and put the spoon down. She leaned over and whispered in his ear. "Aside from the nasty language, don't you think we should take this conversation outside?"

Curt pondered for a moment. "Yeah, you're right."

She only had a few spoonfuls of soup and a couple of bites of salad, and then they left the officer's mess, and in the cool night they walked toward the landing pad.

Curt, attempting to sound indifferent, said, "Now, as I was saying, this is a . . . you know what, story. You've come across a prisoner who looks like a famous swordsman, and he's got you believing the most ridiculously absurd story I've ever heard."

"He's not a look-alike. He's the real thing," said Sharpie. Knowing Curt as well as she did, she had been afraid he wasn't going to believe it. He was one of those people who was always skeptical, and even when you put the proof in front of his face, half the time, he still didn't believe it. "I've followed this man's life-story since the time he was discovered as a child prodigy in swording and took the championship of his home planet at the age of nineteen. Aside from his name and his looks being the same, his mannerisms, his speech, and his characteristics are all the same. Even the way he gestures with his hands when he's talking. I have no doubt that this is Professor Ben Hillar, the fourth swordsman of the Galaxy."

Curt stopped walking and looked her in the eye. "I don't know how you can be so positive when you've never met this Ben Hillar."

"Are you doubting my intelligence?" she asked with a scowl.

"Not at all. I just don't see how anyone could be so positive in a situation like this."

"I don't know how I can prove it," said Sharpie as she looked off into space trying to consider all the possibilities.

"Forget that," said Curt. "Let's consider for a moment, even if he was 'the' Ben Hillar, why would the Galaeaf of the Galactic Empire be on Ar with him? And that six hundred year old man . . . come on, - completely

absurd and you know it."

"Don't tell me what I know," her eyes flashed angrily. "I'll tell you. And I'm telling you this man is Ben Hillar."

"Why are you getting mad? I'm just telling you I don't believe this man is Ben Hillar."

Sharpie thought for a moment and then said, "And if I could convince you he is 'the' Ben Hillar . . . ?" She was angry on the outside, but dismayed on the inside. As well as she knew Curt she would have never imagined he would be this unreasonable—not even willing to concede the possibility that some of it might be true.

"If I thought he was the real thing, I'd still have doubts about his story."

"If he was the real thing, then he would have nothing to gain by making up these stories."

"I don't believe that's true. There could be any number of reasons he was making up these stories."

"Maybe," said Sharpie, "but you're forgetting one thing." She paused knowing that he would wait for her to finish. She said, "We have a VIP prisoner who, for some reason unbeknownst to us, is unidentified."

"No, I thought of that," said Curt. "I just figured it's a coincidence."

"A very timely coincidence," answered Sharpie. "Actually, too timely for my taste."

When Curt didn't say anything for a long time she knew she had him thinking. "I have just conceived a plan," she said, "which will help us to determine the truth, or, at least part of it."

Curt let out a small sigh of relief. "Thank God," he said and then he hurried to add. "And I don't mean that in an irreverent way."

Sharpie ignored his comment. "Next week the warden's going to be gone for five days. We'll set up a swording match while he's away, between . . ."

"Between you and this supposed Ben Hillar?"

"No," retorted Sharpie. "I would never embarrass myself by going up against Ben Hillar, but Talman Hisser, my swording instructor, you know, the Lieutenant Commander of Hurd's police force, is a very good sword. In fact, he came in first two years ago in one of the Tarmorian tournaments."

"And what will we tell the warden when he returns? . . . You know he'll find out."

"We'll just tell him we wanted a little amusement. You know he'll understand that. And, in fact, he might ask us to do it again, so he can watch."

Curt drummed his fingers on the side of his phasor handgrip, a habit that annoyed Sharpie. "Yeah," he said, "You're right." He stopped drumming his fingers and pointed at her. "Okay, let's consider the worst case scenario. Let's say he is the Ben Hillar and let's say he's telling the truth about the Galaef, then the question becomes . . . what the hell can we do about it?"

"You don't have to swear," said Sharpie in a disappointed tone.

After a look of consternation crossed his face, Curt said, "Yeah, sorry."

"And I don't know what we can do about it. I think we'll have to give it a lot of thought, and perhaps confide in some key personnel."

"And another thing—what about Talman? Do you think it's a good idea to get one of Hurd's police officers involved in this?"

"Talman won't be a problem," answered Sharpie. "During all the practice matches I've had with him he has never said anything nice about Hurd. He has never openly discredited Hurd, but he has intimated it. If he suspects anything, I know he'll keep it to himself."

"Okay," said Curt almost reluctantly. "Let's do it." He paused and then added, "And now let's go back to our apartments and get out of this cold." He paused, "Or maybe we could go to your apartment."

They turned and started back. Sharpie wasn't feeling too romantic at the moment, but maybe after a couple of drinks. "There's just one more thing," she added. "I want to get Professor Hillar on light duty and one hot meal a day."

"Do I hint a bribe in this conversation?"

"No, but it might help get me in the mood."

"Well then, the answer is 'yes,' but you know the answer would have been 'yes' even if you had said 'no.'"

"Yes, I do," she said. "But my answer would have been 'yes' even if yours had been 'no.'"

Curt laughed. "This conversation is starting to confuse me," he said.

Sharpie smiled.

Chapter Forty-Nine

It was Viella's fifth day in the Jamarl Plains prison pit.

She bent over the emaciated prisoner lying in the hospital bed and wrapped the cuff around his extremely thin arm—it was so thin there was almost too much of an overlap, but she managed to position the cuff and pump it up while positioning the bell-end of the stethoscope. She finished taking his blood pressure, wrote down the findings on a chart, and set it on a table at the end of his bed.

JoJo's hanging in there, she thought. He just might make it.

Her first day in this hell hole she had learned the "program"—everything she needed to know to conform to the rules in order to stay alive. They got her up at six thirty, a half hour before sunrise. At that time she performed all her morning necessities, and then she was marched out of the women's cellblock and on to the pavement in the prisoner's courtyard. Circles, about two and a half feet in diameter, were painted on the hard black surface—all in neat little rows of thirty and extending ten deep. In each circle was a number starting with 1 in the first circle and ending with 300 in the last.

Earlier, in the women's cellblock, the matron had informed Viella that her number was "102." The warden liked to keep things neat and orderly, so each new prisoner was given the largest remaining number at the end of the already established number of prisoners. "Your number will most likely change every week," said the Matron. "Whenever a prisoner dies, you move down a number."

As she stepped into the circle with the "102" painted in the center of it she noticed that Em, the man or android who had saved her life, was standing next to her on "103."

The guard began taking roll. He shouted out the names in order, sometimes giving special instructions to the man or woman whose name he called. He finally got to Ben Hillar who was on Viella's left in circle "101."

Ben raised his hand and said, "Here."

The guard told him he would be a loader, whatever that meant, until further notice. "Viella Tybo," he called. "Here," she said and raised her hand.

"You will be assigned to the prison hospital until otherwise notified." He paused then yelled out, "Em" He looked at the sheet again as if puzzled and then again he called out, "Em."

Em looked straight ahead and remained silent, lost in a world beyond.

"Em," called the guard again.

But there was no answer, as Em remained silent.

And suddenly the man who had been cracking the whip, the largest man Viella had ever seen, even larger than Everette the mountain man, with anger sweeping over his face, started through the ranks of prisoners. A sea of human flesh parted before him hurrying to get out of his way as he raised his whip into the air.

Viella quickly grabbed Em's left arm with both of her hands and pushed Em's hand into the air while at the same time yelling, "here."

The guard looked down the ranks and then said, "It's okay, Og." He had been informed of Em's silence. And Og turned around and walked back as the prisoners filed back into their circles.

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Later that morning Dr. Struem, the prison hospital's medical doctor (who was also a prisoner), instructed Viella on the duties, which included taking the vital signs of the patients every hour on the hour, and keeping the rooms and the equipment spotlessly clean. "When these chores are completed you can hang out in the waiting room and read magazines or watch the viewer or whatever as long as you don't leave the building until the shift is finished. At that time you will return to the women's cell block."

He introduced her to Maley, another female nurse, and told her that Maley would be her supervisor. He then left the room, and Maley proceeded to show her how to perform the duties.

Later, during the afternoon of her first day, the warden, with Maley right behind him, walked through the door.

The roll of his stomach hung over his belt and jiggled as he stepped through the doorway. "Well, what have we here?" he asked in a rhetorical tone. "A new nurse to attend to our unhealthy patients."

Maley stepped beside him as if protecting her territory.

Viella noticed immediately, but didn't say anything because she was smart enough to keep her mouth shut.

The warden walked over to the bunk next to Viella and leaned against it. He was huffing and puffing as if he had just run a mile. "What is your name, darlin'?" he asked.

He knows my name, she thought. So, why the games? Maybe just trying to make conversation. "Viella," she said rather tonelessly.

"Viella, what a wonderful name. And a nice looking woman, too, I might add."

She didn't like him ogling her, but since there was nothing she could do, she kept wiping down the bed frame with disinfectant.

The warden smacked his lips a couple of times and then said, "Thursday night I have a meeting with my officers, but Friday night I have nothing to do. . . . Maybe we could have dinner together at my house."

Dinner at his house was the last place she would ever want to . . . And then the helplessness of her situation struck home. She grimaced and almost burst into tears as she realized that if he had a mind to rape her, she would be powerless to stop him.

The warden watched as a look of horror swept across her face. He took great joy in her weakness and a large grin encompassed his face. "Yes," he said. "I will write it in my date book: Friday night Viella will have dinner with me at my house."

She turned her back to him and continued wiping down the bed frame. Her face turned white, and her hands began to shake.

Yes," said the warden. "We will have great fun." He turned to leave. "Now you take good care of her, Maley," he said. And he walked out the door.

As the door slid shut Maley screamed at Viella. "You clean every bed in this room and then you mop the floor!"

From that moment on Maley was openly hateful and bitter toward Viella.

o o o o o

On the fourth day (the day before she was to have dinner with the warden) Viella had a mop in her hand and was cleaning the floor near one of the beds in the Intensive Care Unit.

Maley had been inspecting the room, keeping a close watch on Viella. She walked over to a bedpan next to JoJo's bed and looked in it. "Get over here and empty this bedpan," she shrieked. The hate and anger were apparent in her voice.

Viella leaned the mop against the wall and started toward JoJo's bed when she heard a noise in the doorway. She looked behind her in time to see her father step into the room.

"Daddy," she said in a surprised tone.

"Just a moment," said Juez calmly. He walked toward Maley. "If you ever speak to my daughter like that again," his voice was rising in pitch and fervor until he was finally screaming, "you'll be in the pit within the hour!" He paused looking down at the woman who began to shrink away from him. "Do you understand?" he yelled.

"Yes," she stammered in a frightened voice. "Yes," she stammered again.

Juez started speaking a little lower and calmer, but the anger was still there and with clenched teeth he said, "And not only that, but you are now going to be her bodyguard, watching out for her, every moment of the day, because if anything happens to her, if she gets the slightest scratch on her hand, your life won't be worth two cents. And believe me, I have the power to bring you down hard—all the way down to your doom."

Maley started to shake uncontrollably as a visible line of sweat formed across her forehead. She was too frightened to speak.

So, Juez asked, "Do you believe me when I say I have the power to bring you down?"

"Yes," she stammered.

"Now get the hell out of here so I can visit with my daughter. And on your way take that bedpan with you."

Maley backed slowly away from Juez, and then turned and stumbled toward the bedpan. She grabbed it, slopping some urine on the floor, turned and fled from the room.

Viella stood in astonishment. She had never seen her father this angry. But when he held his arms out, she broke through her amazement and rushed toward him, falling into his open arms.

He held her and patted her on the head. "Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yes," she said in a tearful voice.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," she said and this time she couldn't help it. She began to cry in half hidden whimpers trying to keep it back.

"It's okay," he said, and he continued to hold her in a hug with both arms wrapped around her in a gentle and comforting manner.

When the whimpers finally subsided, and she had calmed herself, except for the occasional uncontrollable sob, she asked, "Did I do wrong?" sob.

"Only by getting caught, child," he answered.

And then, thinking about getting caught, she suddenly remembered her brother. "Did Sam get caught," she asked.

"Yes, he did."

"But I haven't seen him since I got here."

In a rather pleasant voice Juez said, "He chose the run."

"Oh my God," wailed Viella.

But before she could break out in tears again Juez quickly added, "But he got away."

Viella broke his hold and stepped back. "He got away?"

"Yes, he and three other runners actually made it to the final zone and just when it looked really bad for them a couple of rebels dropped ropes from the girders above, and they managed to escape."

Viella sighed with relief. "Sounds like Sam," she said. "When this is all over he'll probably write a book and become the richest man in Newusa."

Juez chuckled, "Well maybe not the richest, but I'm sure he'll do alright." Juez paused and sat down on a bed. "But speaking of alright, my main concern right now is you. How are you doing?"

"I'm doing okay," she said in a subdued voice. She hesitated a moment and then she added, "except for one thing."

Juez' eyebrows furrowed and he became intent on her words. "Except for what thing?"

"The warden," she said, and her face showed she was one word away from crying again.

"The warden?" asked Juez

Viella started out with, "He . . .," but broke out in great sobs and Juez had to wait for several minutes before she calmed down enough to continue. "He made advances on me, and he says I have to have dinner with him tomorrow night at his house."

Juez remained calm on the outside giving the pretense of composure, but Viella knew he was seething on the inside. "That's an easy problem to solve," he said. "I'll take care of it before I leave."

Viella nodded, knowing he would.

They talked awhile longer, and then she walked with him to the front door, which exited from the waiting room. She watched as he left.

Chapter Fifty

It was noon of the seventh day when Ben stepped into his numbered circle, '101,' and came to a silent stance. Most of the other prisoners continued to talk and mill around as the excitement swept through their ranks. And though a hot meal did excite him, he did not feel conversational considering he was here under false charges.

The front lock opened and the guard who acted as roll-caller stepped through the doorway. Og was behind him and had to crouch to get through. He turn to one side to keep his broad shoulders from jamming on the sides. It must have been quite irritating to live on a planet of small people. As soon as he was in the compound he cracked his whip to remind the prisoners the most important reason for being quiet in formation.

Everyone came to an erect stance and remained very still.

The guard started the roll call and after what seemed like an eternity he came to Em's name. Viella grabbed his arm and raised his hand while shouting, "Here."

The guard looked down the rank to make sure it was Em's hand and then made a mark on his sheet. Finally, he yelled out, "Samsung," at which time Samsung raised his hand. "Okay," yelled the roll caller, "fall into single file by the number."

Ben fell in behind Keegan as he and the other prisoners formed a single file. On command they marched to the prison cafeteria, where, one by one they started through the food line.

Ben looked down as the food servers slopped food into the neat little compartments formed by the ridges in the metal tray. His stomach started to growl in anticipation as he looked at the food—two kinds of vegetables, a stew with meat—probably toral, and a yellow, creamy looking desert—not the best meal he had ever seen, but one he wasn't about to miss.

With his tray full, and steam rising from the stew, he started down the middle aisle looking for a seat, but not wanting to wait that long he popped one of the little cubes of meat from the stew into his mouth. He saw some tables at the back of the hall and stepped up his pace.

Shortly, he passed Tillo and Sweyn who were sitting next to the aisle. They were mountain men who had been caught in a raid during rebel exercises in one of the underground buildings. These two men were huge in physical stature, mean in actions, and ugly in facial features. They were so mean that it surprised Ben they would join a gang—but they had. During the short time that he had been in prison they had become friendly toward him. Maybe it had something to do with his refusal to join a gang. He didn't know, but it was always good to have friends in unfriendly places.

I have to get out of this prison and help put a stop to Hurd's reign of terror, he thought as he approached the bench. As an archaeologist it was his job to write the history of his discovery and to remain an objective observer of any civilization he may come in contact with. But now, it was personal. He no longer wanted to write the history. He wanted to create some of it by getting a hold of Hurd in a dark place. Seven days ago, this man of invidious character had sentenced him to death, first in the run, and now in the crystal pits of Ar.

When he first started working in the pit it looked like death would be coming his way in a short period of time, but because of his fame as a swordsman a ray of hope appeared on the horizon. Yesterday, for the second time, Sharpie pulled him from the ranks, and gave him some news worth hearing. Four nights hence, she had arranged a swording match between him and a man from Newusa. Exactly why, she didn't say. He assumed it would give the officers some entertainment, and, in exchange, she would be able to do him some favors. She had already arranged for him to be on light duty, and he would get a hot meal everyday. He would also have his own private cell.

Somehow this didn't seem like enough. Oh sure, he could survive under these conditions, but how long would he be in here—ten, fifteen years? Maybe longer if the rebels were unsuccessful in overthrowing the Hurd regime. It could last his whole lifetime, which meant he had to escape.

With Sharpie's help, he thought, escape was a distinct possibility. But what if she refused to help him? In that case, he might get Roqford to help him.

He saw an empty seat and started toward it, but just then one of the prisoners stood up from a table and stepped in front of him. Another man quickly joined in. Ben looked them over—two of the uglier and meaner looking rebels in the prison—not quite as ugly and mean looking as Tillo and Sweyn. As the men sneered at him, unbeknownst to Ben another one came up from behind.

In the form of a question, the ugliest of the pair said, "You must be Ben Hillar?"

"That's right, and you?"

"Me? Why my name's Mensk and this here," he pointed to the man on his right, "is Josef."

"Nice to meet you. Now, if you'll get out of my way, I would like to eat this while it's still hot."

"Actually," replied Mensk, "that's what we're here to talk about. Rodde sends a message. He says he likes your spunk, so he's going to give you two more days to join a gang, but the price of his generosity is the food on your tray. Hand it over and no one gets hurt."

"You know," said Ben, "if this conversation is going to take much longer, I can eat just as easily standing as I can sitting." And with that Ben grabbed a handful of the stew and stuffed it in his mouth. Josef doubled his hand into a fist and raised his arm. But Mensk was quick to intervene. He pushed the other man's arm down. "Just a moment, Josef," he said calmly. "Watch and learn."

He slipped a five-inch metal blade out from under his sleeve. "Mr. Hillar, if you don't hand that tray over right now, I'm going to have to hurt you in spite of Rodde's feelings for you."

Now I get a peek at the infamous shive, thought Ben, and then as he swallowed he said, "It doesn't have to happen this way. We should be bonding together to find a way out of this rat hole, instead of fighting each other."

"We're not fighting each other Mr. Hillar. We have a set of rules that everyone follows and as it turns out, you're the only one who's fighting, refusing to conform to the standards set by our leaders."

"Oh, you mean like the standards set by Hurd."

Mensk didn't like Ben's comment and his hand tightened around the handle of the shive. "Hand it over,"

growled Mensk.

"Just a moment," said Ben as he calmly grabbed another handful of stew and stuffed it into his mouth.

Mensk drew back his hand holding the shive.

Ben knew that with his athleticism and his training in combat, taking care of these two thugs would be no problem. He moved his feet into the proper stance taking into consideration the position of each man and which man he would have to attack first—that would be the one on the right—the loud mouth. He readied himself and was about to throw his first punch when suddenly he was grabbed from behind. A pair of large arms wrapped around Ben and locked his hands in front of Ben's chest pinning Ben's arms against his sides. Now he had no immediate chance for defense.

Mensk shot his hand forward and drove the shive a full five inches into Ben's abdomen.

The hot, searing pain sent shock waves throughout Ben's body. For a split second he was paralyzed into helplessness, with a sick feeling of wanting to run, but unable to part from the paralysis caused by the knife in his abdomen. The feeling of horror swept through his brain for another moment, but then the adrenalin kicked in and the pain, the paralysis, and feeling of horror were no longer there.

Mensk pulled the shive out of his flesh and drew his hand back in order to make another stab, but Ben saw it coming and turned his tray vertical spilling the food to the floor in order to shield his abdomen from the next thrust.

"What the . . ." said Mensk as he watched the food fall to the floor. He was already driving his hand forward with the shive when Ben turned the tray. The shive hit the metal tray and careened harmlessly into the air with Mensk's arm flailing behind it like a flapping shirtsleeve in a breeze.

Ben raised his foot and drove it down with all his force smashing the heel of his shoe into the arch of the man's foot behind him. He could feel the snapping and crunching of bones, and the man quickly let go, falling to the floor, howling in pain.

At the same time Ben formed the knuckles of the second joints of his right hand into a spear-shape and drove it into Mensk's Adam's apple. The windpipe was crushed blocking the flow of air to his lungs. He fell backwards to the floor. His eyes were bulging and his tongue was hanging out fluttering around in the air---the air which he so desperately wanted to get into his lungs. He rolled over on his stomach and clawed at the floor a couple of times.

Josef stood with his mouth open as he watched Mensk scratching helplessly for air. Josef looked at Ben with doubt and uncertainty written on his face. It was obvious he didn't know what to do.

But Ben knew what to do. He swung the metal tray with great force and hit Josef on the side of the head and face. He could feel a grating through the vibration of the tray, which told him Josef's jaw had been broken in several places, and when he pulled the tray away, it had lost its neat little metal ridges and now looked like an artist's rendition of a man's head and face in profile. There was blood trickling from the side of Josef's head.

He crumpled to the floor like a man in slow motion and lay there unconscious with his mouth hanging open in an unnatural position.

Ben believed the attack was finished, but it wasn't. He heard a noise from behind. For a moment it puzzled him. He thought the man behind him had been incapacitated. He spun around in time to see that four more assailants had jumped from their seats to join the fight. Two of them had shives, and another one had a small, wooden club.

Ben knew he couldn't protect himself from all four of them, especially with his wound. It looked like Hurd was going to get his wish. And then, three allies, which Ben didn't know he had, joined the brawl.

Samsung came in low and kicked one of the men in the knee. The man's leg was broken. He dropped the shive and went down screaming. Then Samsung did an astounding jump into the air and kicked the other shive-carrying prisoner in the face knocking him off his feet. The man was unconscious as he hit the floor with a thud. Tillo hit the man who had the club from behind with a huge fist, and when the man turned to face him, Tillo started viciously pummeling him. Blood splattered. The man's nose was broken. There were several cuts above his eye, and then Tillo swung a huge fist and broke the man's jaw before he fell to the floor.

At the same time that Tillo was kicking the one prisoner's ass, Sweyn attacked the other one with the same viciousness. It was horrific to watch. It was as if they were spilling huge volumes of red-molten anger that had stored up since they arrived at the prison. It exploded in wrath and resulted in brutal beatings of the two men they attacked. They kept kicking them, even as they lie on the floor. Ben could hear ribs cracking.

Finally Samsung had to grab their legs and throw them down. He held up his hand. "Enough!" he shouted.

Tillo and Sweyn calmed down and stood up.

“If you kill them,” said Samsung, “you will receive the death sentence.”

Ben was surprised that these men would help him, especially since they had nothing to gain by it.

“Thanks,” said Ben. He was feeling woozy.

Samsung grunted, “My pleasure.”

And the two mountain men nodded their heads. Then the three of them returned to their tables and sat down.

But Ben wasn't finished. He looked at the table on his left and singled out the man in the middle. “Your turn, Rodde,” he said behind gritted teeth. “Get your ass over here and let's see what you got.”

But Rodde just sat there and said nothing.

Ben was the only one standing when a blur of guards ran into the room and spread out with phasors drawn while some of them ran down the aisle. “What's going on here?” shouted the one in the lead as he looked at the seven men lying on the floor.

“They wanted my food,” said Ben. He pointed at the prisoner whose face was starting to turn blue. “You better get him to the doc quick. He's dying of suffocation.”

Ben could feel the adrenalin starting to wear off. He grabbed his abdomen with his hand and sat on the bench nearest him. He was starting to feel faint. The blood was seeping between his fingers and dripping to the floor.

And then the blackness closed in.

Chapter Fifty-One

The sun was bright. It shone for miles, reflecting green into the air from a ripple of trees in the garden of Zanphir. Little animals scampered in the grass beneath the pyramid, playing hide and seek with their companions. They sometimes stopped to eat plump red berries from little bushes, which popped up here and there between the trees. A large cat, whose fur was a dark golden color, sat beneath a tree near the pyramid and smiled at Ben while watching with curiosity.

Roqford is that you?

Ben stood on top of the pyramid, which was flat and had a symmetrical surface extending twenty feet in each of the four directions. On top of the pyramid there was a diamond shaped pattern carved into the rock with the top and bottom points of the diamond touching a side of the pyramid. The other two points stopped two feet short of the other two sides. Inside and at the top of the diamond was an eye watching all who stood on top of the pyramid. Also, inside the diamond was a circle touching the four sides of the diamond, and inside the circle there were two rows with seven cylindrical rods in straight lines. They protruded two inches through the flat surface.

A man with white hair and light brown skin, wearing a black and white striped robe, appeared on the far edge of the pyramid across from Ben. With a benevolent smile on his face he started walking toward Ben, and when he was but a few feet away he said, “A near death experience opens the door of the Universe and brings forth intuition seeping into the mind from our Universal knowledge,—pay close attention.

A force inside compels Ben to move forward—walking to the left and stepping upon the second rod from the top and sixth from the bottom, hissing, with dust rising from the hole as the rod moves down, and the air escapes. The force, and Ben moves to the right stepping on the fourth rod from the top. Again there is the hissing and the dust. Then the top rod on the right. Then the second rod from the bottom. Then to the left and the fourth rod from the top. Ben steps down from the pyramid—a giant step. He looks past the garden, and the gates to the valley open wide. He feels a wisp upon his face as if a butterfly has flown close. The man with white hair beckons him from the valley. The sun is rising over the hills. He feels a wisp upon his face. He raises his sword in triumph and moves toward the man. Suddenly, there is a quake shaking the ground and giving off a thunderous noise. The ground begins to move, dust rises blotting out the sun, and a horde of one hundred thousand race toward him in fury. And there is a wisp upon his face . . .

Ben's eyelids fluttered as he opened them. He looked up at Viella who was wiping the perspiration from his forehead with a white cloth. He looked into her beautiful brown eyes and suddenly it reminded him of the deliciously brown espn trees on his home planet with their long, spreading branches coming off the dark brown trunk and the light brown leaves fluttering from the smaller branches and the delectable chocolate-brown fruit hanging from the branches in clumps. *Where is my home planet?* he wondered.

"You're awake," she said.

Ben looked around the room. In spite of feeling groggy he was trying to remember where he was. On the other side of the room he saw two men lying in beds. One of the men had his jaw wired and was strapped down with his head and neck tractioned in a cervical harness. The other man had his right foot and leg in a cast. And next to the door was a uniformed guard.

"It's okay," she continued. "You had a nasty wound and Dr. Stream had to repair it." She busied herself for a moment and then said, "Thanks to you I have someone to talk to—not that I would wish injury on you, but it gets boring when there's no one here. Now, there's three of you in here and five in the other room."

"Where am I?" he asked. And then his current predicament came flooding back like a torrential nightmare of crashing waves. "I'm in prison," he stated, answering his own question. "What day is it?" he asked.

"It's Monday."

The Arians had kept the same seven-day week structure as had been utilized by the Earthians, even keeping the same names for the days. It didn't surprise Ben because over the course of his studies in archaeology he had found that a lot of civilizations had kept the same or similar time structures as had been constructed by their ancient ancestors. *That's right*, he thought, *I'm a Professor of Archaeology*. "What time is it?"

"It's ten fifteen in the morning."

"Where am I?" He knew he had been sent to prison, but he couldn't remember why he was in this room with this woman.

"You're in a prison hospital," she said. She stopped patting his face and threw the sanitary cloth in a chute, which was whisked away to an incinerator. "Don't you remember the fight?"

"The fight?" Ben tried to sit up, but the attempt brought a stabbing pain from his abdomen, and then he did, indeed, remember the fight. "Oh crap," he said softly, and laid his head back on the pillow.

Viella walked around the bed and picked up the blood pressure cuff. "Just lie back and try to relax," she said. "Your wound is going to take some time to heal." She wrapped the cuff around his arm and pumped it up while positioning the stethoscope.

Now he understood why the man, with his foot in a cast, was scowling at him.

Ben felt himself relax. She was right. If his wound was going to heal quickly and properly, then he had to take it as easy as possible.

"We've never really had a chance to talk," said Ben. "Even though we stand in circles next to each other every morning. Now, it looks like we're going to have that chance. And you're certainly not going to be lonely with eight newly injured prisoners in your hospital."

"You're right," she answered with a smile. "Now be real quiet while I take your blood pressure."

Ben looked at the cuff. *An antiquated procedure for taking blood pressure*, he thought. Since coming to Ar he had noticed the Arians had a diversity of highly advanced technology from the far reaches of the Galaxy mixed in with archaic machinery from their ancient Earth ties.

Viella took the arms of the stethoscope out of her ears, unwrapped the blood pressure cuff, and set them on a small table next to the bed. "Only slightly low," she mumbled. She wrote the figures on his chart and set it on the same little table.

"So," said Ben, "what's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?" He had read that phrase in an ancient Earth text, but in Komotu it didn't translate the way he had intended; instead it sounded something like, "What's a nice girl like you wanting to be in this place."

In spite of the misinterpretation she understood his question, and a look of anxiety crossed her face. "I was smuggling some guns into the city and had the misfortune of being caught."

Ben grimaced as a pain shot through his abdomen. He slowly relaxed and then looked at Viella. "Wait a minute," he said, taking a small breath between each word, "you're the woman who was with Em when he was apprehended."

"That's right," she said, remembering that night she first met Em. "He saved my life."

"Well, I'm the one who was studying him before he escaped or maybe I should say, before he ran away."

Viella sat on the bed next to Ben's. "What do you mean you were studying him?"

Ben looked surprised. "No one told you?"

"Told me what?"

"We found Em in a suspended animation chamber in a computer complex beneath Newusa, and according to the time indicator he's more than six hundred years old."

Viella scowled and stood up. "I don't believe you," she said bluntly.

"No, it's true. Why do you think he always walks around like he's in another world?"

For a moment she looked puzzled, then "I don't understand. If you are who you say you are, and he is who you say he is, then why are the two of you in prison?"

"Now that's a good question," replied Ben. He motioned her closer and when she stood next to his bed he grabbed her by the arm and pulled her down. He whispered in her ear. "I've already said too much. We have to be careful what we say." He motioned around the room. "The walls have ears."

She looked around. "What do you mean?" she asked, then it sunk home and before Ben could answer the first question she asked, "How do you know?"

Ben smiled a calculated smile. "I have an inside source," he whispered.

Viella was about to whisper, "Who?" but just then Dr. Streum walked in.

The look on his face portrayed curiosity as he saw them whispering, but he didn't ask, instead he said, "I see our patient is awake." He walked over to Ben's bed. "You're a very lucky young man," he said as he picked up the chart and read the vital statistics.

"Damn, doc," replied Ben, "where I come from we don't consider it lucky when you get stabbed in the gut with a razor sharp knife."

Dr. Streum chuckled a bit. "What I mean, Dr. Hillar, is that the razor sharp knife missed all the vital organs, and if it had been a half inch further to the right, it would have cut the abdominal aorta wide open." He looked at Ben with a frown. "You would have bled to death within two minutes."

"So I was lucky, and now I get to enjoy the comforts and luxury of prison life."

Viella interrupted, "Lieutenant Sharpie told me to notify her when you became conscious." She left the room without waiting for anyone to answer.

"So, you don't like the comforts of our prison. Well, you'll be happy to know you'll be out of the work force for at least five days, and in three days you'll be back on solid food."

"That quick?"

"Yeah, the drug I used will accelerate the healing process."

"You have xanphiltropin phlorimethanine?" he asked incredulously. This medication was very expensive, and it surprised Ben that they would have it at the prison. This drug was commonly known as SR, for speed repair, and it came from a flower found on only one planet in the Galaxy—in the deepest of jungles.

"I'm impressed," said the doctor. "Your education must expand past that of archaeology. And to answer your question, 'yes,' we have everything here. The warden insists on it."

"Well," said Ben, "the more I hear about the warden the more I'm beginning to understand him."

Streum didn't ask him what he meant. "I'll be back to check on you this afternoon," he said. He set the chart on the table and left the room.

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Half an hour later, Ben was lying in bed with his eyes closed, when he heard Sharpie's voice, "I thought you were conscious?" she whispered.

Ben looked up. "I am," he stated.

In a reproachful tone she said, "You didn't hang in there like I told you."

Ben frowned. "I'm not a joiner," he replied.

"A joiner?"

"Yeah, you know, the gangs."

"Oh," she said in a hesitant voice. "Yes, the gangs." She looked as if she were trying to figure out how to say something. Finally, she said, "You won't have to worry about the gangs anymore." She looked at the two men on the other side of the room and then back at Ben. "Last night someone threw Rodde over the edge of the pit, either that or he accidentally fell. Personally I pick the first of the two."

Ben looked distressed. "Did you have something to do with it?" he asked.

"No," she answered. "But I think I know who did."

They both looked at each other for a moment, and then Ben asked, "Jobbe?"

"It doesn't really matter 'who.' The point is the gangs won't bother you anymore, because if they do they're going to end up, or maybe I should say, 'end down' at the bottom of the pit like Rodde." She said it a little louder as she looked across the room at the other two men.

The man with the cast on his foot and leg averted his eyes.

"I guess I can live with that," said Ben, "but I wouldn't have had Rodde killed."

"Yes, it's unfortunate," she said, "nevertheless the point's been made." She walked between the two beds until she was parallel with Ben's chest. "I guess I'll have to cancel the swording match."

Ben raised his head. "Not on my account," he said without hesitation. "With the administration of the SR I'll be up in three days."

"But you'll be weak."

"Maybe, but I'll be ready." He said with a tone of conviction.

"I can see you're a man of determination. I guess that comes with being a great athlete."

Chapter Fifty-Two

Ben looked at his dessert. It was a square cake with cream-colored frosting running over the top and dripping down the sides. Ben stuck his fork under one edge and flipped the cake up and down a couple of times. The waiter told him it had a fruit compote filling that was "absolutely scrumptious."

He continued to look at it, while thinking about his luck. He had always considered himself above average in the luck department, but here he was in a most unlucky turn of events. If he had stayed aboard the Commander or if he had gone back to the computer complex to study some of the archeological findings, or if he had gone anywhere except to Hurd's office that day, he wouldn't be in prison. No one would have given him a second thought.

Why was his luck turning on him? Especially now that he had met Lyil.

He looked up at the guard standing about ten feet away. "Hey Jake, you want my dessert?"

The guard looked at it longingly, "I'd like to," he said, "but I'm on duty, and if they caught me eating it, they'd have my ass. Thanks anyway."

"Yeah," said Ben. He kept flipping it up and down, and then it occurred to him to take it back to his cell. "Hey Jake," he called in a loud whisper, "okay with you if I take it with me?"

The guard pondered for a moment. "Fine by me," he said, and then added, "But I don't know anything about it, if you know what I mean."

"Yeah, thanks," said Ben. He unfolded a paper napkin and pressed out the creases as he did. He put the cake in the middle, wrapped it up, and put it in his swording helmet. *That'll keep it for a while*, he thought.

There was a large crash from the other side of the room as a busboy dropped a load of dirty dishes on the floor. When he bent over to pick up the dishes, one of the waiters who was passing by, playfully thumped him on the head and then bent down to help him. The waiter said something, and they both started laughing.

The accident happened on the other side of the swording mat, which had been placed in the middle of the Officer's mess hall. The tables and chairs had been moved out of the way, but not taken out of the room; instead they had been crowded together in anticipation of a lot of spectators. There were already quite a number of officers and their spouses sitting at the tables talking and laughing—causing a drone of conversation throughout the huge room.

"Are you feeling up to it?"

Ben turned and saw Sharpie standing behind him. "Damn straight," he replied.

Sharpie gave him a look. "I'm going to let it slide this time," she said, "because you don't know me, but I'll tell you now, I don't like people swearing when they're talking to me or even when they're talking to someone near me."

"Oh, . . . I'm sorry," said Ben. "I'll keep that in mind." He knew Sharpie was his best chance for getting out or escaping from prison, so he wanted to stay on her good side.

"Let me ask again," she continued, "has your wound healed, at least enough for you to compete in a swording match tonight?"

"Darn straight," replied Ben. He looked around the room at the officers, wondering why she had arranged this match. If he were to beat a local guard in a swording match, how would that help him out of his predicament.

Sharpie continued to look concerned. "Talman Hisser will be here in a few minutes," she said, "but if you're not feeling up to it, we can put it off until tomorrow or the next night."

"No, I'm fine," said Ben as he stood up. He picked up his swording helmet and started toward the mat.

Sharpie was at his side. He felt her hand on his shoulder, which she had placed there in a caring manner, and it reminded him of Lyil with her feminine and thoughtful concerns for a fellow human being. He wondered what Lyil was doing at that moment - maybe at home watching the viewer or maybe having dinner with her friends in the outer city. And then it occurred to him that Lyil might be in danger. What will happen once Thorne has complete control of the Federation armada? "We've got to get the Galaef out of this prison and back on the throne," said Ben.

"I agree," said Sharpie, "but to do that we have to convince the right people that he's the VIP prisoner."

"How do we do that?" asked Ben. "And who are the right people?"

"The first thing you have to do is to prove to the Captain of the Guard that you are a master swordsman. That will convince him you are 'the' Ben Hillar. After that we can start thinking about the Galaef."

Ben stepped onto the swording mat with Sharpie following. He laid his helmet next to the stool in his corner. "I've never heard of Talman Hisser, so I take it he's not of Galactic caliber." It wasn't a polite statement, to say the least, but Ben wasn't feeling charitable.

"He's never been in the Galactic Games, if that's what you mean," she retorted in a defensive tone, "but a couple of years ago he placed first in a Tarmorian tournament. And that means he's no slouch."

Ben sat on the stool and picked up the sword, which had been lying on the mat. He swished it through the air a couple of times, being careful not to whack Sharpie, and then he grabbed the end of it, and bent it feeling for flexibility and strength.

"Well?" asked Sharpie.

Ben set the sword down and looked into her blue eyes. "Three inches shorter than what I usually use, but, overall, Not bad."

"Better not be," she replied. "It's my own fencing sword, and I paid a lot of money for it." She broke the stare and looked around the room. A couple tables away she saw what she was looking for.

Ben watched as Sharpie walked over and grabbed the empty chair by the back. There were three men and two women sitting around the table, and as Sharpie grabbed the chair one of the men started to say something, but thought better of it.

Sharpie took the chair back to Ben's corner and sat down. "Being the fourth sword in the Galaxy I'm sure you've been well trained—heard it all and seen it all. So, I'm not going to say anything like, 'don't underestimate him.'"

"But you did," said Ben

"Did what?"

"You just said it. You just said, 'don't underestimate him.'"

"Well, maybe I said it. But I didn't say it as a piece of advice."

Ben sat on the mat and stretched his low back and hamstrings by touching his toes and bending his head toward his knees. "I bet you and your boyfriend have some strange conversations," he mumbled.

"What?"

"Nothing," replied Ben.

"I heard what you said. And if that was an insult, I would think you would be a little more appreciative for what I've done for you."

Ben continued his stretching. "You can't begin to know the magnitude of my appreciation. I've been stuck in this . . . you know what, prison under false accusations, and you're the only friend with any clout I've got in this . . . you know what place." He sat up and stretched backward, loosening the antagonistic muscles. "And I assure you it wasn't an insult. It was just a little sarcasm. You know, a little tongue in cheek."

"Actually, I do know," she said. "I've seen a number of your interviews, . . . but it kinda caught me off guard when it was aimed at me."

"Well, then, don't take it personal."

Sharpie sat back in her chair and laughed. "You're a real kick, you know that? It's too bad we had to meet in a place like this."

It's too bad we had to meet at all, thought Ben. I could be back on Galactica with Lyil.

Just then Curt, the Captain of the Guard, stepped onto the mat from the opposite side, and right behind him came a man in a swording uniform. The officers and the rest of the crowd started to cheer, clap, and stomp their feet.

The two men walked to Ben's corner, and as Talman stepped out from behind Curt a shocked look came over his face. "You told me it was a prisoner," he said in disbelief. "You didn't tell me it was Ben Hillar."

"Pleased to meet you," said Ben as he stuck his hand out for a handshake. But Talman was too stunned to be shaking anybody's hand.

After leaving it there for a few seconds, Ben put his hand down.

"You think this is Ben Hillar, the fourth sword of the Galaxy?" asked Curt.

"Do I think it?" he asked angrily. "I don't think it. I know it. He and the Galaef have been kicking around Newusa for the last couple of months."

"The Galaef?" asked Curt. Now it was his turn to be shocked.

"You didn't know?" asked Talman. "I realize they didn't broadcast it, but I thought you would have gotten the word by now."

"We don't get to town much," said Curt with an angry tone in his voice. "Let's start the match," he said looking at Ben, "and we'll see how good you really are."

Talman smiled sardonically. "How good he really is? In my opinion, and in the opinion of many others including the experts, he's the best in the entire galaxy."

Talman stuck his hand out and Ben shook it. "It's an honor to be swording against you," said Talman. "I just wish I had been prepared for it." He turned and walked back to the other corner.

Curt grabbed Sharpie by the arm and turned her until she was facing him "If this is THE Ben Hillar, then it's possible that the VIP prisoner is the Galaef," he said softly.

"It's me," said Ben without looking at anyone. "I am THE Ben Hillar."

Curt continued without paying attention to Ben. "Which means we could be getting ourselves mixed up in the middle of a Galactic war." There was a worried look on his face.

"It's starting to look more and more like I'm right. Doesn't it?" She removed his hand from her arm. "So, we better come up with a plan."

Just then the announcer, not a professional one, but rather one of the guards, stepped onto the mat and walked to the middle holding a Mic in his hand. "Ladies, gentlemen, . . . and even you officers," he said, in an attempt to be funny. "Tonight we have a best three out of five round swording match between a prisoner, Dr. Ben Hillar to my left." He pointed at Ben. There was an unenthusiastic round of applause.

Suddenly Ben felt a very subtle intrusion into his mind. It was so subtle that most people would never notice it, but Ben had experienced it everyday since he came to this prison. Sometimes five or six times a day. *So, you're here,* said Ben.

Yesss, answered Roqford through a half yawn. *It'sss me.*

I thought you would be asleep by now.

Usually, said Roqford, *but I thought I would watch you fence tonight.*

And to my right," continued the announcer, and then he clumsily tried to let the following words roll off his tongue as if mimicking a professional announcer, "we have Talman Hisser, Lieutenant Commander of the Newusa City Police."

The crowd cheered, clapped, and stomped their feet.

The announcer waited a few moments as the cheering quieted down and then walked off the mat, which was the signal for the match to begin. Ben picked up his swording helmet and put the napkin with the lump in it under his stool. (He noticed a quizzical look, which turned to a knowing look on Sharpie's face.) He placed the helmet on his head, flipped the protective eye shield into place, and picked up the sword. He stood up and walked toward the middle of the ring.

The rules were different for this match. They would sword all five rounds. The swordsman to win the most rounds would be declared the winner.

Ben and Talman saluted each other with their swords, then crossed them above their heads, and waited. The timekeeper sounded the buzzer, which simultaneously started the clock. And the match began.

Ben started with a series of parries and half thrusts, which were meant to fool the antagonist into believing an offensive move was coming. After two minutes into the round Ben parried, stepped back, parried, stepped back, parried, and then stepped forward which caught Talman by surprise. Ben placed his left hand on Talman's chest and shoved mightily.

Talman stumbled backward and fell to the mat flat on his back. At that time Ben could have easily moved in and dispatched him, ending the round, but instead he waited for Talman to stand and resume his stance.

Less than a minute later the buzzer sounded, the round came to an end, and Ben walked to his corner. The pain in his abdomen, caused by the stab wound, was a little sharper as he sat on the stool. He had his head bent down with his eyes closed. He probed the wound with his fingers, massaging the sore spots to relieve the pain.

Suddenly he had that feeling that someone was staring at him, and he looked up. Talman was standing in front of him and Curt was walking up beside. Sharpie stepped onto the mat and joined the other two.

"What's going on?" asked Talman.

"What do you mean?" asked Curt in return.

"What I mean is, are you playing some kind of a joke on me?"

Curt just gave him a puzzled look.

But Sharpie said in a hurtful tone of respect to her swording instructor. "This is no joke. I assure you."

"Then why did Professor Hillar not make one offensive move the entire round?" Angrily he turned around and walked back to his corner.

Sharpie gave Ben an unkind look.

"I know. I know," said Ben.

"You know what?" asked Sharpie.

"I know you want me to prove who I am, but I thought I would prolong it for the five full rounds, and give the spectators something to watch." Ben paused, and then said, "I didn't realize Talman would take it as an insult. He is a fine swordsman. And I would, by no means, belittle him."

"It appears you have," replied Sharpie. "And I didn't set up this match for the spectators. So, let's finish it."

Curt grabbed Sharpie by the shoulder and spun her toward him. "I knew this wasn't Ben Hillar," he said.

"You don't know anything," retorted Sharpie. Now she was becoming angry. "Ben's just playing a little game," she said under her breath to keep from shouting. She turned back to Ben. "Well?" she asked.

"Okay," he said, "I'll finish it."

At the disappointment of the crowd the next round lasted five seconds. A thrust to the right rib cage and the buzzer sounded. Tal was shaking his head while standing in the middle of the ring. He said, "In all my years in the arena I have never sworded against a man with this expertise."

The crowd, knowing Talman's accomplishments at the Tarmorian tournaments, figured it was just a lucky stab.

The next round lasted seven seconds, and the final round lasted eight seconds. Tal started to turn toward his corner when Ben pointed at the digital display of the time clock and quipped, "You're getting better."

Tal smiled. "I guess I asked for that," he said. "But up yours anyway."

[Chapter Fifty-Three](#)

While Gaal sat on the couch reading a book, Sam paced back and forth on the bare, living-room floor. His eyes were vacant as he stared into thought. His fingernails tapped rapidly on the butt of his phasor strapped to his right hip. He glanced from time to time at the front door of the small apartment. Finally, he came to a halt and reached with his right hand to massage his painful shoulder.

Fortunately, it had just been a severe sprain with no dislocation nor broken bones. "Where the hell is she?" he muttered to himself. He pulled on both handles of his long, red, handlebar mustache. Dahms had left the apartment three days ago with the intention of contacting Rogae X. Now that the three of them had escaped, they would never be able to go into public life again, at least, not until Hurd's reign had come to an end. So, what were they going to do? Maybe hide out in the Mountain Nation. Everette would find a place for them, and they would do what they could to help the rebel cause from there. It would be almost impossible to continue hiding out in Newusa. Their freedom of motion would be greatly restricted now that they were being hunted. They didn't know anybody in the other three major cities of Ar. So, that wasn't much of a possibility. *No, thought Sam, we'll probably end up in the Mountain Nation. Rogae X will pull whatever strings he has to in order to get us safely out of Newusa and into a new hiding place.*

Rogae X was high in the chain of command. He was a man of considerable power. It occurred to Sam long ago that Rogae X was probably one of the city councilmen. He had hoped, and believed it was probably his father—the only one of the city councilmen who would stand up to Hurd. He remembered the time Hurd was planning to tear out the city park and build a large military complex in its place. "It's for the protection of our city," he told the city council. But Sam's father knew Hurd was planning to build another scent tower to insure his hold over the people, and more specifically, his hold over the rebels.

Juez would have none of that. He brought in several environmental experts.

Later, Sam discovered his dad had the experts exaggerate their statements for the need of oxygen producing plants—that the city’s oxygen generators could not produce enough oxygen by themselves. The fact was, the plants did help take some of the load off the generators, but they didn't, in reality, help that much, and the park could have been demolished.

In the end Juez with the charts, graphs, calculations, and testimony of the experts, won out, and the city park was left alone.

And it was these types of actions that led Sam to believe that his father might be Rogae X. If he was, he didn't want to know about it because he didn't want to have the knowledge that could put his father's life in jeopardy. When rebels were caught they were all put under a lie detector test in which the question was asked if they knew Rogae X's identity. If there was any indication that they might know, they under went the excruciatingly painful mind-melt, which usually ended in death or some kind of terrible psychosis.

How did Dahms get through the lie detector test? Dahms had indicated, without saying it in so many words, that Rogae X had personally conducted the test.

He had helped her out of a tough spot. He had also arranged for the rebels to break Dahms, Sam, and Gaal out of the run. And now Dahms had gone to him again for help. But that was three days ago. Where the hell is she? He asked himself. She said she would be back in two days.

Visions of seeing her in a small room, with men hanging over her, and a metal cap strapped to her head sucking the life out of her brain, raced through his mind.

He shook his head trying to shake away this ridiculous idea. He walked over to the apartment window, which had been greyed to keep others from looking in, and looked at the street three stories below. What he saw was a small side street with sidewalks on both sides. It was dotted with a few people hurrying along on a morning workday. Everything appeared normal.

Sam turned and looked down at Gaal. "Damn that woman," he said. "She said she'd be back two days ago. And here we are still waiting. Maybe they caught her."

"Probably not," said Gaal. He placed the book on the couch next to him—face open and face down so as not to lose his place. "She's too smart for them." He leaned back and crossed his legs while looking up at Sam.

But Sam wasn't convinced. "Not so smart that she didn't get caught once before," he said. "Even with all the precautions—the secrecy, the body guards, and the underground maze of tunnels leading to the small meeting room. The patrollers still stormed through taking out all the resistance and taking Dahms and five other rebels into custody."

"Completely different circumstances," said Gaal. He held up his hand in gesture. "In the first place she's not in a meeting, and secondly there was an inside tip which led the patrollers to the room that night."

Sam was just about to retort when there was a noise at the door. He quickly pulled his phasor from the holster and ran behind the wall, which separated the living room from the kitchen.

Gaal bolted over the couch to hide from anyone who might step through the doorway.

As Sam looked around the corner, the door slid open and a woman with short black hair and ugly protruding teeth, stepped quickly into the living room. She was dressed in a simple, lower class cotton dress.

"Where are you?" she asked quietly. The teeth caused a slight slur in her speech.

Sam stepped into a shooting stance aiming the phasor at her chest. "Who the hell. . . ?" he started to ask, and then he recognized her.

"Dahms?"

She pulled off the wig and spit the buckteeth into her hand. "Is everything alright?" she asked.

"Yeah," said Gaal as he stood up from behind the couch. "How about you?"

"Kind of okay," she answered. She took a couple more steps into the room. There was a large bundle, wrapped in butcher paper with a string tied around it, under her left arm.

"They have posters with our pictures all over town," she said. "And they're offering a large reward for our capture."

Before she finished her sentence, a man, tall in stature, at least six foot eight, and slender in form, and wearing a colorful, puffy shirt along with a colorful, puffy pants, stepped through the doorway and into the room.

As the door slid shut, Sam noticed the peculiar clothing of the man. Sam had a nagging feeling he had seen him before.

Dahms set the bundle on the couch and then gestured toward the man. "This is Xygliper."

It was then that Sam remembered where he had seen these peculiar looking clothes. He hadn't seen the

man's face, but he definitely remembered the clothes, and he would never forget where he had seen them. He whirled toward the man and brought his phasor to bear upon the man's chest, but instead of pulling the trigger knowing that there was a reason this man was here, he said. "I've seen this man before."

Dahms quickly stepped between Sam and the stranger. "Don't do anything stupid."

"You do realize this is the archer who tried to kill us in the Run."

The man peered over Dahms' shoulder with a look of indignation. "Sir," he said, "if I had wanted to kill you, then surely you would be dead by now."

Dahms shook a finger at Sam. "He's been working for us the past five years," she said.

Sam lowered his phasor, and looking at the man, he said, "There was always that nagging feeling in the back of my mind the way the archer kept missing us. As if we had been a little luckier than we should have been."

Gaal walked around the couch and stuck out his hand, "So, a double agent, eh? I'm glad you're on our side."

The stranger grasped the outstretched hand and shook it. "Name's Xygliper," he said.

"The fact is," said Dahms, "he's the only one of Hurd's killers who would join the underground."

Xygliper sat down on a chair and looked up at Sam and Gaal. He said, "When Hurd first contacted me five years ago on my home planet, he made it sound fun and adventuresome. He would pay me large sums of money to participate in a sporting event." He paused and clicked his fingers (later Sam was told that this was a habit Xygliper's race would exhibit when irritated). "When I got here I quickly found out the Run is nothing more than the senseless murder of people."

Dahms stepped a little closer to Sam and said, "Xyg had decided to return home about the same time we contacted him. After he heard of our plight he decided to stay and help us."

"That's right," said Xygliper. "And five days ago was the first chance I've had to help a runner. Even though the left is easier, it's the first time anyone has made it that far down the left path."

"Yeah, it makes sense," said Sam. "At the time I thought you missed because of our quick movements. But later, after I had time to think about it, it seemed a little too lucky. It seems to me a good archer would time his shots with predictable movement." Sam mused for a moment, "And I'm sure Hurd buys only the best. . . . I suppose you placed in the Galactic Games?"

"Number eight," said Xygliper.

"Which is why he's here now," said Dahms. "Even as you were wondering if we could be that lucky, we knew it wouldn't take Hurd long to realize Xyg had missed on purpose."

Sam walked over to Xygliper and stuck out his hand. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Okay," said Dahms, "now that the introductions are finished, I have some startling news." She paused to let the word 'startling' sink in.

Sam could only think of the worst. Letting go of Xyg's hand, he quickly asked, "Is it my sister?"

"It involves your sister."

It didn't make him happy that she didn't come right out with it. The five days of being hidden away in a small apartment was beginning to have an effect. "What has happened to her?" he asked in a raised voice.

"She's in prison."

"In prison?" He was still talking loudly. "In the pits of Ar?"

"Yes, but that isn't the news . . ."

"Well it's news enough for me. And we've got to get her out. If we don't get her out, she's dead. You know it and I know it. Everybody in here knows it."

Dahms eyes started to glare. "Will you please listen." She waited for him to say, 'yes,' but instead he quickly stroked one side of his mustache in an agitated manner.

"We're going to do everything we can to get her out. But let me finish what I have to say."

"Fine," said Sam.

Dahms stepped in closer to the center of the room. A worried look crossed her face. "There has been an attempted usurpation of the Galaefship."

"What?" asked Gaal. "The ruler of the Galactic Empire?"

"That's right. His second in command, Thorne, is attempting to become the new Galaef."

"But that's impossible."

"We all thought so, but Thorne has found something which he believes will allow him to be successful. Since we don't know what that 'thing' is, we can't predict the probability of his success. We only know that we have to do whatever we can to stop him."

Sam sat down and leaned back against the couch. It didn't seem possible that the Galaef could be

overthrown, but he decided to reserve judgment until he knew more. He said, "My first question is, who is 'we'? And secondly, how can 'we' help?"

Dahms answered quickly as if she had anticipated the questions. She said, "Over these past three days I've been in long discussions with the leader of the underground, Rogae X. It is his contention that this crisis is as important as the underground cause. Since part of the Galaef overthrow has taken place in Newusa, we can address both issues simultaneously."

Took place in Newusa?" Sam was incredulous. "Why would they choose Ar?"

Dahms explained the details as they had been told to her. She ended with, "After Thorne and Hurd captured the Galaef, they put him in the pits."

"Surely this can't be so," exclaimed Gaal with a look of consternation.

"They put the Galaef of the Galactic Empire in the pits?" Sam was aghast. "They're going to kill him."

"No. I'm sure he's only doing light labor or no labor at all. If they had wanted to kill him, he would be dead by now. For some reason Thorne needs him alive."

Sam stood up. "If you were in conference with Rogae X for three days, you must have formulated a plan concerning my sister and the Galaef."

Dahms looked distraught. "Actually, only half a plan," she said. "And because the plan is incomplete we cannot predict if it will be successful."

"Three days and only half a plan?" Sam was obviously irritated.

Dahms reached into the bundle on the couch and pulled out a rolled sheet of paper. As she unrolled it, she sat cross-legged on the floor setting the paper in front of her. "This is a layout of the prison and the surrounding area," she said.

The others moved in closer, taking their cue and sitting on the floor next to the plans. Sam sat to her right, Xygliper to her left, and Gaal was on one knee looking over her shoulder.

"This is the landing pad." She pointed to a circular area one mile northeast of the prison. "Thorne has two G15 destroyers, with full phasor capabilities and a sonic bomb arsenal, parked on the southwest corner of the pad. Here and here." She pointed out the location.

"He wants to make sure the Galaef doesn't go anywhere," said Gaal.

"Yes, and if we're going to get the Galaef and Viella out, we have to first take over these destroyers."

"I would say, 'almost impossible.'" There was a disconcerted tone in Sam's voice.

"Not so impossible," said Dahms. "Rogae X will be sending a message to the lead Commander explaining that four patrollers, sent by the council, will be coming aboard. Our purpose will be to explain to the crews of the G15's the internal workings of the prison."

Gaal looked a little nervous. "Pretty flimsy reason for wanting to come aboard a Federation warship."

And Sam asked, "What makes you think he'll believe it?"

"Well, first, because we have these patroller uniforms." She pulled four uniforms out of the sack. "And secondly, because the message is going out on a top secret frequency."

Sam started to say something, paused, and finally said, "I won't ask."

"Good," replied Dahms. "Tomorrow night Rogae X will have a shuttlecraft hidden in the ravine just outside the East gate. Inside there will be stun bombs and palm stunners. Once we get inside the G15, it shouldn't be too difficult to take control."

Sam had the feeling that Dahms wasn't as confident as she appeared to be.

"And probably we'll be able to play the same trick on the second ship." She paused. "So in the morning the day after tomorrow we'll be on our way to the pits. Any questions?"

Sam didn't hesitate. "You said we only have half a plan, but it sounds like the hardest part is already laid out. Once we have the destroyers, if we can pull it off, then we should have no difficulty formulating a plan to take over the prison."

Gaal stood up and stretched his legs as Sam made his observation. Xygliper stood up from the floor, walked over to the couch, and sat down.

"It won't be so easy," said Dahms. She raised her voice so everyone could hear. "First, none of us, and no one else in the underground knows how to operate a destroyer. Secondly, we don't know how many men are in each ship. Thirdly, we could have one of the Galaef's men operate it, but we don't know who is loyal to Thorne and who to the Galaef—I suspect the Commander of each ship will be one of Thorne's, but who else? And finally, there are phasor turrets along the tops of the prison walls."

"That does paint a gloomy picture," said Xygliper, "but as I see it, we have no choice but to try."

"You're right about one thing. No one from Ar knows how to operate a G15." Sam looked at Xygliper. "How about you Xyg, do you know how to fly a destroyer?"

"Nope. Never learned."

"Considering all the possibilities," said Sam, "I don't think the odds are in our favor. But like Xyg says, we have no choice, and even if I have to do it alone, I will do whatever I can to get my sister out of that death pit."

Chapter Fifty-Four

As they came closer, Dahms peered intently ahead. She could see the two ships sitting silently on their pads like sleeping giants waiting to awaken and go into battle. Her heart began to pound as she anticipated the coming conflict between the four of them and the crews of these two warships.

Any man who was assigned to a G15 was trained to the 'nth' degree in all forms of combat and was ready for anything that might come down the line.

She suddenly realized she was more frightened now than she was when they were fighting for their lives in Hurd's infamous "Run." It occurred to her, even with all their planning and drilling, their chances of success weren't all that good.

But they had to try. Without control of these destroyers there was no hope of freeing the Galaef.

The G15 destroyer was considered by most war strategists as the most powerful conventional weapon known to mankind. The shell of the ship was made of an atomically forged metal alloy called merilite, which was second only, in strength, to norimuinatit, but three times lighter. The ship was so close to being circular it was difficult to tell that it was oval in shape, nevertheless the pilot and control room were at one end of the oval and the engine room which contained a Zen I crystal power plant was two decks below and at the other end of the oval. The ship was 55 meters in length, 45 meters wide, and 40 meters in height. It was big enough to sleep, feed, and house 100 men comfortably. On the other hand, it was so easy to handle that a skeleton crew of nine men could wage battle. All they needed was a pilot, a copilot, a navigator, a fourth dimensional navigator, an electro tech (in the event that any of the electronic equipment might be damaged or start to malfunction), three men to double as cook, mechanic, and medical officer, and then, during time of battle, to man the three photonic guns, and finally, one man was needed to fire the torpedoes or the sonic bombs.

If the G15 wasn't going into battle, it could be handled by a crew of five, and in emergencies two men could fly and maneuver it.

One photonic gun could fire 36,000 rounds of phasor bolts within the duration of an hour before it would have to stop to cool down. It could carry enough Zen I crystals to keep all three guns firing for twenty-two hours.

And last, but most significantly, it contained a fully stocked arsenal of two comboys, two seeks with fifty rounds each, two portable laser canons, two portable missile cannons, 120 phasor rifles, 120 phasor hand guns, a various assortment of hand weapons including standard issue knives and crossbows, 100 torpedoes, and 500 sonic bombs (which were misnamed because they are actually missiles).

The fire-control technician, who fired the sonic bombs, had at his fingertips the power to obliterate an object as small as a man or as large as a city. It would completely disintegrate anything it hit with the exception of an object made of norimuinatit—upon which the sonic bombs had no effect. Needless to say, it was important that the fire-control technician be perfectly skilled in the employment of sonic bombs. It was a silent, but extremely lethal force.

Freeing the Galaef and Sam's sister wasn't Dahms' first motivation for commandeering the G15 destroyers. If they could get control of these warships, Hurd's reign of terror would come quickly to an end.

Dahms set the shuttle easily on the landing pad. It was early morning and the sun was rising on the horizon. In the distance, straight ahead, she could see lights coming from a small domed city. It was the Employee City where the crystal processing plant was housed. To the left she saw the lights along the walls of the prison. It occurred to her that their mission had to be successful. They had to get Viella and the Galaef out of there. She was concerned about Sam's mental frame of mind if they couldn't save his sister. And the Galaef, what could one say? Someone was tampering with the workings of the Galactic Empire, which in the long run could result in Galactic chaos, wars, and the unnecessary loss of many lives.

Dahms could hear the hum of the antigrav motors wind down as she pushed the off button. "This is it," she

said. She placed her finger on the 'door open switch' and the four doors arced out and up. She stepped out and looked up at the G15—an awesome sight.

For them to be successful, they had to have all the crewmen in one room. For this reason, Rogae X had sent a message stating that everyone in the ship, in case of an attack, had to be well acquainted with the internal layout of the prison. Thorne wouldn't be happy if the rebels were successful in taking over the prison. The excuse seemed plausible enough; at least, she hoped so.

She secretly pulled the palm stunner from her pocket and placed it neatly into her left palm. It bothered her that there were double agents in the revolutionary forces. How high up they went, she didn't know, but that's how she was captured the first time. If a double agent had sent word to the crews of these ships, and they had set a trap for them, all would be lost. "Is everybody ready?" she asked as they started walking toward the destroyer.

"My palm is getting a little sweaty," said Sam, "from the you know what," he said in a whisper as if he were keeping it a secret from the men aboard the G15. "Other than that everything is peachy, and I'm as ready as I'll ever be." With his free hand he stroked his mustache.

The ship was sitting peacefully on two semi-circular rows of landing feet—big dome like projections, which were powered from inside the shell just before landing. There were three feet in each row.

"It looks too serene," said Xygliper. "Let's stir things up a bit."

The other three let out a nervous laugh.

From a distance the destroyer looked small, but up close it was huge. They had to walk underneath the outer rim, which was, at least, twenty feet above them, before they came to the outer door lock, which was ten feet off the landing pad. As they approached, the door pulled back, moved to the side, and a ramp slid to the pavement.

Dahms started up the ramp with Sam behind her, next came Gaal with Xygliper behind him.

A man appeared in the doorway. He stepped out and shook Dahms hand. "My name is Xilil," he said. After the introductions were over he said, "If you'll come this way I will escort you to the Captain's War Room." Rogae X had told Dahms that the Captain of this ship was Commander Mace.

When they entered the War Room the first thing that struck Dahms was the large strategy table in the center. It was oblong and at least 25 feet long and 15 feet across. There were two dozen stations around the table, which consisted of computer screens with headsets and chairs mounted on swivels. At the head of the table was a pilot control station and next to that a fourth dimensional navigation station.

The War Room was connected to the bridge by a large opening in the wall, which almost made them one room, except the War Room, even though it was large, seemed to be set in an alcove.

Inside the bridge Dahms could see the Captain's chair and a large screen set in the bulkhead, which was twenty feet in front of the Captain's chair. There were various stations inside the bridge which she had no idea as to their purpose.

"Is this your first time aboard a G15?" asked Xilil with a tone of pride.

"That's correct," responded Dahms letting out a small mental sigh of relief. *So far, so good*, she thought.

"In that case let me show you around." He pointed at one of the stations at the table. "During battle, war strategists sit at these stations and, in conjunction with the computer, they quickly figure the best fight or flight scenarios for attack and retreat strategies. The center of the table lights up in a three dimensional space continuum with this ship projected as a small blue dot in the middle and the enemy ships projected as red dots. Each of the strategists tell the computer what they think the best plan of action might be, and then the computer computes the figures and presents them to the commander, who, being at the head of the table, makes the final decision. It's quite impressive," he said. "I've never been in a real battle, but we've had plenty of mock battles in which we were tested on our combat ability. I'm not a strategist, but I get to see the action because I sit over here." He pointed at a station against the bulkhead on the other side of the room. As he walked toward it he said, "I'm the head communications officer and this is my station. From here I can contact any Federation ship in the Galaxy. Since we've been on this assignment I haven't had to use it. The only communications we've had to make is to the Commander, and we've used the short distance radio with satellite link ups." He pointed at the bulkheads. "You see all those lights—some blinking and some not?" He didn't wait for an answer. "This room is surrounded by the on-board computer. Our flight tech knows what those lights mean, but don't ask me." He pointed at three more stations at equidistant positions around the periphery of the room. "Those are rapid fire phasor control stations, better known to us as the rfp stations. And this," he pointed to a station next to the communications station, "is the sonic bomb control station. I've only seen it used once and that was during a mock battle on a deserted planet. One minute I was looking at a city, which could hold two million inhabitants,

and the next moment it was nothing but powder. It was an awesome sight."

"Especially since there were no people in it," said Dahms bringing everybody back to the reality of war.

"Yeah, I guess you're right," said Xilil. The enthusiasm was gone from his voice. "Have a seat anywhere. The rest of the crew and the commander will be here soon."

Xilil sat down at his station and started playing with the knobs. Dahms couldn't tell if he was actually doing something or if he was just pretending. She and the others walked around to the other side of the table. They needed to be in a strategic position, and they didn't need a computer to figure it out. If they had to shoot Xilil, it would be better if they didn't have their backs to him.

"Damn," said Xilil in a voice of consternation. "There's something wrong with the long distance . . ."

Dahms and her rebels were still standing when Commander Mace and the crewmembers walked in. "Good morning," he said in a gruff and rather unfriendly voice. He introduced himself and the crewmembers, and then went to the head of the table and sat down. He acted as if he would rather be somewhere else, instead of here—pampering locals who didn't know anything about war.

He looked at the uniformed strangers and his crewmembers. "Well, don't just stand there. Have a seat."

Bradon, Phist, and Donn walked to the other side of the table and sat down. Bradon sat next to the Commander and Phist and Donn sat two seats to the right. Xilil was still sitting at his station with a look of perplexity. Dahms sat three seats from Mace. According to her calculations, this was the best position for what was coming. At the same time, Sam sat two seats down from Dahms, and Gaal two seats down from him, and Xygliper two seats down from Gaal. Before they left the apartment, they had practiced a number of times how they would subdue the crew and take over the ship.

Xilil, looking anxious, motioned to the Captain and after several waves finally caught his eye. "Commander, I have to talk to you."

"Not now," retorted the Captain in an irritated voice and then on second thought he added, "Unless it's an emergency." He waited for a moment while Xilil was considering the situation. "Well, is it?"

"No sir," he answered with hesitation.

"Then it can wait until we're finished with the business at hand." He looked at Dahms. "I don't understand the reason, but I was informed you would explain the layout and the internal workings of the prison." He paused looking thoughtfully discontented, then he smiled and said, "I suppose it could help if we're forced into action, but personally, if that happens, I'm going to blow the shit out of anything that moves."

All his men laughed. The way he said it, even Gaal laugh.

"Our orders, which come directly from the Galaef," continued the Commander, "are to keep watch on this prison and to thwart any attempt to free the prisoners. It seems that command headquarters received some information that a rebel group is going to storm the prison walls. And since the prisoners are mining Zen I crystals . . . Well, I'm sure he doesn't care about the prisoners, but you know how the Galaef feels about his crystals."

"Yes we do," said Dahms and now she knew it was her turn. She had decided earlier to use the direct approach.

And so it begins, she thought. "It's funny you should mention the Galaef," she began, "because even more important than the internal workings of the prison, it has been reported that the Galaef of the Galactic Empire is being held prisoner behind those walls."

Three men looked shocked, Xilil, Phist, and Donn, but two, the Commander and Bradon, had looks of consternation.

And after a second of thought the Commander quickly reached forward with his left hand and touched a switch on the control panel. Simultaneously, his right hand shot down and came up holding a phasor.

Normally, this would have been a surprise tactic, but Sam was ready for any kind of action. Before the Commander could level his phasor, a stun beam hit him full in the chest. He was slammed against the back of his chair. The magnetic rollers held to the floor, but the chair was sent reeling backwards and whirled around a couple of times before it came to rest exactly where it had started. The Commander stiffened as his muscles went into spasm. He sat against the back of his chair as stiff as a board and unable to move.

Bradon, following the actions of his Commander, also started for his phasor, but as Dahms held up her palm stunner, he subsided, and put his hands on the table in front of him.

Xilil, stood up. "The Galaef in prison? That's a little hard to believe." He didn't say anything about what Sam had just done to his Captain. He didn't even think about it. The Galaef was his Commander in Chief, his leader, and he needed to know if anything untoward was happening to him.

Before anyone could say anything. Xygliper smirked and pointed at Mace. "Hard to believe?" he asked in mimicry. "The Captain of your ship didn't think so."

Xilil thought it over and then said, "Yeah. I see what you mean."

Xygliper pointed at the other man. "And neither did he."

Sam stood up, still holding the palm stunner face out. "Everybody, very carefully, put your phasors on the table and slide them in our direction."

"I didn't know anything about this," said Xilil.

The other three shook their heads in agreement.

Sam looked at them. "You I don't believe," he said pointing at Bradon. "The rest of you I'm inclined to believe, but we can't take any chances. So, slide 'em down."

Gaal and Xygliper removed the power packs from the phasors and put them in their pockets. Sam stepped over to the Captain, wrenched the phasor out of his hand, and removed the power pack. "Now what?" he asked Dahms.

She looked at the three crewmen. "Who knows how to fly this thing?"

"I do," said Phist. "I'm the pilot."

"Okay. You'll do the flying, but we'll be watching you."

"Look lady, a-a-a-a Dahms, if the Galaef is a prisoner behind those walls, I'm going to do everything I can to get him out."

"And I believe you, but I'm still going to be watching you, just in case I'm wrong."

Donn stood up and in an angry tone, he said, "I don't care what our Captain did. To believe the Galaef is a prisoner is beyond absurdity. Who could possibly have the power to put him there, and why would they do it?"

Xygliper was the first to answer, and he wasn't feeling kindly when he spoke. "The man who has the power is Thorne. And the reason he has made the Galaef a prisoner is because he wants to be the new ruler of the Galaxy."

For a moment everyone was silent, then Xilil said, "Damn, I wondered why they gave us a new Commander at the last moment." He paused, "and him." He pointed at Bradon. "He was also a new addition. Our crew had been together for three years and at the last minute they reassigned seven of our crew, including our Captain and put them on another destroyer, then they brought in Mace and Bradon and told us we only needed a skeleton crew for this mission."

"How many are on the other ship?"

"Five," answered Xilil.

"Okay," said Dahms, "Sam and I are going to go to the other ship . . ."

"You can't," said Xilil in a tone of urgency.

"Why not?"

"The Commander sent an internal danger-alert signal to the other ship just before you stunned him. It alerts them that our ship has been contaminated by a hostile force."

"Oh, that's great," said Xygliper. "Fast on the switch, but fortunately not fast enough on the phasor."

Xilil continued, "Right now they're at battle stations. All doors are locked, all hatches are closed, and they won't stand down until they get a coded signal from our Captain. In fact, right now they're preparing to fire on us and will do so if we don't give them the code within five minutes."

Everyone went silent while they considered the different alternatives. Finally, Xygliper pointed at the screen. "There's only one thing to do," he said. "Call them on the viewer and give them the same message we gave you. The Galaef is a prisoner in the prison you are guarding."

"What?" asked Xilil in an incredulous tone. "Why?"

Xygliper smirked. "That way we'll find out if the Captain is with us or against us."

"Will it work?"

"Of course it will work." He paused, and then added, "It worries me somewhat, but it'll work."

Xilil wasn't happy with his last comment. "Why does it worry you?"

"If the Commander reacts like this one did, then I'm afraid one or more of your boys might get hurt." Since it didn't seem to register he added, "You know—shot with a phasor. And if the Thorne supporters get control of that ship, it's going to be an all out battle. So, you better be ready to pull the trigger if things don't go the way we want them to."

Phist walked over and pushed the captain out of his chair and sat down.

Donn blurted out, "That's ridiculous. Why would the Captain fire on his own crew?"

"Because," responded Xygliper, "it appears there weren't enough money grubbing traitors to make a full complement for both of these destroyers. That means, if the captain is a traitor, he has to do anything it takes to carry out his real mission, including killing the Galaef supporters in order to remain in control of the G15."

Xilil hesitated, but only for a moment. "This whole thing seems crazy," he said, "but," he looked at the Captain who was still stiff as a board and lying on the floor, "but we joined the Galaef's armed forces knowing there could come a time when we would be going into battle. If it ever becomes necessary, then we understand it's our duty to die for the good of the Galaxy."

A sardonic smile crossed Xygliper's lips, but he didn't say anything.

Phist pointed at Donn. "You control the rapid fire phasors."

Donn sat down at one of the rfp stations and pushed several buttons. "I'm ready," he said.

"Okay," said Dahms. "Xilil, you give the message."

Xilil hurried to the front of the viewer panel. Quickly he sat down and touched the switch pad.

Dahms and the others stood out of sight of the screen, but they could hear the voice of the other Commander when he came on line. "What's going on over there?" he yelled out. "Why did you send the alert signal?" There was a nervous tone in his voice.

Xilil was looking intently into the screen. There was a look of anger and frustration on his face. "Captain," said Xilil, "I'm speaking to you and the rest of the crew members aboard your ship."

The Captain's voice was anxious as he yelled out again. "Have foreign agents taken over your ship?"

"Captain," said Xilil "it has been reported to us that the Galaef, ruler of the Galactic Empire and our Supreme Commander and Chief, has been made a prisoner behind the walls of the prison we are now guarding."

The screen went blank.

"Oh crap," said Gaal. "What are we going to do if they start firing on us?"

"It's either fight or flight," replied Dahms.

Phist shook his head. "It won't be flight. It takes at least a minute to fire up the engines."

"By that time we'll be incinerated," added Donn.

"Then it's fight," said Dahms sharply. She quickly looked at Donn. "Can you take them out?"

"If we fire first," he looked hesitant as he sat with his finger on the button. "But the Captain is the only new one aboard the ship. I've personally known the other four for years. They're friends of mine, and I don't want to fire on them."

"Not even to save the Galaef?"

He thought for a moment. "You're right, of course."

"Okay, what do we do?"

But he didn't have time to answer. At that moment the communications screen between the two destroyers came back on. A crewmember's face appeared. "What the hell's going on over there? And what the hell did you say to our Captain?" He didn't wait for an answer; instead he continued with, "He went crazy. He killed Jos with his phasor, and before we could draw our own he killed Benz." The man was obviously distraught, but he became silent and waited for an answer.

"I'll tell you the same thing I told the Captain," said Xilil. "The Galaef is a prisoner behind those prison walls, and we've been sent here to make sure he doesn't escape."

"That's not possible," said the face on the screen. "And you know it."

"Look around you," replied Xilil. "Why would this new Captain, a military man you've never met before, do what he did? You know me, Zorn. We've known each other for years. You know I'm not lying when I tell you our new Captain reacted the same way."

"Damn," said Zorn. "Damn," he said again.

Dahms stepped in front of the screen so Zorn could see her. "That prison has five hundred guards, all carrying phasors as well as stunners. The prison walls have phasor turrets mounted all along the perimeter. "If we're going to have any chance at all of freeing the Galaef, we're going to need these destroyers."

Zorn looked into the screen, "We were sent here to keep anyone from breaking into that prison. How do we know this isn't a trick to break in and break your friends out?"

"It would be easy to think that way if your Captain hadn't gone crazy—wouldn't it?"

Zorn scowled as he thought. "Okay, so now what?"

Brale, a crewmember on the other ship, stuck his head in front of the screen. "You won't be using this destroyer," he said. "One of the phasor bolts went through the computer and took out the electronics controlling the drive motor."

Xilil looked at Dahms. "Looks like we're down to one destroyer." He turned back to the screen. "Okay. You might as well shut it down and join us over here."

"Right," said Zorn. The screen flicked off.

"Wait," said Dahms. "I still don't know who I can trust." She looked at Xilil and then Sam.

Sam shrugged his shoulders. "In my opinion, they've already earned our trust."

"I suppose your right. It's just that it's so critical that we free the Galaef."

"And Viella," added Sam. "But there comes a time when you have to trust someone. And these men know how to operate this destroyer, and we don't."

"Okay." She made up her mind. "Take the Captain, and that one," she pointed at Bradon, "down to the sleeping quarters and secure them with magnetic wrist and ankle locks."

"That won't be necessary," said Xilil. "We have a brig on board. And it'll keep these two traitors from going anywhere."

Chapter Fifty-Five

Dahms stood to one side of the portal watching and waiting as the door slid open. She was surprised, which made her a little wary, that any of these men weren't Thorne supporters. It must have been difficult for Thorne to find enough men to go along with his scheme. He undoubtedly raised the two commanders to their position of rank and then put them in charge of the two destroyers.

Or so it seemed. It was still possible that some of these men were good actors, and because of this she wasn't going to take any chances. She had Sam standing at the other side of the entrance with his phasor in the ready position. And Xilil was there to talk the two men into giving up their phasors.

Zorn was the first to step through the hatch. At first glance it was obvious he was shaken by the recent events. His face was pale and there were little beads of sweat, which had formed on his forehead—on this bitter-cold night.

"What the hell is going on?" asked Zorn as he stepped onto the entrance grid. "Three men, including the commander, on my cruiser are now dead. And you're trying to tell me that the Galaef is a prisoner?" His face started to grow a little red. He was angry and frustrated at the same time.

His phasor was holstered, but he had his hand on the butt.

"Damn it," he said, "Jos was a long time friend of mine." His voice cracked, and the last word of his sentence was almost inaudible.

"We've all lost friends," said Dahms warily as she watched Zorn's hand tighten on the butt of his phasor.

"And who the hell are you?" asked Zorn as he looked at Dahms.

"I'm second in command of the Newusa underground," she said. "I don't suppose you know much about Newusa. The fact is we have a tyrannical, self-appointed Head Councilman who kills people without thought in order to satisfy his greed.

"Several years ago, myself and several others formed an underground movement with the purpose of overthrowing our city government." She looked down the hall of the cruiser. "Now I find myself in the middle of a Galactic crisis. Something I didn't ask for, but here I am. And I'm going to do whatever it takes to save the Galaef."

"With all due respect Ma'am, I don't buy the story of the Galaef being a prisoner in that prison."

Dahms understood his skepticism. Only a fool would try to overthrow the Galaef. And for good reason. There were too many safety nets to cut through. "I'm sticking my neck out by telling you this, but the leader of the Newusa underground is a city councilman. I won't go as far as to tell you who, but because of his position he has access to a lot of privileged information. And when he tells me the Galaef is a prisoner in this prison," she gestured through the wall of the ship with her hand, "I listen. And when he tells me to free the Galaef and put him back in command of the Galactic Empire, like you, I follow orders."

"You have to admit," added Xilil, "both of the commanders acted irrationally when confronted with this information. And now one of them is dead."

"Yeah," agreed Zorn.

Dahms could tell Zorn wasn't completely convinced.

Zorn moved forward a step, and Brale moved beside him. He also had his hand on the butt of his phasor.

"So what now?" asked Brale.

Xilil didn't hesitate. "The first thing is to give up your phasors."

Zorn looked hesitant. "I don't know," he finally replied. "By the death of the commander and because Mace is in the brig, and by my rank, I'm now the new Captain and ranking officer of these ships. By giving up my phasor, I'm surrendering, and that goes against my orders."

Sam was starting to get irritated. He kept his phasor pointed at Zorn's chest. "Look," he said, "if you're true to your allegiance with the Galaef, then you can prove it by giving up the phasor. Otherwise we have to assume you're a threat to our mission to save the Galaef."

Zorn didn't respond.

"Do you understand the logic in what he's saying?" asked Dahms.

Zorn continued to hesitate.

"It only makes sense," said Xilil. "And I, for one, am ready to do whatever it takes to save the Galaef."

"Yeah," said Zorn, and then he added, "If the Commander hadn't gone crazy and started shooting at everyone, I would have never believed this story. But . . ." he said. He slowly pulled his phasor out of the holster and handed it to Dahms.

He looked at Brale. "Go ahead. Give it up."

Brale didn't hesitate to follow orders.

"Okay," said Dahms "let's go to the conference room. "We have to plan a strategy."

She stepped several paces back to let the three crewmen lead the way.

After everyone had entered the conference room, and everybody had been introduced, in not so ceremonial a manner, Dahms stepped up to the head of the conference table. It seemed to Dahms that all the men on this ship, with the exception of Mace—the Commander, and Bradon (who were locked up in the brig), were supporters of the Galaef. She deduced this by their actions and the way in which they had responded to the sudden events. Nevertheless, she would watch them carefully, and she would not assign them any jobs that dealt with handguns.

She would have put all of them in the brig, so as not to take any chances, except she needed them to operate the G15. None of her crew had any experience nor training in the handling of such a sophisticated piece of machinery.

Zorn, Xilil, Brale, Donn, and Phist sat at the far end of the table, while Sam, Gaal, and Xygliper sat near the head of the table. It was a dour group of men—each of them weighing their part in this melee and trying to guess the outcome.

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Brale, who was perhaps the quietest man in the bunch, was sitting with his arms folded on his chest and leaning back in his chair. He never questioned their mission, but he did consider it strange that they were never told why they were ordered to park on a pad outside the prison and to wait for further orders. Now, it seemed the Commanders did know, and they were involved in some nefarious plot against the Galaef. Why else would they have reacted the way they did?

If it came to a fight to save the Galaef, Brale was not opposed to this idea. He had joined the space corps at the age of 18, full of spunk and ready to save the Galaxy from invading hordes of monstrous villains. Because of his high scores on physical and aptitude examinations, he had been sent to the cruiser-training academy on Zenel III—a small planet coincidentally close to his home planet. He graduated near the top of his class, and because of that he was stationed on the Galaef's command ship with orders to man one of the G15's. From the moment he graduated until now he had seen very little action. In fact, his life had become quite boring, so much so that he was considering serving out his term and then returning to civilian life. But now it appeared that his humdrum military career was about to change.

Brale watched as Dahms pulled a computer disc out of her briefcase. She slipped it into the computer and spoke with a commanding voice as she looked at the group of skeptical men. "We're in an awkward situation," she said. She flipped a switch on the computer. "You don't know if I'm telling you the truth about the Galaef being a prisoner behind those walls. And I don't know if you're telling the truth about being a supporter of the Galaef or if, indeed, you're a Thorne supporter."

Zorn didn't hesitate. "Believe me, ma'am. If the Galaef's a prisoner I would be willing to give up my life to free him. And I know that something strange is going on. Why else would the new Captain have acted the way

he did?" He paused as if considering all the possibilities, and then said, "But how do we know you're not a Thorne supporter, and it's Thorne who you're trying to rescue behind those walls?"

"You know if we can't come to an agreement, I'm going to have to lock you up and do this without you."

"You can't do that," said Phist. "Am I correct in assuming that none of you know how to operate this destroyer?"

"Don't you worry about it, Bud," retorted Sam. "We'll figure it out, and if we don't we'll just ram the damn thing into the prison walls."

"Quiet down," said Dahms.

But Sam ignored her and spoke out. "It's not just the Galaef we're after. My sister's a prisoner behind those walls, too. And I'm getting her out one way or another."

Brale understood why everyone was acting as though the situation was hopeless. These revolutionaries from Newusa were suspicious that any of the five crew members were Thorne supporters, on the other hand, the crew members were suspicious of the revolutionaries. It was almost unthinkable that anyone would try to overthrow the Galaef—there were too many failsafe systems. So, were these rebels from Newusa trying to break their buddies out of prison? It wasn't a good situation, but Brale had thought of a possible solution. He cleared his throat, indicating that he had something to say.

Dahms ignored him, which led Brale to believe that she was the type of person who, if you wanted her attention, you had to speak out. She said. "We have to reach some kind of common ground so that we can make plans and achieve our goal."

"It looks like an impossible task," replied Zorn.

"We can't let it be impossible," retorted Dahms. Now, she was getting a little irritated. "We will find a way, if we have to stay here all night."

"The problem is," replied Zorn, "there could be any number of reasons why you would want this ship and our help. As far as I'm concerned it's very probable that you want to get his sister," and he pointed at Sam, "and a bunch of your rebel buddies out of prison, and that's the only reason you're here."

Brale thought he would try again. "Ahem," he said, but this time as he cleared his throat he raised his hand as if he were still at the academy trying to get the teacher's attention.

Dahms glared at him. "What is your name?" she asked.

"Name's Brale, ma'am," he said as he lowered his hand.

"What do you want Brale?"

"Just a suggestion," he said. And then he waited for permission to continue.

Brale noticed as Dahms looked at the other men with an expression on her face as if to ask if Brale's politeness amidst all this turmoil—death of comrades, and distrust amongst this group of men, was feigned or really his nature. It was almost humorous. "Well?" she asked as the corners of her mouth turned up a little.

Brale didn't care. It was his nature to be polite, plus the fact that she had all the weapons, which put her in charge. "Well ma'am," he started, "I have a friend aboard the Flagship—name's Blynthe. He's the Galaef's personal valet. He always knows the Galaef's every move. I could give him a call and find out if the Galaef is on board."

At first there was stunned silence as if everyone had been hit on the head with a board, and then they realized that the most obvious, but allusive solution to the problem had just been revealed.

Finally, Dahms laughed out loud. "By God," she said, "I think you have just solved our problem."

She waited for a moment, but Brale didn't move. He wasn't going to do anything until she gave him permission.

"Please, by all means," she said. "Contact your friend, Mr. Blynthe."

"Thank you, ma'am," he said as he stood up. He crossed over to the intership communicator and punched in his friend's number on the keyboard.

"I hope this works," said Dahms.

Just then a friendly face lit up the screen.

"Hey Brale," said the face. "What's going on?" He paused as he looked past Brale. "Who are all those people behind you?" A puzzled look crossed his face. "I didn't know you had a woman on board."

"Yeah," said Brale. "She was a last minute addition just before we left the Flagship."

"Why's she wearing those funny clothes?"

"Undercover work," said Brale in a whispered voice. "Can't really talk about it, you know."

"Speaking of which, I thought you were under radio silence."

"Yeah, we were, but we're finished with that phase of the mission. So, they lifted the cloak."

"Must be exciting. Finally, getting some of that action you been wanting all these years."

"I can't talk about what we're doing, but actually the reason I'm calling is I need some information in order to complete the mission."

His face went from friendly to quizzical with an almost proud look that Brale would be asking him for information. "Anything I can do to help," he replied.

Brale hesitated trying to find a way to ask the question without giving any clues as to what was going on. Indeed, if Thorne were behind this seemingly ridiculous scheme that Dahms was purporting, then they would definitely not want Thorne to know what had happened this evening aboard the destroyers. "First, you have to promise me, upon our friendship that you won't tell anyone that I have contacted you."

"Sure, . . . but does that mean you weren't suppose to break the silence?"

"I'm doing exactly what I've been ordered to do."

"Okay, . . . go ahead then."

"Both the Galaef and Thorne have information which we need, but again you can't let them know I've contacted you. Okay?"

"They have information you need, . . . but you can't ask them for it?"

"I know it sounds strange, in fact very strange, but I can't explain now. Please trust me."

"Of course, I trust you. But how am I suppose to get the information?"

"You're not. Listen, I'll get the information, but first I have to know if the Galaef and Thorne are aboard the ship?"

Blynthe suddenly looked stunned. "How tight has this cloak of silence been? You haven't been told about the Galaef?"

"The truth is, we haven't had any contact with the outside world."

"You know, you gotta tell me about this mission when you get back. It's getting stranger all the time."

"Sure thing. But right now, I need this information."

Blynthe grimaced, and then said, "About a week ago the Galaef contracted a virus native to the planet Ar, and he was immediately put in a hospital in Newusa."

"That doesn't make sense," commented Brale. "They have better hospital facilities aboard the Flagship. And if they wanted to get him away from the virus why would they leave him on Ar?"

"That's what I wondered."

"And another thing, why didn't they send you down to attend to him while he's in the hospital?"

"I wondered that, too."

"Okay," said Brale. "I'll contact Newusa to get more information. Now what about Thorne?"

"He's been aboard ship ever since the Galaef was put in the hospital."

"So, Thorne's been aboard, and you haven't had any contact with the Galaef since he went to the hospital, not even over a communicator."

"That's right. How did you know that?"

"I didn't. I was just asking." Brale put his hand on the off switch. "You've been a great help. And when I get back I'll tell you everything."

"Yeah, I hope to see you soon."

"Me too." And Brale flipped the switch.

"Well?" said Dahms as everyone found their places around the conference table.

Brale shifted in his chair while considering the situation and listening to Dahms and the others.

Zorn sat straight, in military fashion, and looked her in the eye. "There's no longer a question about who's a prisoner behind those walls." He looked at his men to see if any of them had a different idea, but they just nodded their heads.

He looked at Dahms. "I just don't understand how Thorne thinks he can pull it off."

"We don't know the particulars yet. Later, maybe, but right now we have to formulate a plan." Dahms pushed a button on the computer and a hologram flashed into existence just above the center of the table.

"That's a good thing to have," said Phist.

"The leader of the underground acquired this computer hologram disc of the prison," she stated. She walked around the table and, with her finger almost touching it, she pointed at the tower. "This is the control center for the phasors. Whenever there's a riot or an attempted prison break or whenever the moment necessitates it, a guard in this tower flips a switch and the phasors start firing indiscriminately at different areas in the compound."

Needless to say, the prisoners in the yard don't have a chance, let alone any small group of men trying to break in.

"Obviously, the first thing we have to do is disable this tower and put the phasors out of operation."

"No problem," said Xilil. "Once we hit it with a sonic bomb, you'll never know it was there."

Xygliper smiled. "Just a pile of powder," he said.

"That's right," answered Xilil. "Dust, floating in the air."

There was a faint whistle as a little puff of air escaped from between Xygliper's lips as he made the sound of a whistling wind.

Dahms withdrew her finger from the hologram. "Good," she said. "But now we have to contend with the guards on the walls and inside the perimeter. They're no match for the destroyer, but they might start shooting the prisoners."

Sam turned his attention away from the hologram and looked at Dahms. "The only way to handle this is to blow a hole in the prison wall and move the cruiser inside the compound. From there we can handle any of the guards. And by God, I'm sure they'll all surrender."

Brale cleared his throat again, like he did the first time he had something to say.

Dahms didn't ignore it this time, but her face turned into a frown. She looked at him and said, "What?"

"Excuse me," said Brale, "but it seems it's probable that Thorne will have placed two or more of his own men in a position to watch the Galaef at all times. It's possible that they have orders to kill him if anyone attacks the prison."

Everyone became silent.

Dahms looked contemplative. "It is a possibility," she said, and then paused. "No," she continued, "not a possibility—a probability which I have overlooked," she said apologetically. "You're right, of course. And before we can even think about taking out the tower, we'll have to find out if there are any of Thorne's men watching the Galaef."

"And how do we do that?" asked Phist.

Dahms pondered for a moment, and then said, "I'll have to contact the leader of the underground. Maybe he has, or can get this information. If he doesn't have it, or can't get it, or if he does have it and there are Thorne's men watching the Galaef, then we'll have to send two of our own men disguised as Newusa dignitaries."

"That really complicates the design of the attack," said Zorn.

Dahms walked around the table toward Zorn until she was but a few feet away. "We'll have to take out Thorne's men just before we take out the tower."

Phist stood up looking a little anxious, shaking his head. "I see all kinds of problems with that plan. For one thing what if our men can't get to where the Galaef is being kept prisoner, and then we take out the tower at the scheduled time? The Galaef would be dead."

"That shouldn't be a problem," said Dahms. "We'll send our men in the day before, and they can advise us through Rogae X as to the situation."

Phist sat down still shaking his head. "Too many complications," he muttered quietly.

"Okay," said Dahms, "I'll contact Rogae X in the morning, and then we'll go from there." She paused and then said, "For now, only me and my men will carry phasors, and we'll keep the rest of them locked in the armory."

Zorn stood up. "I believe that is the right thing to do," he said. "I know I am on the Galaef's side, and I believe the rest of us are loyal. I've known these men for a long time, and I trust them. Still with the Galaef's life at stake, I'm not willing to take any chances."

"Good," said Dahms. "Now if there are no more questions nor comments . . ."

As Brale continued to study the hologram he suddenly thought of another problem which needed to be addressed and solved, or they would all go up in smoke—literally.

Brale cleared his throat.

"My God," said Dahms, "Now what?"

"Excuse me ma'am," said Brale. "I foresee one more problem." And then he waited for permission to continue.

Dahms gave Brale a look, and then she said, "I would like to break this meeting up, get something to eat, and sit back and get some rest. Is this something that needs our immediate attention?"

"Yes, ma'am, I'm afraid it is."

"I hope it isn't going to make the situation more complicated than it already is. I'm starting to have doubts

of our success.”

“I’m afraid it will,” said Brale.

Dahms remained silent while she waited.. After a few seconds, in a pleasant voice, she said, "Please, tell us what you're thinking."

“Well ma'am," said Brale, "Our late Commander, the scum that he must have been, contacted Commander Mace every morning at exactly 8 a.m. to tell him that everything was proper aboard our ship.

“On the morning of the fourth day after we had landed on Ar I was sent over to tweak a few adjustments on the onboard computer as they were having a few minor problems. In fact, I was in this very room that morning when Lizz called Commander Mace to tell him everything was in order aboard our ship.

“When he signed off, Commander Mace immediately called the Flagship, but he kept the viewer off and talked rather quietly, so there was no way I could have known what he was saying. I didn't think anything of it at the time, but now I'm quite sure he was reporting to Thorne or one of Thorne's men that everything was proper aboard the two cruisers."

"Yeah, that's right," agreed Zorn. "Mace called the Flagship every morning at five after eight."

“This is the worst news yet. By the curse of the Zorstras," swore Dahms. "What the hell are we going to do now?"

Brale not only thought of the problem, he also thought of a possible solution, so he said, "If you don't mind ma'am?

“By all means,” said Dahms.

“Have Mace make the call. Tell him if he does anything out of the ordinary, he won't live to see the next sunrise."

"That sounds good on the surface," replied Dahms, "But you know they're going to have some kind of secret code. All he has to do is move his eyes a certain way or twist his lips or say a particular word which doesn't seem out of the ordinary to us, but turns out to be a signal to his contact. Then they'll send down a cruiser to drop some kind of bomb and blow us all into the next Galaxy, including the Galaef."

"There's only one thing to do," said Xygliper as he stood up. "Someone will have to go to the brig and cut Bradon in half with a phasor."

Brale understood Xygliper's intent immediately, but everyone was suddenly acting confused and taken aback. "What the hell are you talking about?" asked Zorn.

"You have to let Mace know you're serious. You tell him if he gives any kind of secret signal, he gets cut in half just like Bradon."

Phist, and Zorn jumped out of their chairs. Phist slammed his fists on top of the table. "You're not going to murder a man just to make a point. Hell, we don't even know for sure he's a Thorne supporter."

"That's not the point," said Xygliper. "We have let Mace see the blood run red and pool on the floor. We have to let him see the agony of death and the look on a man's face as he is dying. We have to let him know that once your dead, there's no coming back. We have to let him know that he's very close to suffering the same fate." He paused briefly, then asked, "Do you want to save the Galaef—what's more important Bradon's life or the Galaef's?"

"It's murder," yelled Phist. "No matter how you look at it, it's murder."

"No," said Zorn as he straightened his stance. "This gentleman is right."

Phist looked shocked that Zorn would agree. "What do you mean he's right?"

"This isn't just some strategy of war," said Zorn. "And we're not just talking about our lives, we're talking about the life of the Galaef and what he stands for, which is countless lives throughout the Galaxy. Right now, we're the only chance the Galaef's got, and we have to make sure he gets free no matter what it takes—even if it means killing an unarmed man."

"And who's going to kill this man in cold blood. I can tell you now, it won't be me."

"It won't be me," added Brale, picturing the horror of it.

"Me neither," said Xilil.

Zorn held up his hands to keep anyone else from talking, and then he said, "Since I realize the importance of this, I'll do it."

But Phist wasn't finished. "Damn it," he said. "You can't just murder this man. I'm telling you . . ." he stuttered in anger and frustration. "Even though I don't know this man, I have seen him aboard the Flagship. I saw him at the park with his wife and his two children. He's a man with a life. You can't just murder him."

Zorn started to say something, but Dahms beat him to it. "That's enough," she said calmly. "I've heard what

you've had to say, and I can tell you right now no one is going to be murdered aboard this ship. Phist was right. You don't just murder someone in cold blood to make a point. I'm sure I have a better solution." She looked at Zorn. "You can explain to him that we know about secret signals. And explain to him the bottom line: if they drop a bomb and we die, he dies with us.

"On the other hand," she continued, "if you want to rough Mace up a bit, without any serious damage, so that he understands pain, I have no objection to that."

All the men had resumed their seats at the table. Dahms looked at them for a moment and then said, "Brale, is there anything else."

"Not at the moment, ma'am."

"Good. Then the plan stands like this: tomorrow morning we have Mace contact the flagship, then I contact Rogae X, and after that, if we have to we send two men into the prison to assure the safety of the Galaef, and we synchronize an attack on the prison in order to free the Galaef and the prisoners."

Xygliper let out a little laugh. "You make it sound so easy."

"I can only hope," said Dahms.

They adjourned.

Chapter Fifty-Six

The morning sun crept over the horizon and chased the night creatures back into their holes. The black of night was folded out with a blanket of light from the dim, yellow sun. The stars winked out. The morning colors of Mars sparkled in the light and painted the icy landscape different shades of red, from bright crimson to dark cherry.

The sun was not yet high enough to extinguish the shadow in the pit, which looked dark and foreboding, telling of another day of pain and possible death.

The prisoners shuffled wearily out of the barracks and into the cold morning air moving slowly toward the assembly area.

Since the death of Rodde most of the gang leaders had grown sullen and angry toward Ben, but they kept their distance knowing that he was like a poison bringing death to anyone who harmed him. This caused the gangs to lose their power and many of the gang members had broken away from the gangs and started following Ben wherever he went. They became friendly with him and even protective in their actions. They were glad to keep the food pellets for themselves.

"It's only been two weeks," said Ben, "and you're already starting to look pale and jaded." He and Keegan were walking toward the formation. Samsung was leading, and Em was following not far behind.

"The work is hard, the food is lacking," replied Keegan, "and I haven't been lying around in a hospital bed eating good food and playing fanny pat with the nurse. And what's this about eating in the officers' mess two nights ago?"

Ben grimaced. "I wasn't talking about me. I was talking about you. And the point is, you're body is becoming emaciated. If we don't get you out of here, you're not going to make it to the end of next month."

"Well I'm all for that. There's just one problem—there seems to be a wall in the way, and on the other side of it there's a thousand miles of desert with toral lurking behind the trees waiting to eat escaping prisoners."

Ben grabbed Keegan as he started to stumble. He pulled him upright and looked into his face. "I've convinced a couple of the guards that the Galaef is a prisoner in this prison. Right now they're working on a plan to get him out. And when they do, this prison is going to fall like a stick hut on the windy plains of Azmoria."

"How are they going to get him out? There are six Federation guards outside the only entrance to his small prison, and two on the inside, not to mention the two G15 destroyers."

"Like I said, they're working on it. And also, I'm working on my own escape plan, and I'm going to try to make it happen within the next couple of days."

"By God," declared Keegan, "you name the day and I'll be ready."

Ben wanted to name the day, but the plan hadn't been fully worked out. He knew he couldn't get the Galaef out, so he would leave that to Sharpie and Curt. Right now his plan was for himself, Keegan, Samsung, and Em to escape. He couldn't take anymore prisoners, and he knew that Viella wasn't in danger of starvation. So his

plan excluded her for the moment.

Ben had considered using Em's ability with locks. But how could he be sure of it? The man was a walking paradox. No. Ben decided to work it out with Sharpie and Roqford. And so far the details of his plan seemed sketchy, but nevertheless plausible. During the day, Rodde would send them, one by one, to the prison hospital, and the doctor would have to be in on it, because he would keep the four of them there until nightfall. They would leave by the backdoor where Sharpie would be waiting for them, then she would get them into the guard tube with her keys and sneak them to the guard's barracks.

The timing of the guards would have to be worked out so they could make their way from the side of the guard's barracks to the back of the officers dining hall without being detected. And that's where Roqford came into the picture. He would keep a mental lookout for anyone in the vicinity. If he detected someone he would warn Ben. Then from there they could sneak aboard the supply transport.

"Well?" asked Keegan.

"We're waiting for Sharpie to contact the pilot of the supply transport. She thinks he can be bribed, but he won't be here until tomorrow."

They came to a stop as Keegan stepped into the circle next to Samsung's. Ben put his mouth close to Keegan's ear. "Making it out of the compound and into the supply transport is only half the problem. We have to be able to tell the pilot beforehand where he's going to drop us off. Right now Newusa is not good. So I'm thinking about the Mountain Nation. Samsung is certain that Everette will let us join his clan."

Em stepped into his circle. His towering six feet four inch figure stood out in the red morning sunlight like a weight lifter in a competition spotlight. The hard labor hadn't tired him in the least. In fact he was looking healthier. His muscles were looking stronger and his face had taken on some color. This man was a mystery.

Keegan put his hand on Ben's arm. "I have contacts in the underground, and it won't be a problem for them to hide us in Newusa."

"Yeah, but where do we go until you contact them. All the patrollers in Newusa are going to be on the lookout for us."

As Keegan was mulling it over, Og and the guard with the recorder stepped in front of the formation getting ready for role call. After a moment, Keegan started to say something, but Ben dug him in the ribs with his elbow at the same time nodding his head toward the giant at the front of the formation. Keegan quickly closed his mouth, and they both remained silent.

Ben noticed that this morning it was Lieutenant Lasitor who was in charge of escorting the prisoners to the pit.

The role caller looked at the board. "There will be no changes today," he said. He looked at his board and started calling out names.

Just then Viella stepped onto her number between Ben and Em. "One of the women prisoners became violently ill," she said looking at Ben. "I had to stay to . . ." She never finished her statement.

"You're not only late, you're talking too!" boomed Og. His deep voice thundered upon the air, shaking the ground, and causing everyone to look his way. He grabbed his whip with both hands as if he were going to wring the life out of it and looked toward the back of the formation, at Viella. His forearm muscles became tense, and then rigid.

Ben turned to look at Viella. There was a puzzled expression on her face as though she didn't know what was happening.

Og started forward, taking giant steps, and the prisoners immediately started to clear a path for him. One unlucky soul wasn't fast enough. Og hit him so hard with the back of his hand, it sounded like his neck was broken. Ben could hear the snapping of bones just before the man was catapulted in the air. He landed four or five paces away and lie still. No cold morning breath could be seen curling away from his mouth or nostrils.

Og kept coming, and the prisoners moved faster to get out of his path.

Like the parting of the Red Sea, thought Ben.

Suddenly the five of them were standing alone.

Viella looked stunned by the sudden occurrence of events.

"This is absurd," said Ben. Then he yelled at Og, "She was fifteen seconds late—what the hell's the problem."

"You will obey the rules!" boomed the giant.

He strode twelve more steps, which brought him towering above the five prisoners. He raised his whip higher than normal, which would give him added force when bringing it down on Viella, but as it rushed toward

her, Ben turned his back to the giant. He stepped in and pushed Viella away committing himself to receive the blow. With this action he had no time to change his mind, and he acted so quickly he had no time to think of the consequences. He could hear the whistle of the whip, which he had heard so many times before. His hand started gripping the air with a subconscious desire to be holding a sword. He wanted to run it through this giant's gut. The whip came down hard causing an impact, which almost knocked him off his feet. He staggered under the force, but managed to keep his balance. He could feel the blood seeping into his shirt.

Ben started to turn toward the giant when he felt the giant's hand close around his neck. Looking up he could see the giant was furious with uncontrollable anger. The last time he had seen that look on the giant, he had killed one of the prisoners. The next thing Ben knew the giant picked him off the pad and flung him aside like a rag doll. He flew through the air and landed ten paces from the roll-taker on the hard, cold plastic of the assembly area.

The giant turned and raised his whip. There was no doubt that he would beat Viella until she lay dead on the ground. Ben tried to get up, but pain racked his body, and he fell back.

When Og raised his whip again Samsung picked up a hard, cold rock from the frozen ground and with a mighty heave he hurled it at the giant. It hit Og in the forehead and caused a trickle of blood to run down his nose. He looked confused for a moment, but then he shook his head and the angry expression once again encompassed his face. He aimed his whip at Samsung, but it missed as Samsung easily did a jump and roll. Samsung came in fast unleashing a furious flying kick to the giant's solar plexus, but it had no effect. The giant was quick as he snatched Samsung off the ground and flung him into the soft dirt above the edge of the abyss. Samsung landed on hands and knees and was already scrambling up the side when Keegan rushed the giant.

He aimed a blow for the giant's groin assuming this was the most vulnerable anatomical location. But, with unbelievable speed for a big man, the giant turned sideways and lashed out with a huge foot kicking Keegan with such tremendous force that he went flying over the edge of the pit and down the embankment to the brink of death. Keegan's hands started weakly clawing in the dirt to keep him from sliding into the abyss, but to no avail. His injuries had sapped his strength, and he slid slowly out of sight.

Samsung, seeing Keegan's plight, scrambled down the side of the pit and disappeared below the rim.

Ben started berating himself. He shouldn't have stepped in between Viella and the giant. Viella would have received a blow. The giant would have been satisfied, and he would have returned to the front of the assembly. But now he was so angry he was going to kill Viella, and there was nothing anybody could do to stop him.

With great anguish Ben pushed himself to a sitting position. He ignored the pain and forced himself to stand. He watched as the giant raised the whip once again, high in the air. This time the blow would be Viella's. She turned to the right to receive the impact on her back thereby lessening the chance of injury to vital organs. Her turning brought her face to chest with Em.

Ben was about to run at the giant, this time planning to kick at his knee, but then something happened which kept him frozen in his stance. At that time, for the first time, Ben saw a strange look in Em's eyes—a glassy sheen—almost a glow. Viella had told Ben about it, but it was difficult to imagine. Now, looking at Em, he understood, but it was hard to believe. A shiver ran down Ben's spine, and the thought of Em being a God was becoming more reasonable—no mortal man's eyes can take on that look.

The giant's whip came down.

With one hand Em began pushing Viella to the side, and when the whip was half way through its arc Em repositioned himself quickly into a weight lifters stance.

With Em moving Viella out of the path of the descending whip, it turned out that she received only a partial force of the blow, but it was so vicious it knocked her off her feet. She went flying onto the frosty ground with a look of pain on her face. There was already a six inch strip of Blood visible and soaking through her prison issue blouse.

Before the giant could raise the whip again, Em grabbed the giant's wrist and pulled the giant forward and down, bending him in the middle. By driving his other hand into the giant's gut he was able to lift him off the ground.

Ben would never forget the look of shock and horror on the giant's face.

Em crouched lower in his stance, and then with a forceful upward heave like a shot-put the giant went flying into the air. His flight arced up and over the edge of the pit, and he disappeared screaming into the gaping hole of the open pit mine.

Everybody—the prisoners, the guards, the Federation guards, even the warden as he stood upon the prison wall in his position of authority, were silent as they watched in disbelief.

A loud crash resounded from the bottom of the pit and echoed off the walls, sending forth that eerie feeling one gets when the reaper has taken a life.

Then again the silence. But it lasted only a few seconds. A loud cheer erupted from the prisoners. There was a clamorous clapping of hands and loud shouts of hooray, then they calmed down a bit and started talking excitedly. They didn't know who this strange prisoner was or where he came from or why he never talked, and they didn't care. In this one act he had vanquished extreme misery from their lives.

The warden finally broke through his mental cloud of amazement and started shouting for the prisoners to get back into formation. But they paid him no attention. They had become almost rebellious. It was as if they were thinking the giant was gone, and there was no one to beat them into submission. They continued their unruly behavior.

The guard who did the roll calling dropped his recorder board, drew his gun, and pointed it at Em. He pushed the button on the handle and started to squeeze the trigger.

Ben knew the guard had just changed his phasor from stun to kill. *It's a death sentence*, thought Ben. And then he moved with the speed and ferocity of a chassion lion. The red phasor bolt would cut Em in half. And with this idea in mind Ben sprinted toward the guard. He was no longer aware of the warden's screams or the prisoner's excited chattering or Viella as she stood up. All his thoughts were concentrated on the guard who was bearing down on Em.

The guard saw movement out of the corner of his eye, but he was a fraction of a second too late as he turned toward Ben and started to fire. With his right forearm Ben forced the gun hand and the gun to the guard's left as the man pulled the trigger. The red phasor bolt tore through two of the prisoners standing on the other side of the numbered area killing them instantly.

Ben formed the knuckles of his left hand into a spear and punched the guard in the throat nearly shattering his Adams apple.

The guard stepped back in pain and dropped his phasor allowing Ben to move forward and throw a punch that caught the guard in the face. He went down with a bloody mouth. He fell prone to the ground in agony, squirming about and gasping for air.

Realizing it didn't matter anymore and knowing that he was a dead man, Ben bent over and picked up the fallen guard's phasor. He swung around and fired a bolt at the warden, but the shot missed and hit a guard standing next to him.

Ben had never seen the warden move so fast as he jumped behind a transparent barrier. He was angry, and he started to stutter as he tried to yell his next order. After a few seconds it finally came out, "Turn on the phasors. Kill 'em all. Kill 'em all." He kept yelling until spittle started to run down his chin.

"Into the pit," yelled Ben. "Run."

The guards in the tower were fast on the button. The phasor turrets started rapid firing random bolts into the prison yard.

It was chaos and pandemonium. The prisoners shoved and pushed, and started tripping over each other as they ran to get out of the yard. A few of the prisoners made it over the edge, but a number of them went down when the bolts tore through them. And the body count started increasing.

Ben grabbed Viella by the hand and together, with Em following, they leaped over the side of the pit and slid down the soft gravel. They dug their toes in to keep from sliding into the dark abyss.

At least another sixty of the prisoners made it over the edge. But the phasors' bright searing beams continued to shoot forth in blinding random patterns burning holes in everything they hit and creating black charred holes in the ground. Little rivulets flowed from melting rocks. The guard who tried to shoot Em was still lying on the ground and was cut to pieces. Phasor bolts tore into the dead prisoner's corpses mangling them beyond recognition.

Even with the prisoners safely over the edge of the pit the warden continued to yell, "Kill them all! Kill them all!" And while he yelled he stamped his foot up and down in violent hate. He was oblivious to everything except killing the rebellious prisoners, even oblivious to Roqford. The cat lay calmly beside him as he ranted.

Even if the warden had noted Roqford's tail twitching, he wouldn't have understood it. He had never taken the time to read about cats, or the civilization and culture on Telephore six. It may have been his biggest mistake, but he would never know.

The big cat rose quietly to his feet, and as the warden yelled at his guards, Roqford walked a little to the front of him and with a clean swipe of his long sharp claws he tore out the warden's throat.

The warden was so bound up in his hate that the event, at first, eluded him. He wondered what the cat was doing. He didn't realize he was dying until his head plopped forward on a torrent of blood, which was gushing from the gaping hole where his throat had previously been. His lips swept back in a look of horror, and his bulging eyes popped open. Why had Roqford done this evil act? What had he done to him? The warden fell forward and was dead before his fat face plowed into the smooth plastic on the wall's walkway. His jowls quivered a couple of times, and then he lay still.

Chapter Fifty-Seven

Zorn and Phist stood outside the bars of the brig looking in at Commander Mace and Bradon. Zorn shook his head. "What made you do it?" he asked as he looked at Mace.

"Do what?" retorted Mace in a commanding voice. "We haven't done anything, but you have. And once we get back to the Flagship, you'll be court-martialed and sent away for the rest of your life."

"There's too much evidence that says you're a liar," said Zorn. "So, here's the deal," he said as he pulled his phasor from its holster. He aimed and pulled the trigger. The blue ray struck Bradon full in the chest and knocked him against the wall. He went down with a look of stupefaction glued to his face.

Mace was startled and jumped back in fear. "What the . . ."

"I'm not finished," interrupted Zorn. "Here's the deal. You make your call to the Flagship this morning as usual with no secret signals, and I'll let you live." He unlocked the bars and motioned for Mace to follow him. Sam and Xyg followed from behind holding a phasor on them.

Zorn lessened his pace, and when Mace came closer Zorn quickly turned and hit him in the stomach as hard as he could. "That one's for the Galaef," he said with a tone of anger, and then he doubled his fist and hit him on the side the head. "And that one's for me, you bastard." He didn't dare hit him in the face. There had to be no look of trouble when Mace made his call.

Zorn grabbed him by the collar and pulled him groggy and stumbling toward the elevator.

Once they reached the conference room Zorn pushed him through the doorway with such force that he wasn't able to stop until he hit the conference table.

"Commander Mace, we meet again," said Dahms.

"I don't know who you are lady, but you're going to pay for this, and you're going to pay hard."

"Commander Mace, hasn't everything been explained to you? If you don't make a correct call, that is if you send any kind of signal that something is wrong, then you're going to die along with the rest of us." She paused. "Do you understand that? You'll be dead and then it won't matter what Thorne does or what the Galaef does. You'll be gone, and you'll never be coming back."

A look of resignation crossed Mace's face. He said, "You don't get it lady, if the Galaef is freed I'll be sent to the Zi pits—the most horrifying death known to mankind. I would rather take my chances of being killed by a sonic bomb with the rest of you."

Now Dahms had a problem. Mace might be right, but she had to make him think there was hope for him so he would make the call with no tricks. "You know as well as I and everyone in this room . . . hell everyone in the Galaxy knows Thorne can't take over as Galaef—too many failsafe systems. So, if you switch over to our side now, I assure you the Galaef will never know you were involved in a plot to overthrow him. And if by some off chance he finds out about your part in this, I will personally stand up for you. I will explain that if it hadn't been for you, we could have never saved him." She paused and then said, "And you know I won't be lying, and he'll know it too, because without your help right now there's no way we can save the Galaef."

"That puts me in a hell of a spot, doesn't it?"

"There's no spot at all," answered Dahms. "If you help Thorne, he'll hit us with a sonic bomb and you'll be dead. If you help the Galaef, you have a chance of surviving and looking like a hero. It doesn't take a genius to figure out which is the best way to go." Dahms looked at the clock. "Time's running out," she said. "It's four minutes after eight."

Mace rubbed the side of his head where the knot had formed. He pondered for a moment. "I guess your right," he finally said. He walked over to the communicator and dialed in the number, and then put on the headphones as he waited.

A moment later he started talking. "This is Commander Mace." . . . Pause . . . "I'm reporting in." . . . Pause .

.. "Everything is proper." . . . Pause . . . "Out."

He looked at Dahms. "I want you to know that I am switching my allegiance to the Galaef at this time. I was never convinced that I wanted to go against the Galaef anyway, but the threat to my family was frightening, and the money was such a large sum I found I couldn't turn it down." He paused. "But I can see now that you're right—the Galaef can't be overthrown. It was pure folly to think so. I can only say that Thorne was very convincing, and the threats he made about my wife and children were horrifying." He said in a solemn voice, "That's my only excuse, and it may sound flimsy, but it seemed reasonable at the time."

"I'm glad you're on our side," said Dahms. "But we can't take any chances. I'm sure you understand." She pointed at Zorn and Phist. "Take him back to the brig."

Dahms was relieved as she began to believe they could succeed. There were so many things that could have gone wrong, and yet it was going better than she had anticipated. Maybe it had to be this way because it was meant that the Galaef, somehow in the great scheme of things, had to retain his authority in the Galaxy. *What the hell*, she thought, *I don't have time to philosophize the matter.*

"So now what, ma'am?" asked Bradon as he looked up from behind a cup of coffee. He had just spent the last three hours watching the prison walls through the viewer—the early morning watch.

Brale walked up and took over the watch.

As Bradon stood up Dahms said, "So now I contact Rogae X. If we are to have any chance at all for success, we're going to need his help and maybe the prayers of a dozen Gorsken Monks."

Bradon nodded his head in agreement.

Dahms walked over to the communicator and flipped off the switch to the viewer and flipped on a switch, which would distort the voice of Rogae X, then she dialed the number.

A moment later a voice answered. "Hello."

"This is Dahms. How is everything in Newusa?"

"The same," replied Rogae X. "Have you captured the G15's?"

"Yes we have, but we've run into a few problems." She sat down in the chair, which faced the blank screen of the communicator.

"Was anyone hurt?" he asked.

"Not from our crew, but the commanders of both G15's went a little berserk when it was suggested that the Galaef might be a prisoner inside the prison. Commander Litz killed two of his men before one of the remaining crewmembers could shoot him down. Right now we have Commander Mace and one of his crew members in the brig."

"You have the G15's . . . that's good."

"It's only half good. One of them was disabled during the gunfire. Brale says it'll take a week and a half to bring it back on line, but that's only if he can find the parts."

"It doesn't matter. One is enough. With it you should be able to plan an attack to free the prisoners and the Galaef."

Dahms agreed with enormous reluctance and said, "Yes, we can, and have planned an attack, but there is one important question that we don't know the answer to, and we were hoping that you might be able to tell us."

She paused, waiting for him to say something, but he didn't. So, she continued, "Are some of Thorne's men guarding the Galaef inside the prison?"

"According to the information I've been able to gather the answer to that question is 'yes.'"

Unavoidably disappointed Dahms said, "That's unfortunate, and that brings us to the really big question . . . if it looks like the Galaef is about to be freed, do they have orders to kill him?"

There was silence on the communicator and finally Rogae X said, "I have no information on that. So, I would have to assume the worst."

"That's what I was afraid of," replied Dahms. "And that means we're going to have to get two of our men inside the prison, and then inside where the Galaef is being held."

Dahms could hear him draw in a deep breath, and then he said, "I will immediately call the warden and tell him that two of Thorne's men will be coming to inspect the security surrounding the mystery prisoner." He paused for a moment and then asked, "What time shall I say your two men will be arriving?"

Dahms replied, "We have planned our attack so there will be the fewest number of casualties amongst the prisoners. We're assuming it will be best when they are in their cells in the evening."

"I'll send in Sam and Gaal at 5 o'clock. They will have one hour to get in with the Galaef and subdue Thorne's men."

"5 o'clock then?"

"Right," responded Dahms. "We'll coordinate our times and keep our fingers crossed."

"Good luck," said Rogae X. "Over and out."

"Over and out." Dahms walked over to the food dispenser and punched in the code for a cup of coffee. A moment later she reached into the slot and came out with a steaming cup. As she was blowing on it she walked over to Brale. "Get on the intercom," she said, "and tell the men to meet us here in 10 minutes."

"Yes ma'am," said Brale. He flipped a switch on the panel next to him. "Attention all crewmen. Attention all crewmen. There will be a meeting in the war room in 10 minutes. I repeat, there will be a meeting in the war room in 10 minutes. That is all."

Five minutes later all the men were seated, and Dahms was standing at the head of the table. "I've talked to Rogae X, and we now know for certain the Galaef is being guarded by Thorne's men. What we don't know is if they have orders to kill him if the prison is being attacked. And that means we will have to assume they will kill him. So we will send in two men to secure the situation." She hesitated and then continued in her usual commanding fashion. "I've decided to send in . . ."

But she never had a chance to finish her sentence.

Brale jumped out of his seat. "What the . . . ?" he yelled. "Excuse me ma'am, but what's going on?" He stood staring at the screen in front of him—the one that kept surveillance on the prison.

It took Dahms a moment to shift gears and to realize that Brale was watching something at the prison. "Switch it to the large screen," she commanded.

He touched a switch and suddenly they were all watching as phasors were firing from the turrets on the walls into the prison yard below.

"What happened?" shouted Dahms.

"I don't know," exclaimed Brale. "All of a sudden the phasors started firing."

Dahms and the men watched the screen as red streaks kept flashing from the phasor turrets.

All of Dahms' instincts told her they had to attack and attack now, but she didn't want to be hasty. Decisions made too quickly oftentimes were fatal. "What if it's just an exercise?" she asked.

"It's no exercise," retorted Sam. "Those phasors are firing into the prison yard and men and women are being killed. We have to make a decision and make it quick."

"Look," said Phist, "there's the warden off to the right with that big cat, just like every morning when the prisoners assemble, but this time it looks like he's shaking his fist in anger."

Dahms pointed at Brale. "Hone in on the warden and enlarge."

Brale rotated a little ball in the panel and pushed several buttons. Suddenly there was the warden big as life, his face all red and his fist shaking in the air. The way his mouth was moving it looked like he was yelling, "Kill them all. Kill them all," over and over again.

As they continued to watch, the cat rose from his lying position next to the warden and slowly stepped forward.

"Damn that's a big cat," said Phist in awe.

"That's what you say every time you see him," commented Xilil.

"Well, look at him."

Suddenly the cat raised his paw and with a quick swipe took out the warden's throat.

Zorn jumped up. "What the . . . ?"

"I don't believe it," said Phist. "Why did he do that?"

No one said anything. They just stood in shocked silence as they watched the blood spurting from the warden's neck. His eyes rolled toward the cat in despair. His head plopped forward onto his chest. And then he fell to the platform, his body bounced and jiggled before it became still.

Sam finally broke the silence. "Now you see," he yelled. "This is no drill. We have to attack. And we have to attack now."

Dahms knew Sam was worried about his sister. And so was she, but she also had to consider the Galaef. "Thorne's men won't kill the Galaef as long as there is no threat of him being freed. If the prison riot is squelched and everything is brought under control and back to normal, then we can proceed with our plans."

"Not very likely," said Xygliper as he looked over Dahms shoulder at the screen. "It's possible the Galaef is already dead, and if not, when this mess is over and done, Thorne will probably move him somewhere else or have him killed."

"Stop chattering. You're wasting precious time," yelled Sam. "People are being killed down there. We have

to act and act quickly."

"Just wait," ordered Dahms stiffly. "We have to think this through."

"I agree with Sam," said Zorn. "I desperately want to save the Galaef, but there are too many unknown variables to figure out all the scenarios. We have to act, and we have to act now, or it may be too late."

Brale said gravely, "Ma'am, they probably had orders to kill the Galaef at the first sign of trouble."

Dahms hesitated.

"I agree," said Xygliper. "If we act, and the Galaef is freed, we're heroes, but if we act, and he's killed all will not be lost. We can still go after Thorne. And in sixty days the computer will choose a new Galaef. If we act now we still might be able to save him."

"Okay," said Dahms with reservations. "Knock out the tower."

Chapter Fifty-Eight

Jacob pushed the invi button on the brim of his hat and the razor sharp blade shot out from inside the rim, reflecting light from its deadly edge. If he were to let go of the hat in a throwing motion, the section of blade, where his hand had been grasping the rim, would snap out, completing the deadly circled blade of Norimuinatit.

All menservants in his country were schooled in the art of hat throwing. It was deemed that a manservant must protect his master at all costs and with any weapon available, and for this reason, among the other courses of weaponry at the University, there were three courses, which dealt specifically with the subject of "hatting." And before one could graduate as a manservant he had to complete all three courses.

Jacob pushed the button again and the blade disappeared into the rim.

In all the history of menservants on Altos there had only been two situations when the hat had to be used. The first one involved a burglary. The manservant, Charles, was standing on the other side of the street looking through a store window while he waited for his master to finish shopping for the day.

He heard a scream from the maidservant who had accompanied the master into the store. When he turned he saw his master, who had just exited the store, being attacked by a would-be robber. He quickly reached for his phasor—the weapon of choice in that situation, pulled it from the holster, and aimed, but as he pulled the trigger the circuitry shorted out and the phasor became inoperable. In a desperate attempt to keep the burglar from harming his master, he quickly snatched the hat off his head, pushed the invi button, and made a throw with a quick snap of the wrist. The flight of the hat was not completely accurate, but considering the distance, it had to be considered acceptable. The hat sliced into the attacker's right buttock causing him to go down in pain. An ambulance and the police were called. And that ended the first incidence of hatting.

Almost a hundred years later, the second incident again involved an attempted burglary, but this time it happened in the master's mansion. In the middle of the night the manservant had gotten up in his nightgown and flipped his hat on his head—out of habit, but as he left the room to go to the kitchen for a glass of milk, he forgot to take his phasor. (By doing so he violated one of the first rules of man serving). While in the kitchen he heard a noise coming from one of the family rooms on the other side of the hall. He quickly and quietly walked across the hallway to investigate. When entering the room he saw a man holding a valuable painting in his hand. And just then his master, who had gotten up earlier and was reading in the study, stepped through the door at the far end of the room. He had a fire poker in his hand.

The burglar dropped the painting, pulled his phasor, and turned toward the manservant, but seeing he was unarmed he whirled toward the master who had raised the poker above his head. The burglar took aim and was just about to shoot the master when suddenly a hat cut through his neck nearly parting his head from his torso.

Considering there had only been two incidences in all those years it seemed probable to Jacob that he would never need to use the hat; nevertheless, he continued to practice with it. He also kept up on his swording, cane, and phasor practice. Recently he had decided to start practicing karate again.

He put the hat on his head. Made sure the phasor was in its shoulder holster beneath his jacket, and left the room.

It was early morning, and he was about to make his rounds to check on the other servants when one of the warden's guards came running down the hallway. "There's something happening in the yard," he yelled as he ran by. "I just saw it on the monitor, and it looked like Roqford did something to the warden."

Jacob turned and followed the guard down the hallway. If his master were in danger, Jacob would have to

do anything necessary to save him, even if it meant putting his life on the line.

They ran up the stairs to the entrance of the crossover tube. The guard punched in the code and as the door started to slide back they squeezed through the opening and started running down the walkway.

When they got to the other end, the guard punched in the code and the door slid back. They stepped out of the tube and onto the prison-wall walkway. The phasors were firing random shots and melting whatever they hit including the ground. The prisoners were below the rim on the embankment of the pit holding on for life. The guards on the wall were running for their lives as Roqford sauntered along behind them. The guards weren't stupid enough to try to fire on Roqford. It was known that these cats from a distance of thirty feet and sometimes further depending on their size were so fast and so maneuverable that they could have you in their jaws before you could pull the trigger. And if you did pull the trigger it wasn't likely that you would hit anything but air.

To the left, about ten feet away, the warden was lying on the walkway with his head partly turned to the left. There was a large pool of blood forming under his neck and chest, and running over the side.

The first thing Jacob thought as he looked at the warden was, *unemployed*. He wasn't sure, but he didn't think he had enough money to get back to his home planet.

What have you done? he asked Roqford. And then he added, *You've gotten yourself into a terrible mess.*

Don't worry, answered Roqford. *In actuality, I have saved the warden from a long and horrible death in the Zi Pitsss.* He stopped, turned, and laid down with his head hanging over the edge, facing the prisoners.

Jacob and the guard watched the firing phasors. Jacob wondered what started the whole affair and then wondered why Roqford was so confident. And what did he mean he had saved the warden from a long and horrible death?

And then the tower disappeared.

The top of it, along with the men inside, was gone instantly and then the rest of it, like a sandcastle beneath a wave, crumbled into nothingness. And the phasors blinked out.

"By the curse of the Zorg," whispered Jacob. He didn't normally talk with this kind of language—being a dignified manservant, but at the moment he was in the middle of a battle with phasor bolts flying everywhere. His master was dead. He had been unable to save him, and more than that a friend of his was the culprit who killed him.

"What now?" asked the guard.

"Yeah," answered Jacob. "What now?" He didn't know what to do. At the moment he was without a master.

So, the two of them just stood and watched.

[Chapter Fifty-Nine](#)

Frostadeem, a tall, but lithe and agile man, was watching out the window as the sonic bomb disintegrated the control tower. He was alarmed when the phasors first started firing at the prisoners and shocked when the cat ripped out the warden's throat, but when the tower fell into a little pile of fine powder, he knew that the time he had dreaded and hoped would never come had now arrived. He could not stop the movement of fate, and now he would have to take action—dangerous action.

As his hand slipped to the butt of his phasor his finger inched its way up to the safety catch and flipped it off. Frosty, as his friends called him, was not afraid, for he knew about danger and had known about danger his entire life. By the time he was eight years old he was being trained by his father to be an asteroid miner.

When he was older his mother told him that people would gasp in horror when they heard that an eight-year-old boy was being taken to the asteroid fields. But that was his father's way. "Teach 'em young and let them become learned in the ways of life and in the ways of their profession, then they'll be successful, like me."

In terms of asteroid miners his father had been very successful. Most miners were able to eke out a living, but would seldom hit the big one. His father, on the other hand, hit it big, not once, but twice and had enough money put away to keep his family comfortable for three generations. So why did he keep mining? Because, as he put it, "I love my work."

But Frosty knew that what he really loved was the danger. The asteroid belt, which is not common to most solar systems, orbited between the fourth and fifth planet and contained hundreds of millions of asteroids. It

had once been the fifth planet from the sun, and what made it explode into all those asteroids no one knew. Scientists were unable to determine the cause.

A hundred years before his father was born, a space explorer discovered Zen I crystals on one of the asteroids, and that started the rush. Explorers came by the thousands. They had visions of becoming rich off the asteroid belt, but they soon found that not only were the Zen I crystals hard to find, but that mining the asteroids was extremely dangerous. Maneuvering a spaceship in and landing on an asteroid was tricky enough, but they soon discovered that there were gas pockets hidden under the surface of many of the asteroids. When a miner punctured one of these pockets with the tip of his pneumatic hammer an explosion would occur, which would immediately kill the miner or send him reeling off into space, never to be found again.

The miners used jet packs to guide them back to their spaceships in the event an explosion would propel them into space, but oftentimes the explosion damaged the jetpacks beyond maneuverability. So, after awhile, they developed a pneumatic hammer with longer handles so the miner wouldn't be directly over the explosion when it occurred. They also started using two grappling hooks with lines attached to each side of a belt around their waist in order to secure themselves to the asteroid.

Frosty would never forget his first trip to the asteroid belt. Early that morning his father gently shook him out of a dream. "Come on, boy," he said. "It's time to go."

Frosty jumped up, quickly performed his morning quotidian, dressed, grabbed a bite to eat and was standing at the front door before his father had even finished his shower.

When they arrived at the spaceport, Frosty's father shut off the engines, walked around to the other side of the land cruiser, opened Frosty's door, and snatched him up. "Okay son," he said. "I'm going to carry you across the threshold like a young man and his girlfriend on their first date." And with that he carried him through the spaceport to his spaceship, stuck his keycard into the slot, and when the door opened he carried him on board and strapped him into a seat.

After his dad had made his first big strike he had bought state-of-the-art equipment, including a new spaceship, which had space warp capabilities making the trip to the asteroid belt very very fast.

For several months his father had been instructing him in the use of the equipment and the method of working and moving about on an asteroid. He even had him dress up in his spacesuit on several occasions to get used to the feel of it and to learn how to move about in it.

Once again, before they left the ship, he went over the equipment, explaining to his son how to use it, then finally he said, "Okay, Frosty my boy, when we get to the mining area I'm going to secure your grappling hooks into the rocks, and you're going to watch as I do the mining." He paused, "Understand?"

"Okay, dad." He said with excitement.

It was quite an adventure being with his dad for the first time on an asteroid. The sky was black and the stars were brighter than he had ever seen them. Off to the right, his dad had pointed to a bright star and said, "That's our planet, our home, boy."

And then his dad started mining while he watched.

As it turned out he did nothing but watch for the next nine months or the next 36 trips. His dad wanted him to get a little more coordinated with the equipment and to get a little bigger in physical size. Then on his ninth birthday much to his great delight he got his own pneumatic hammer, much smaller than his dad's, but it was big enough that he could break apart rocks and look for Zen I crystals. He was so happy.

When they got to the asteroid he grappled his hooks and started his hammer going, breaking apart rocks and digging up debris, looking for those crystals. At last, he was a real miner like his dad. He still had to go to school on school days and his dad was insistent that he get a proper education, but now he knew he was a miner and would be for the rest of his life. And even at the age of nine he knew he wanted to hit just one big one so that he could be successful like his dad. For several years they mined without an incident. They found a few crystals from time to time, never anything much, but enough to pay for their trips with some left over. And after awhile he learned to love the excitement and the danger of it, just like his dad.

When his friends at school would ask him if he was scared he would laugh and tell them it was more fun than ice gliding.

It was only one week before the incident when his best friend asked him if he wasn't afraid of an explosion. Frosty looked at him with a whimsical smile and said, "My dad always says, 'if two grappling hooks and a jet pack can't keep you alive, then it was just meant to be your time.'"

A week later, it was meant to be his father's time. It was just a few minutes after they had set up and started mining that his father hit a gas pocket. A violent explosion ripped the grappling hooks out of the rocks and sent

his father spiraling into space. The explosion was so forceful that it even tore one of Frosty's grappling hooks loose from fifty feet away. The outside hook held, which caused him to be thrown in an arc, up and then down, slamming him into the asteroid twenty feet on the other side. The force of the impact ripped his suit and cracked his air canister. Being smashed into the asteroid caused his vision to become fuzzy, and he passed out for a few seconds. When he became conscious again he was groggy and confused by the faint hissing sound, which seemed to be coming from behind him.

Then he heard his father's voice and his eyes opened wide as the memory of what had just happened came flooding back. "Where are you?" he yelled.

"I'm afraid I'm in a bit of trouble," his father answered. "I've been thrown into space and my jetpack isn't working."

"I'll come get you," yelled Frosty with panic in his voice. He flipped the switch to turn on his jetpack, but nothing happened. He flipped it again and again, but still nothing happened. "It's not working," he screamed in desperation. "Oh my God, it's not working."

He pushed himself to his feet and stumbled toward the spaceship. "I'll put on another one, and then I'm coming for you."

He stumbled faster. The ship was only a hundred yards away. "I can make it," he cried, his voice breaking into sobs. "I can make it."

"Not this time," answered his father resignedly. His voice came in so faint over the communicator, it was almost inaudible.

"I can make it," sobbed Frosty. He was now fifty yards from the ship. The hiss of the escaping air from his canister was growing louder, but he didn't care. He only wanted to save his father.

"Listen," his father yelled as he knew his voice was becoming less audible, "there's not much time. So, listen to me. I have had a great life with a loving wife and a loving son, and I regret nothing. Now, my last wish in life is that I want you and your mother to have a great life." A slight pause, then he yelled, "repeat that." Even with the yelling, his voice was hard to hear.

Frosty was choked up and could hardly say a sentence. Finally, he blurted out, "You want me and mom to have a great life. That is your final wish."

"Will you do that for me, son?"

"I'll try dad. I'll try."

Silence.

"Dad? Dad?" There was a little crackling noise on the other end, and then nothing.

Frosty stumbled into the air lock and got quickly to the ship's controls. He lifted off the asteroid and then spent hours and hours looking for his father, but to no avail. His father was lost in space.

His mother cried every day for nearly three months, then one morning she got up and never cried again. She said it was time for her to follow her late husband's last request and to have a great life.

Over the years she never dated nor went out with any male friends. When Frosty asked her why she simply said, "I could never meet another man like your father."

Frosty gave up going to the asteroid fields, not because he was afraid, but because he loved his father, and he did not want to be reminded of his death.

When Frosty was 20 years of age he decided to become a space cadet with the idea of someday joining the Galactic fleet. It never occurred to him that he would be lucky enough to be stationed aboard the Galaef's Flag Ship, but after he graduated from cadet school and after all the test scores in psychology, physical dexterity, physical strength, mental acuity, and IQ had come in, it was determined by the scorers and the computer that Frosty was Flag Ship material. He was then sent to Security Training School where he was taught, among other subjects, protocol -for dealing with dignitaries, linguistics -for designing and breaking code, logic, espionage and counter espionage, and combat, including small arms weapons, jujitsu, blades, and various other devices for killing an enemy.

Secretly, and without his knowledge, he and his classmates were continually bombarded with subliminal messages encouraging loyalty to the Galaef and the Galactic Empire. (The professors in psych conditioning never found subliminal messages to be very effective, but the security school used them anyway. Their conclusion was, "It certainly can't hurt.")

Finally, after six years of training, he was sent to the Galaef's flagship as a top-notch security officer. Only the very best ever served aboard the Galaef's flagship.

He had served in his capacity for eight years, and during that time he met a woman named Lilt, and much to

his mother's happiness, they were married.

Six years later Lilt became pregnant and decided to terminate her contract with the Federation. As she told Frosty, "I don't want to raise our child on a space ship." And she moved back to her home planet.

Since then Frosty would visit his wife and child, whenever he could take a leave. With only six years left, it was his plan to finish out his 20 and then retire, so he could be with Lilt and their child permanently.

But now, with this new and terrible situation, he was not sure he would ever see them again.

It had only been a couple of months since he was approached by a secret messenger sent by Thorne. The offer was simple: guard the Galaef in the prison on Ar, and if any one tries to break him out, kill him. In return for this service he was offered five times more money than his father had accumulated.

"If you accept the offer, but fail to carry out your orders, your wife and child will meet with a fatal accident, and you will be hunted down and killed," said the messenger.

"I'm not concerned with any of that," replied Frosty "And, in spite of your threats, I accept the offer." In actuality, Frosty was concerned with all of that, and he knew if he turned down the offer, the three of them would be killed in order to protect Thorne's plan. He had been trained well enough in security matters to know that this was, in reality, a one-sided offer. If he did not accept the offer, there was only one consequence, but if he did accept, there were several possible outcomes. In the first place, Thorne's plan might succeed, in which case he wouldn't have to kill the Galaef, and he could take the money and retire to Lilt's home planet. If Thorne's plan didn't work, . . . well there were a number of possibilities, none of which looked good. He spent his nights going over all the possible scenarios, hoping he could find a solution, but it never came.

As he pulled the phasor from its holster he whirled around to face his partner in this heinous crime. He and Mordrous had been placed on the inside with the Galaef with orders to kill him if the necessity presented itself. The other six guards were placed on the outside to slow down any possible attackers.

"What are you doing?" asked Mordrous in a threatening tone.

"I won't let you kill him," said Frosty calmly.

"What are you talking about. No one's attacking. We don't have to kill him."

Frosty smiled sardonically. "You saw the tower go down, and you know it was a sonic bomb. And therefore you know they're coming." He paused as his smile turned into a frown. "Your tactic of ignorance won't work."

Mordrous let out a guilty laugh like the little boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "We have to kill him. You know that."

The Galaef stood up in his small barred room. "What do you mean you have to kill him. Are you talking about me?"

"Shut up," reported Mordrous in a raised voice. "Just shut up." He looked back at Frosty. "We have to kill him." There was a frantic tone of urgency starting up in his voice. "If we don't kill him our families will be assassinated. Do you want that?"

"Haven't you figured it out yet?" answered Frosty still in a calm voice. "They don't have to know we didn't kill him."

Mordrous' face was turning red with anger. "You fool. You know they'll find out eventually," he growled in a frustrated voice. "If we don't kill the Galaef, our wives and children will be murdered, and after they kill the Galaef, they will find us and send us to the Zi pits." Mordrous' anger turned to pleading. "All we have to do is kill the Galaef, take the money, and go home. Don't be a fool, we can't protect the Galaef."

Frosty kept his phasor aimed at Mordrous' chest. "Of course they'll figure it out, but by the time they do, we'll have our families in a safe place."

"I can't take that chance," said Mordrous with a cracked voice as he started to consider his options.

Frosty frowned. "And I won't be responsible for the collapse of the Galactic Empire, and all the wars to follow, and all the countless number of lives lost."

Mordrous tightened his grip on the butt of his phasor. He looked as though he was planning something, probably falling to the left or to the right while pulling his phasor out of the holster on his right hip.

"Don't try anything stupid," said Frosty as he watched the look in Mordrous' eyes. "You know I can get a shot off before you can pull that phasor." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a shiny disc. "But just in case you get off a lucky shot at the same time . . ." He threw the disc into the cell with the Galaef. "Now he has the key to his cell."

The Galaef bent over and picked up the disc. "If you let me go," he said, "I'll give both of you immunity from a court martial. You'll be given an honorable discharge, and you can take the money Thorne gave you and go home."

"Sounds great," said Mordrous, "except for two things. First, I don't believe you and secondly, even if you were sincere that still doesn't save my wife and children."

"By the stars, man, you have my word on it," retorted the Galaef. He sounded astonished that anyone would dare to call him a liar. "And as far as your wife and children are concerned I will personally call and have them relocated to a safe place."

"I wish I could believe that," said Mordrous. "You're the last man in the Universe I want to kill. I wish it was Thorne, instead, but I can't take the chance."

And with that last statement Mordrous dove to his left while at the same time pulling his phasor from its holster. He got a shot off, but frosty moved with agility and lightening speed as he flung himself to the his right. Mordrous' blue phasor bolt missed its target and hit the ceiling. It was Frosty's quick movement that saved him from stun. As he pitched to his right he fired at Mordrous, and as Frosty hit the floor, so did the blue phasor bolt hit Mordrous in the chest.

"I told you not to do it," said Frosty, "but you tried it anyway." He pushed himself up from the floor and walked over to where Mordrous was lying. "You should have known it would never work. In fact, I'm sure you did—just a desperate act in a desperate situation."

"Nice move," said the Galaef in a voice of relief. He inserted the disc into the key slot.

"Just a moment," said Frosty as the door slid back. He didn't point his phasor at the Galaef, but the look on his face told the Galaef he would if he had to.

The Galaef stopped and waited. "What? And make it quick. We still have six guards in front of this building to deal with."

"I want you to know that we didn't take this job for the money. We took it because it was a one-sided offer. If we hadn't accepted it, we would have had a fatal accident somewhere on the ship." He paused waiting for the Galaef to indicate that he understood.

But instead the Galaef asked, "And?"

Frosty didn't hesitate. "And I want your assurance that you will hold to your word. That you will get our families into a safe place and that you'll let us go with the money to join them."

"And if I don't?"

Frosty was surprised by this answer and had to stumble around for a moment. "I . . . well, you'll have to contend with the six guards by yourself."

The Galaef laughed. "That's not much of a punishment," he said.

"I've always assumed you were a fair and honest man, and I expected a different answer." Frosty shuffled his feet. He felt uneasy speaking on a one-on-one basis with the Galaef.

"Okay," said the Galaef in a more serious tone. "I will keep my promise to Mordrous." He nodded toward the man lying on the floor. "But not to you."

Frosty was stunned by this last statement. "Why not to me?"

The Galaef stepped through the doorway. "Because at this moment there isn't a man in the entire Galaxy I trust more than you. You've had a test more brutal than any computer or any psych professor could have ever devised, and you came through it with great success. I know, without a doubt, that you will never betray me, and I know you're smart and quick. I saw the way you took down Mordrous and because of this I'm going to make you my chief security officer. You will be in charge of all the security on the ship, and you will escort me wherever I go. The fact is, I still can't believe that Thorne got through my security so easily and without any warning." He looked Frosty straight in the eye. "I need someone like you. It appears I always have."

Frosty didn't know what to say. So, he didn't say anything.

The Galaef turned and walked toward the front door, which was the only door to this small building. "Now let's do something about those six guards."

Frosty caught up with him. "Please allow me, sir."

Frosty made sure his phasor was still set on stun and then he opened the door and stepped outside. He quickly brought down three of the guards before the remaining three could react and then he jumped back inside just as a phasor bolt hit the door frame behind him.

"You three out there," yelled Frosty, "I know all of you by name and rank, and where you're from. I'm telling you now that the Galaef is in here with me, and he orders you to put down your weapons." He paused and then added, "If you do, he will grant you immunity from court martial."

"I don't know what you're up to, but I do know that what you're saying is absurd," yelled Bale. "The Galaef's not in there." He looked at Shast. "Is he?"

"You stupid Mesmalian beast, who do you think we've been guarding all this time?"

"What!?" asked Bale. "You're telling me it is the Galaef?"

"I haven't known for sure, but I've had my suspicions."

"And you're calling me the stupid?" Bale yelled toward the door. "You've got to believe me Frosty. I had no idea the Galaef was the mystery prisoner. I'm putting down my weapon." He looked at Shast and Cronlin. "If you're not the idiots I think you are, you'll do the same thing."

"Yeah," agreed Shast, "Let's put 'em down."

Chapter Sixty

Ben and the other prisoners lay in the soft dirt, eight or nine paces from the top of the rim. Their fingers and toes were dug in deep to keep from sliding into the open-mine p—where Em had minutes before heaved Og to a quick and unexpected death.

Fast and furious, the phasors continued to fire their deadly bolts in a random pattern, every now and then hitting a few feet from the top of the rim or just several paces above the prisoners.

This was not a design by accident. Roqford had once told Ben in his slow mental speech, If ever the phasorsss start firing get to the slopesss of the pit. When the prison was first built, it was decided, in order to squelch a prison riot, random phasor shotsss would be used, but in order to keep from killing the majority of the prisonersss there should be a small safety area, which will hem the rebelliousss prisonersss into a corner. The design isss meant to keep the prisonersss in the pit until more guardsss can arrive.

Ben turned and looked down the slope searching for Samsung, and there he was holding onto Keegan's wrists to keep him from sliding over the edge. Keegan's legs were hanging into the abyss up to his thighs. There was a glassy look in his eyes and blood was running out of his mouth as he feebly hung unto Samsung's grip. Slowly, inch by inch, they were sliding further into the hole as there was not enough traction in the soft dirt. Samsung attempted to jam his toes deeper into the dirt, but to no avail. The two of them were slowly losing ground, and it wouldn't be long until Samsung would have to let go or be pulled to his death along with Keegan.

The loose gravel around Samsung's toes gave way, and they slid another foot and a half in an instant. Keegan was up to his waist in the pit, and his legs were no longer in sight. They were sliding faster.

"Hang on," yelled Ben exhorting Samsung to dig deeper. "I'm coming." He turned and did a swimming motion in the soft dirt until he was just above them. He grabbed Samsung's ankles and started pulling. He grunted and pulled harder, but they were still slipping. With Ben's help the decent into the pit had slowed, but hadn't completely stopped. Keegan was too far over the edge. "Keegan, you've got to help. Push against the side of the pit with your feet."

But Keegan was too weak, and it seemed he was slipping in and out of consciousness. They were losing ground. "Come on, Keegan. You're not helping," yelled Ben. He pulled harder. He knew in another few seconds he and Samsung would have to let go. "Keegan, push!" he yelled.

Someone grabbed Ben's ankles and with a mighty yank, pulled Ben, Samsung, and Keegan up the side of the embankment. Without looking Ben knew it was Em. His strength was unnatural.

Ben righted himself, as did Samsung, and they pulled Keegan up to their level. Ben studied Keegan's look. His face was ashen. His eyes had a glassy stare. Blood was running from his mouth. "Damn," growled Ben, "we have to get you to the hospital."

Samsung was lying on the other side of Keegan holding on to him. He wiped the dirt and blood from Keegan's face and talked softly trying to encourage Keegan to hold onto his life.

Ben started up the incline.

"Where are you going?" asked Viella. "You can't go up there."

"I'll be okay," he said in a quiet voice as if sneakiness would keep the phasors away.

He stuck his head over the rim. Three feet to his right a phasor bolt hit the dirt causing the soil to steam and ooze.

As he looked around he saw prisoners strewn about the yard like a scene in a ghastly war movie, except this was real, and they were really dead, dying, or wounded. And the wounded wouldn't be alive much longer with the phasors tearing into them with random shots. He could see the guards in the yard standing near the wall.

The lieutenant of the morning watch stood facing the warden in a stance that he always maintained while waiting for the warden to give the orders to escort the prisoners into the pit. But this time the lieutenant had a puzzled, pained look on his face.

Ben followed his stare. *By all that's holy*, thought Ben, *it appears the warden won't be giving any more orders, this morning or any other morning.* The warden was lying face down with his head and one arm hanging over the walkway in an unnatural position. His throat was torn open and blood was pooling beside him and dripping over the edge. The lieutenant, the sergeant, and the long row of guards stood next to the wall on the other side of the phasor firing line. They were staring at the warden's corpse.

Roqford, thought Ben in a loud mental voice, *did you do that?*

The guards on the upper walkway were in a state of panic as they rushed for the elevator shafts. Roqford was slowly stalking behind them. *It wasss my pleasure to help you out*, responded Roqford.

You didn't help us. You just sentenced yourself to death. The guards are still in control and the phasors are firing.

Not to worry, replied Roqford, *help isss on itsss way.*

What do you mean by that? snapped Ben.

Roqford padded softly down the walkway until he was above the guards in the prison yard, and then he lay down with his paws and huge face hanging over the edge.

Try to keep from doing anything obtuse, said Ben. At first he thought the huge cat was going to pounce on the guards in the yard.

Patienccce, said Roqford as if he were talking to a small boy. And then he turned off.

Ben had that sudden empty feeling he always got when Roqford mentally pulled away. He looked back at the guards. He knew his luck may be running out with the phasor bolts, but he had to get Keegan to the hospital before the internal bleeding killed him.

He watched as the sergeant looked away from the warden and back to the lieutenant. Ben overheard him say, "I believe you're in charge of the yard, sir. What do you want us to do?"

The lieutenant turned and looked toward the pit. He could see Ben peering over the edge. "You're either very brave or very stupid," he said.

"You have to turn off the phasors. We have an injured man down here and if we don't get him to the hospital quick he's going to die." Ben nodded his head to the side signifying where the man was lying. "And all those wounded men in the yard are going to be killed, or maybe I should say murdered."

It didn't seem the lieutenant was in a hurry. "As soon as the reinforcements arrive, I'll give the order, and we'll . . ." His sentence ended abruptly.

Out of the corner of his eye Ben caught a momentary blackout, like a hole in space—reflection of the sunlight was there and suddenly it was gone. He turned his head toward the tower and in a state of confusion he lost his vision as it was pulled into the black hole, then instantly it returned, and he watched the effects of a sonic bomb. He had never seen one in real life, only in the movies and on the viewer where it was make-believe.

Up close and in real life it was phenomenal, to say the least. The top of the tower was there one moment and the next it was totally vaporized. Only small pieces of artificial material and human flesh remained and floated away in the gentle breeze of the morning. An instant later the remainder of the tower fell into a little heap of powder as the inaudible sound destroyed the molecular bonds.

The deadly rays of the phasor beams blinked out freeing the prisoners to run loose.

Viella scrambled up the side of the pit and laid down next to Ben. She peeked over the rim to see what was happening.

"By God," said lieutenant Lasitor in disbelief, "am I seeing things or did the tower just disintegrate before our eyes?" He stood for several seconds with his mouth hanging open. He looked up at the warden and then back where the tower had been. Finally, he said, "What the hell is happening?" and then he closed his mouth, still looking at the little pile of powder, which had once been the tower.

"It had to be a sonic bomb," said the sergeant.

Lieutenant Lasitor hesitated with a look of worried concern, then he said, "Sonic bomb? No one has sonic bombs on Ar."

"Must be the G15's sitting on the landing pad," answered the sergeant.

"Yeeeah," replied the lieutenant, slowly. He thought for a moment. "But why would they want to destroy our tower?"

"Must have something to do with the mystery prisoner."

"Yeeeah," he said, again. He started contemplating the situation. Finally, he said, "Have the men . . .," but he halted his sentence. Someone stepped outside the mystery prisoner's prison and shot down three of the six guards who were standing on the porch, and then he jumped back inside with a phasor bolt close on his tail.

"You know," said lieutenant Lasitor, "I think we better stay out of this until we find out what's going on."

"Good idea," said the sergeant.

"Damn," grunted Ben, as he pulled himself out of the pit. "In all the commotion I forgot about the Galaef." He could see the three remaining Federation guards hiding behind the posts with their phasors drawn. They were watching the door.

Ben pushed the stun button on the phasor and started, in a crouched run, toward the Galaef's little prison.

"Hold it," came a voice from behind. "Drop the phasor and turn around."

Ben lowered the phasor, but he didn't drop it. He glared at the lieutenant as he turned. "We don't have time for this. I need the phasor, and I need to get over there, now." He pointed toward the Galaef's confinement quarters. "I know who your mystery prisoner is, and if we don't help him, the consequences could be disastrous."

"You don't need to go anywhere," said the lieutenant pointing his phasor at him in a threatening manner. "I don't know what's going on, and we're not taking any action until we find out."

The sergeant eyed Ben quizzically. "So, who is he?" he asked.

"The Galaef of the Galactic Empire," said Ben.

The lieutenant laughed contemptuously. "You must think I'm the slowest turtle on the beach. In the first place, no one is ever going to take the Galaef prisoner, and secondly, how is a prisoner, such as yourself, going to know who's in the confinement area?"

Ben shook his head. "Why do you think they have two G15's sitting on the landing pad? Why do you think they just knocked out the tower with a sonic bomb? Come on man, think."

The lieutenant started to say something and then hesitated.

"Look," said Ben, he had just about made up his mind to shoot it out with this fool. "keep your phasor rifles trained on me if you want, but let me take the phasor and go over there."

"I can't let . . .," once again the lieutenant was interrupted in mid sentence. He watched as the three remaining guards in front of the mystery prisoner's prison threw their phasors on the porch and stepped into the open.

A moment later the Galaef and another man walked out of the small prison.

"Oh, crap," said the lieutenant, and then again in a more subdued voice, "Oh, crap."

Ben turned toward the pit and yelled. "Samsung, take two men and get Keegan to the hospital." He turned toward the lieutenant, and said, "It would be good if you would have your men take the wounded prisoners to the hospital." He used his hand to indicate the men lying about the yard.

The lieutenant nodded his head. "Sergeant," he said.

"Yes, sir?"

"Do as he says."

"Yes, sir."

"Come on," said Ben to the lieutenant. "Let's go talk to the Galaef." Ben was trying to sort the events in his mind as they walked in that direction. It sort of made sense that the Galaef was still alive, but what about the tower?

When they arrived the Galaef was giving orders to the Federation guards. When he finished he looked at Ben and noticed his prison issue uniform. "I see you're still alive," he said.

"Yes, sir," answered Ben. "And I'm surprised to see you're still alive. I thought Thorne's plan would have been to have you killed as soon as there was any trouble in the yard."

"That was the plan, but one man remained loyal. The Galaef turned toward Frosty. "Meet Frostadeem, my new head of security."

Ben nodded his head toward Frosty. It only took a second for Ben to remember that he had seen Frosty outside the Galaef's office on Galactic VII and then again outside the Galaef's office on the flag ship.

"Now," said the Galaef, "until this usurpation is put down, we're going to be sorting through the problem of who we can trust and who we can't trust." The Galaef was clearly not happy. He surveyed the six men who had been members of his elite guard. "For the present I'm going to trust the power of my office, knowing what all my guards know," he said it loudly so that all those in the near vicinity would hear, even those lying on the

porch in stun, "if they betray me, they and their families will suffer a horrible death."

Bale stepped forward. "Please believe me, sir, when I say I had no idea you were our prisoner. I was told to guard this building and to let no one in." He looked horrified. "Believe me, sir, I was only following orders." He got down on one knee to show his reverence.

"Get up," boomed the Galaef. "We have matters at hand to deal with. You," he pointed at Shast. "You stay here and watch over these three." He pointed at the three guards in stun. "And keep a phasor on them. We still don't know who can be trusted. The rest of you follow me."

The Galaef, Ben, Frosty, Bale, and the lieutenant walked into the small building, where the Galaef had recently been a prisoner.

Ben looked around and saw a man lying on the floor in a state of stun, to the left there were two bunk beds, to the right a barred prison cell, and on the far end of the room, about thirty feet away, there were two consoles.

"You see those two red buttons?" asked the Galaef.

Ben looked again at the two consoles and this time he noticed the buttons to which the Galaef was referring. "Yeah," answered Ben. He was never happy about being subservient to others, especially politicians, but he was glad the Galaef was back in command, and he knew the Galaef was glad too. "I see them."

"They have to be pushed simultaneously or Thorne is going to send a G15 down here to wipe this prison out of existence, and then he's going to eliminate the families of the involved elite guard." Taul saw the quizzical look on Ben's face. So he added, "The two red buttons will send a signal telling Thorne that I've been killed."

"I see," said Ben. "So let's push the buttons."

"It won't work unless they're pushed by the two inside guards, it recognizes their thumb prints, but as you can see Mordrous isn't going to be pushing anything for another twenty minutes."

"Okay," said Ben, "so let's carry Mordrous over to the console, put his thumb on the button and push it down while Frosty is pushing the other one. Or is there something else I don't know?"

The Galaef never did seem worried, "Actually, that sounds like it will work," he said.

Once the deed was done the Galaef pointed at Mordrous. "Put him in the prison cell. I'll be sending him and his family to the Zi pits."

Ben wondered what had happened in this little room, but Frosty was shocked. "You promised," he said in a whispered voice trying not to let anyone hear him question the authority of the Galaef.

The Galaef wasn't concerned about quietness. He loudly exclaimed, "Haven't you learned yet the worth of a politician's promise? We only say what we have to say in order to get what we want. I'm the ruler of the Galactic Empire. It's not my job to keep promises. It's my job to protect all the inhabited planets of the galaxy, and sometimes, as in this case, it becomes a difficult job. I have found that I can't trust this man, and with his knowledge of classified information that makes him a threat to my job."

"But," exclaimed Frosty, no longer in a whispered voice, "it was a lose-lose offer. And it wasn't the money that prompted us to take it. We thought we could best protect you by taking the offer and being here with you. It was our plan from the very beginning."

"And, indeed, you were successful," said the Galaef, "but he wasn't."

"Sir, I am sure it was fear of his family's well being that turned him at the last moment."

The Galaef glared at Frosty. "Your lobbying for this traitor should make me angry, but I won't let it because I understand that the offer put both of you in a difficult situation." He thought about it for a moment (and no one dared say anything). Finally he said, "Okay I will have his family moved to a safe location, but the best I can do for him is to offer him a choice of a swift execution or solitary confinement with no human contact of any kind for as long as it takes us to put down Thorne's attempted overthrow. After that, if he has chosen the second, he and his family will be placed on an obscure little planet with no space travel privileges."

"Thank you, sir," said Frosty. "Your decision is most generous." It appeared that Frosty was a bit angry that the Galaef wasn't keeping his promise, but considering the alternative he was content with the compromise.

That being done the Galaef turned to Ben and motioned him off to the side. "I've had a lot of time to think while I've been in here," he said. "And it pleases me that you're still alive, since it fits into my plans." He paused. "I've decided to make you second in command."

Ben looked at him warily, "Second in command of what?" he asked.

The Galaef grimaced, "You know," he started, "I'm not going to consider that a foolish question only because you've been through a lot lately, and because it's not everyday someone is offered a job like this. So I'm just going to say it one more time. I want you to be second in command of the Galactic Empire. I want you to take Thorne's position in the government."

Ben looked aghast. "You want me to be second in command of the Galactic Empire?"

"Take your time and let me know. You've got five seconds."

Ben thought for a moment and realized he didn't want the job. In the first place he wasn't qualified and in the second place he hated politics.

Then the next second he was thinking, on the other hand, it seemed the Galaef needed his help, and also if he didn't take the job, Taul might choose another fool like Thorne. "Okay," said Ben, "I'll take it."

Much to Ben's chagrin the Galaef patted him on the back and said, "I knew you would."

Chapter Sixty-One

The sun had risen and was shining its feeble rays upon the landscape of the red planet. Like reflective liquid the sun's light formed in pools on the barren landscape to the east bringing about the misconception of shallow bodies of water—a substance most lacking on Ar. It continued with its magical pretense of red steam rising in the air from the pools.

To the south between the prison and the employee's city grew the trees which were the tell-tale sign of the toral. Those closer to the prison had been cut down to keep the beasts away.

The Galaef, with Ben next to him, stood in a regal manner on top of the prison wall watching Curt the Captain of the Guard who had formed his men into ranks and was ready to advance on the prison compound. Behind Curt was a row of officers—two commanders and seven lieutenants. The five hundred guards behind them, both men and women, were dressed in brilliant-red uniforms, and were wearing black boots, black belts on which their black holsters with phasors were attached, and black-billed caps. They all stood at attention holding long-range phasor rifles close to their sides.

They waited.

It was obvious Curt had received information that the warden had been killed resulting in a blood-bath and that the prisoners had revolted, but by the time he was ready to advance his men, the tower had been disintegrated, which would be a deterrent to any leader, and now the Galaef was standing on the wall in plain sight. Curt was smart enough to hold his men back.

"Are they a threat?" asked the Galaef indicating Curt and the five hundred guard who were standing at attention.

"Only if you're worried about being blinded by their uniforms," said Ben. "Other than that, the contact I've had with them tells me they are our allies. In fact, I've had personal and up-close conversations with the Captain of the guard and his girlfriend, a Lieutenant by the name of Sharpie," Ben pointed at Curt standing at the front of the formation. "They found out you were a prisoner, and they were already formulating plans to get you out. And all the other guards I talked to hate Hurd as much as the rebels."

"If that's the case, then why are they working here?"

"It's a matter of survival. It's one of the better paying jobs, and if you ever got a good look at how the people in Newusa are living—in squalor and very little food, you'd understand."

"That is unfortunate," said the Galaef. "But in a way it's good for us. It'll make it easier to acquire a following—an army of sorts."

"Now that we've taken over the prison and apparently the G15's, we can start our plans to get you back on the throne, and put Thorne someplace where no one will ever see him again."

"I like your eagerness," said the Galaef.

Ben knew it wasn't so much eagerness as it was his fear of what Thorne might do, and what many of the planets might do once they found out the throne had been usurped. "Part of it is the safety of two million inhabited planets—making sure Thorne doesn't upset the balance," said Ben, "and the other part is personal."

The Galaef continued to stand in his regal manner. "By personal, do you mean revenge because of what Thorne did to you, or do you mean a particular red head on Galactus VII?"

"The latter," said Ben without hesitation. He squeezed the grip on the phasor. "I don't like her odds now that Thorne is taking over the palace. There is no way to know what he will do to the men and women who are loyal to you. He has proven that he has no regard for life."

"Yes, it could be a problem." He turned and looked down at the gates of the prison yard—two sets of double doors. He motioned to Lieutenant Lasitor. "You," commanded the Galaef.

"Yes, sir." The Lieutenant snapped to attention.

"Open the gates."

"Yes, sir," said the Lieutenant.

"Better tell him to make it fast," said Ben.

The Lieutenant heard Ben's suggestion and answered before the Galaef had a chance to say anything. "Yes, sir," he said as he continued to stand at attention.

"Now!" snapped Ben.

"Yes, sir," said the Lieutenant. He hurried toward the elevator.

The Galaef gave Ben a sour look. "I never liked Thorne much," he said.

And? thought Ben. He was wondering where the Galaef was going with that statement. He didn't like Thorne either, that was a given, but the Galaef's sudden change of subject meant he had something else in mind—probably another line of political nonsense. "Then why did you hire him?" he asked.

"You know how sometimes a girlfriend can be a great companion to a man—caring, happy, helpful, and giving all the support she can? And then, one day they get married.—And the wife becomes a complete reversal of the girlfriend, making life a living hell for the man.

"Or in some cases," added Ben, "the man is a great person, and then as soon as they get married he becomes mentally and physically abusive."

"Exactly. And that's what happened with Thorne. During the interviews he had all these great qualities—intelligent, good ideas on how to handle planetary upheavals, politically dignified with the right answers, pleasant to talk to, and many other qualities, and then when I hired him, his personality completely changed—solemn, angry, spiteful, and just all around, not a nice guy. I really started disliking him."

"Then why didn't you get rid of him?"

"He was competent, and he was doing a good job."

Plus you didn't want to look foolish for not choosing the right man the first time, thought Ben. *Sometimes you politicians let appearances get in the way of correct actions. And this is the perfect example, now you have a second in command who is trying to kill you.*

"But that's not my point," said the Galaef.

"No?"

"No. Even though I didn't like him, and as I find out now that he didn't like me, didn't have a high opinion of me, and is now trying to take over as the Galaef, at least he said 'sir,' or 'your majesty,' or 'sire' when he was talking to me, showing me respect, especially in front of other people. Right up to the end he was showing me respect, but I haven't seen that from you. And the fact is I would really appreciate it if you would throw in a 'sir' once in awhile."

"Yes sir," said Ben.

"Thank-you."

"No problem." Ben realized it was indeed more political nonsense. And he quickly let it pass. "You know," said Ben. "I think Thorne has taken the flagship and gone back to Galactus, otherwise I'm sure he would have completely destroyed this prison by now. In fact he probably left yesterday or the day before."

"Yes, I agree. And if that's the case, then that's good for us. We won't have to worry about him finding out I'm still alive."

"It might be that he doesn't care. If he's confident that he's going to succeed, then he's going to push ahead with his plan, and it doesn't matter to him whether you're dead or alive. And that makes me wonder what he thinks he has that will make him successful."

The Galaef was hesitant to say anything, obviously not wanting to give away classified information. But after he mulled it over for a few moments he finally said, "All he has is a piece of information. He found out that there is a special key which will allow him access to the internal workings of the Computer planet."

Ben grimaced. "So if he has the key now, he has essentially won."

"No," said the Galaef. "He couldn't have found it this fast."

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

Ben mused for a moment. "That's good," he said. "Now we have to find away back to Galactus VII and use everything in your power to bring him into custody."

The Galaef smiled, which was rare for him. "We won't have to get back to Galactus VII," he said. "Once I get to a long-range communicator all his plans are going to fall apart. All I have to do is tell the computer

aboard the Commander that Thorne is an usurper, and his 'second in command' status will be revoked, and then, even if he has the key he will not be allowed to enter the computer." The Galaef paused, then said, "The only problem after that will be retaking the Commander and the palace.

"Over the last four or five months he has brought in a lot of men, plus it appears he was able to bribe key personnel. I'm afraid it will be an all-out battle."

The Galaef wasn't helping put Ben's mind at ease concerning Lyil. "Considering he will be looking at the Zi pits, I'm sure in his desperation he won't just give up," said Ben hoping the Galaef wouldn't agree.

"That's right."

Ben saw movement out of the corner of his eye and turned his head. One of the G15's rose from the landing pad and started toward the prison compound.

"Here they come," said the Galaef.

"Yeah," said Ben. "If it wasn't for them—whoever they are, you'd still be in prison, and Hurd would be ordering my execution by now. Thorne would be taking over as Galaef, and the Galactic Federation would come crumbling down, because many of the planets would revolt."

Just then the huge gates creaked and groaned as they slowly started to open.

Ben deliberated, as he was still putting together all the facts and probabilities, then he said, "This is the way I see it. If Thorne gets the key before you get to a communicator, it's possible he can get into the internal workings of the computer planet. And if he has a high-tech computer programmer with him, which is probable, then they can reprogram the computer giving him control of the Federation fleet, and then he will be unstoppable."

"Yes, that's one way to look at it, but I'm going to get to a communicator first. In fact, here comes one now." The Galaef pointed at the approaching G15.

When the destroyer was fifty yards from the prison wall it came to a halt. Ben and the Galaef watched and listened as a voice amplifier, from the G15, boomed so loud it actually sent a slight tremor through the prison walls and walkway. "All occupants inside the guard's compound and living quarters must immediately vacate and fall into formation upon the grounds leaving all weapons behind. All guards now in formation must lay down their weapons. If this command is not being followed within ten seconds we will destroy the compound and the living quarters, and all those within."

It didn't take ten seconds.

The guards who still remained inside, along with the secretaries, the cooks, the waiters, the janitors and all the other personnel came running out of the buildings and came to order in formation. The assembled guard in front of the buildings, on Curt's command, laid down their hand phasers and their rifles.

As this was being done the lieutenant returned from below and informed Ben and the Galaef it would take another twenty minutes for the gates to be completely opened. And then for some reason he gave them an aside of information. "For the first time in the history of this prison both sets of gates are being opened simultaneously. Even when we had to move in large equipment, the gates are far enough apart that only one set at a time would be opened."

The Galaef wasn't impressed. "Lieutenant," he said.

"Yes, sir?"

"Go to the hospital and see to it that the wounded are cared for and that the dead are sent to the incinerator plant."

"Yes, sir." The Lieutenant hurried away.

The Galaef turned and stared down at the crystal pit. "I thought it was a regular mining operation," he said. "I had no idea the crystals were being mined by prisoners."

"Under horrible conditions," added Ben. And then he made, what he believed to be a reasonable suggestion. "I think the families of all the men and women who have been prisoners here should be given a Zen I crystal for all the pain, and suffering, and death they've experienced."

The Galaef grumbled a bit and mumbled something that sounded like, "Yeah maybe." Then he said, "Let's go below and meet with those in the G15. It's time for me to use the communicator and to form a plan of action." He walked toward the elevator.

Ben caught up as the guards were stepping out of the way. "Sir," he said, "I believe you should let me approach the G15, just in case there's something we don't know. Even though it seems they are friendly, it's possible they aren't."

"Yes," interjected Frosty, "I believe that would be the best course of action." Ben knew Frosty wasn't being

out of line by making that statement. It was the duty of the chief security officer to be near the Galaef for two reasons: first, to physically protect him; and second, to listen in on any conversations or communiqué. If it sounded like the Galaef could be putting himself in harm's way which, then it was the chief security officer's duty to interrupt the conversation and state his opinion

"Okay," said the Galaef. "You commandeer the G15 and while you're doing that I'll check on the wounded, and then I'll inspect the crystals to make sure everything is in order." He stopped and turned to Frosty. "Have two of your men escort Ben to the G15, and wherever else he goes. And I want these two men permanently assigned to him as his bodyguards."

"Yes, sir," said Frosty. He called out two names of the elite guard, Shast and Higgins, and gave them their orders. "Until further notice you will be protecting Professor Ben Hillar with your lives. He has been appointed as second in command of the Galactic Federation."

"Yes, sir," said the two men.

Ben and the Galaef along with frosty and eight guards stepped into the elevator and descended. Ben stuck the phasor between his belt and his waist. He subconsciously felt for the sword on his left hip, but it wasn't there. Even though the phasor was a more efficient weapon than a sword, Ben felt defenseless. It was all those years of practice and swording in the ring.

The elevator opened and they stepped out. The Galaef started for the hospital.

Ben stood looking at the corpses. There was blood running red on the frosty ground. Arms and legs lie crooked in unnatural positions. He thought about the warden's paranoia. "There's the real crime," he said to no one in particular. Although he knew his two guards could hear him. "I bet they didn't wake up this morning thinking, 'today I'm going to die.' No. They were thinking about another horrendous day in the pits, and hoping the rebels would overthrow Hurd—real soon. They were men and women with thoughts and hopes, but they won't be thinking anymore."

Ben turned and moved past the gates, which were still opening. He stepped onto the artificial pavement on the outside of the prison compound and continued, until he was forty meters from the G15. The silver disc stood sparkling in the dim, morning sunlight reflecting red beams from the atmosphere in all directions—camouflaged beauty for a deadly machine.

A doorway opened and a ramp slid to the pavement.

Ben watched as a woman with a man following disembarked. He noticed that the woman was nearly as tall as himself. She had blond hair and a slim, but pleasing figure. Her most striking characteristic, however, was her presence—her manner of bearing, and there was no doubt she was in charge.

She strutted down the ramp.

As soon as she was close enough, Ben recognized her—*Dahms*, he thought, *somehow in charge of taking over the G15's*. And then he recognized Sam who was right behind her.

They stepped off the ramp. "Hello, Ben," said Dahms. "I'm glad to see you're still alive. And I truly mean that."

"Me too," replied Ben.

"I don't think we would have made it through the run without your help." It appeared she wanted to pat Ben on the back and give him a hug, but after a few moments she turned her attention to the gates. "Have all the Thorne supporters been subdued?"

"As far as we know."

"And the Galaef? We saw him standing on the wall. Is he okay?"

"He's fine," answered Ben.

"Thank the Lord," said Sam.

"Yeah," agreed Ben. "Sometime you'll have to tell me how you took command of the G15's. You came to our rescue just in time."

"Sure," said Dahms. She pushed her hair out of her face. "Where's the Galaef?"

"He's probably in the crystal packing plant by now. You know how he feels about those crystals." It was true that the crystals were essential for space flight—without them hyperspace was impossible. It was like the need for gasoline in combustion engines. The scientists were able to produce artificial Zen I in the laboratories, but they weren't as efficient, and because of that, normal space reentry was more dangerous. Ben understood the Galaef's concern with the crystals even though it seemed he was a little too obsessed. Ben pointed toward the prison wall. "It's at the far end of the pit. Go through the gates and turn right."

"I have to talk to him," she said and started to walk away.

“Just a moment,” said Ben.

Dahms turned and faced him. “What?”

“The Galaef told me to commandeer the G 15’s.”

“They’re all yours.”

“Who’s in charge?”

“While I’m out of the ship?”

“Yeah.”

“Gaal.”

“Alight.”

“Anything else?”

“Nope, that’s it.”

Dahms strode toward the gates.

“I see she’s still taking charge and ordering people around.”

Sam pulled on his red, handlebar mustache. “Not all the time,” he said coming to her defense. “But right now that doesn’t matter. I’m looking for my sister.”

“Viella?”

“Yes.”

“The last time I saw her she was headed for the hospital. I’m sure she’s helping Dr. Streum and the other nurses with the wounded.”

“Is she okay?”

“She has a welt across her back from a whip, but it’s not bad and other than that she’s fine.”

“A welt!”

Ben could see anger forming on his lips. “Yes, but don’t be concerned—the man who hit her with the whip is no longer among the living. He was thrown into the pit. It’s actually quite a long fall.” Ben paused, then said, “When the two of you have more time, she can tell you about it, but for right now I need information.” He looked into the distance at the G 15 resting easily on the raised landing platform. “Are both G 15’s operational?”

“That one was damaged in the take over,” said Sam following Ben’s gaze.

“How badly?” Ben couldn’t see anything wrong, but of course it was at least a mile away and most if not all the damage was probably on the inside.

“Brale says if the parts are available, it should be space worthy in three or four days, but he’s skeptical about finding the parts on Ar.”

“That’s not good. Who’s Brale?”

“He’s the whiz-kid who keeps the G15’s operational.”

“Is he still aboard?”

“Yes.”

“Who else?”

“Two of our own and five of the men who were operating the G15’s when we went aboard. Plus two in the brig.”

“Can the five be trusted?”

“We trust them,” said Sam. “But just on the off chance that they’re part of the overthrow—we don’t let them have weapons.”

“And what are your two men doing now?”

“They’re keeping the rapid-fire phasors trained on the guard.” He pointed at Curt and his men.

Ben looked at Curt, Sharpie and the other officers standing in front of the formation. Everyone was still standing at attention. “It’s not necessary,” said Ben. “Come on.” He started toward the guard. He was anxious to have the preparations made and to get the hell off Ar and back to Galactus. He came to a stop in front of Curt.

“Hello, Sharpie,” said Ben as he looked behind Curt at the row of officers.

She didn’t answer, but continued to stand at attention.

“Hello, Curt. You can have your men stand at ease.”

No one moved, so Ben said, “The Galaef has appointed me second in command. So if I tell you to be at ease, you can follow my orders.”

“Second in command of what?” asked Sam.

“The Galactic Empire. I’m sure he was in a state of confusion when he did it, but thus far, he hasn’t rescinded it.”

“That’s quite a promotion, sir,” said Sharpie as she stood at ease. “Now, instead of taking orders, you’ll be giving them.”

“Yeah,” said Ben, “and my first order is don’t call me, ‘sir.’” And then he motioned to Curt. “Have one of the officers take over the head of the formation. I want you and Sharpie to make an accounting of all the personnel. I want the names of everyone dead, alive, or wounded including the prisoners, the guards, the men aboard the G15, and all the other personnel in the compound.”

“Yes, s . . . Okay Ben,” said Curt.

“Make it quick. I have some other business to attend to, then I’ll be sending for you in about twenty minutes.”

“Right.” Sharpie and Curt headed for the officer’s quarters.

“Second in command of the Galactic Federation. Damn,” said Sam.

“That’s what I said,” said Ben. “Damn!” He motioned toward the prison. “Let’s go.”

They walked through the open gateway and into the prison yard—a place with a lot of bad memories.

As he quickly looked around the compound the doors to the elevator, at the far end of the yard, opened and a man stepped out. He didn't hesitate. He immediately walked toward Ben and Sam.

He was a man of medium height and build, but he walked with an air of dignity and purpose. Ben noticed his clothes were too neat and perfect for the crystal pits. On his head sat a black hat with a small dome and a thick, three-inch brim completely encircling it.

"Sir," he said when he stopped in front of Ben, "my name is Jacob. Before this morning's incident I was the warden's chief manservant. The fact that he was killed while I was in his employe will certainly not look good on my next job application."

"It goes good with me," replied Ben. "I’m sure I can write you a great recommendation.”

Jacob ignored Ben’s statement. "Sir, I have been informed that you are now second in command of the Galactic Empire—a recent promotion, and that you will soon be forming an army to go against the horrific Hurd of Newusa. Sir, I am well schooled in swording, situ, hat, karate, and phasor shooting, and since I am now unemployed I would like to join your army."

Ben shook his head and then nodded. "Before I say 'yes,'" he answered, "I'm curious. How could you already know I'm second in command, and what makes you think I will be forming an army?"

"Sir, I have a very reliable source. You may know him. He tends to draw out the s's on the endsss of hisss wordsss."

There was a look of recognition on Ben's face as he realized the source. "I understand," said Ben. "You're Roqford's mental friend."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, Jacob," said Ben, "If an army is formed, you can count yourself in. Any friend of Roqford's . . .you know."

"Yes, sir. And thank you, sir." Jacob stepped off to the side to await further instructions.

“Let’s check the hospital,” said Ben. Even with the equipment and drugs available it was probable that Dr. Struem could and would have to work a miracle, because that’s what would be needed to bring Keegan back from the almost dead.

They walked through the double front doors of the hospital. The waiting room was full of wounded men sitting in chairs, standing and leaning against the walls, and lying on the floor. Lieutenant Lasitor and a nurse were running around checking on them, obviously trying to decide who Dr. Sreum would attend to next. Ben saw Samsung standing at the front counter talking to a nurse.

Sam saw him too. “Samsung,” he said with surprise. He stepped forward and bowed. After Samsung returned the bow, Sam said, "Damn, it's good to see you. I didn't know what became of you after that night in the tunnel."

"It's good to see you too. I am glad you are well."

“How’s Keegan?” asked Ben.

“The doctor is still operating and so far the nurses have nothing to report.”

Without further conversation Ben, with his two body guards following, strode across the floor, opened the door, and walked into the hallway. Wounded men were lining the walls, some were standing, but most were sitting with their backs to the wall or lying on the floor. Many had bandages. Nurses were scurrying about with

a spray can—probably an ointment containing SR. They also had gauze and cotton bandages. They were spraying superficial, bloody wounds, then bandaging with cotton and gauze.

Ben and his two guards had to step over legs as they walked down the hall toward the surgery room. They passed a door when a man from inside let out a scream. Another man was sitting on the floor muttering and staring into space. The side of his skull was charred and smelled like burning hair and flesh.

A nurse, with a sour look, hurried out of the room across the hall and stooped down in front of the man. “Oh, Lord,” she said. She sprayed the man’s head, then looked up at Ben. “Would you mind?” she asked. She pointed at the room across the hall. “I need to lay him in bed.”

Ben knelt to the side of the man and put an arm behind his back and grunted as he carefully lifted the man to his feet. Then he followed the nurse and walked him into the room. There were eight beds, and seven of them were occupied. Ben walked him to the empty bed and laid him down.

“Thank-you,” said the nurse.

“Glad I could help.” He left the room and made his way to the surgical center. He opened the door and looked in.

Dr. Streum looked up momentarily, then looked down and continued with his work. “We won’t know anything for a couple of days,” he said. “So you might as well go about your business.”

Keegan was lying on the table with his abdomen cut open. A nurse patted the sweat on Dr. Streum’s forehead as he sutured a broken blood vessel. Ben noticed several other blood vessels clamped off, which would be sutured in order of importance. On a tray next to Dr. Streum, amongst all the scalpels and other surgical instruments, was a bottle of SR. Dr. Streum waited for the nurse to stop patting his forehead, then he reached over and soaked a cotton swab with the SR, which he applied to the sutured vessel.

Knowing it would be useless to wait around Ben shut the door and started down the hall.. If they were to leave Ar within the next day or two, he might never find out if Keegan survived the surgery. Maybe he would call to enquire once Thorne was captured.

When he opened the door to the waiting room he saw Viella on the other this side of the counter talking to Sam and Samsung.

Ben crossed the waiting room, stepping over and around the wounded, and headed for the door. He looked over his shoulder. “Let’s go,” he said.

Sam and Samsung started to follow.

“You too,” said Ben looking at Viella. He stopped and waited for her.

“But they need me here.”

“They have enough nurses,” said Ben, “and I need you for something else.”

Sam was quick to mumble an explanation. “Better do as he says. When the Galaef’s not around, he’s in charge.”

Viella raised an eyebrow. “Okay,” she said. She removed the blood smattered smock and laid it on the counter, then followed Ben, Samsung, and Sam out the door. They headed across the compound and stopped in front of the gates.

By that time several other prisoners, whom Ben no longer called prisoners, but revolutionaries, had walked to the gates and were looking out the opening. Even with the gates open he knew they wouldn't be going anywhere—too far of a distance to the nearest city, which was Employee's City, and too many total.

"Ben," said Viella, "here comes the Galaef."

The Galaef with Dahms at his side had just left the packing plant. Frosty and the elite guard were behind and to both sides. The Galaef was striding fast, and the others almost had to trot to keep up.

The Galaef stopped in front of Ben. "This woman is second in command of the revolutionary underground, and she wants our help to overthrow Hurd's government." He paused, "But you know it's against Federation policy for me to become involved in planetary disputes."

"On the other hand," growled Ben, without hesitating, "Hurd was partly responsible for your capture and imprisonment. I believe that supercedes Federation policy in this case and gives you the right to squash Hurd like the bug that he is. Besides, we need to get into Newusa for supplies and parts to repair the damaged G15. And since Hurd is a part of Thorne’s usurpation, I don’t think he will welcome us in."

Ben noticed a look on the Galaef’s face which told him the Galaef just had an idea—almost the same look a used car salesman gets when he thinks he has suckered a lame-brain into paying big bucks for a lemon.

"Well," said the Galaef, "I was thinking we could help the revolution for a small fee. Say, a reduction in the price of the Zen I crystals."

"Absolutely not!" exclaimed Dahms. "I know all about the so-called 'great debates of Ar,' and I know that somehow you convinced the council to charge a lower price than what the crystals are worth. If anything we should raise the fee, considering you're already getting them for practically nothing."

It was apparent the Galaef didn't like hearing that. "On the other hand," he said, "we do need parts and supplies, and we do have a common interest in our dislike for Hurd. So, I guess we should leave things as they are, and we'll help you for free."

Dahms stuck out her hand and the Galaef shook it. "Alright," she said, "let's make war plans."

"Right." The Galaef looked at Ben. "What I need now is a staff of higher echelon personnel—officers who understand the strategies of war. I'll leave it up to you to organize the staff, and let there be no doubt about it: I am authorizing them a commission in the Federation Fleet. After we have put down Thorne's rebellion, if they decide to stay on as officers they will have the option to do so. This will be my reward for those who help us."

"Looks like there's going to be a lot of changes in the fleet's chain of command," said Ben.

"That's right," retorted the Galaef. "So organize the staff, and we'll meet in the conference room aboard the G15 in half an hour."

"I'm assuming that includes the prison guards," said Ben.

"The prison guards?" The tone of Dahms' voice made it apparent she was against using them for the upcoming battle.

"They're on our side," replied Ben.

"That's absurd. The men and women of the guard work for Hurd in a prison that's cruel and inhumane. Everyone knows that most of the prisoners are usually dead within three months of working long hours in the bitter cold with very little to eat."

"It may look that way to you and the others on the outside," replied Ben, "but I've been here long enough to have gotten to know a number of them, and from what I've seen, they want to get rid of Hurd as much as you."

The inflection in Dahms' voice indicated she wasn't convinced. "Since I don't know any of them, I can't refute what you're saying. So let me just say: be very careful who you choose."

The Galaef said, "If you know any of them well enough to trust them, then I will trust your judgment. As a matter of fact, while you're putting the staff together I'm going to talk to the Captain of the guard." He looked at the uniformed man at the head of the formation, then said, "That's not the man I saw before."

"No," said Ben. "I sent the Captain and a lieutenant to put together a complete list of all prison personnel, dead or alive, including the guards, the prisoners, the workers, and even the men aboard the G15. I'm going to have Frosty check the list for anyone who might be a Thorne supporter. I want him to interview anyone he deems suspicious."

With a nod from his head Ben indicated the direction. "I'm assuming they're using a computer to compile most of the list." Ben started through the open gates. "I'll show you," he said. "They're in the officer's quarters."

The Galaef and the entire entourage followed Ben through the gates. He pointed at a building closest to the prison wall, but a hundred meters from it. "I'm assuming we'll be checking out the long range communicator soon."

"Very soon," said the Galaef as he turned and started for the officer's quarters.

Ben watched him walk away, then he turned to Samsung. "If you're willing to accept it, I'm appointing you a Lieutenant's commission in the Galactic Federation."

Samsung replied by saying he would be honored to help the Galaef.

"Good," said Ben. He looked at Viella and her brother Sam. "We've been through a lot together," he said, "and as an archaehistorian maybe someday I'll write a book about it," he paused, "but for right now there's still a lot ahead of us. I can see battles coming and a lot of men and women being killed." He waited for any questions they might want to ask or any comments they might want to make, but they stood waiting for him to make his point. "You need to keep that in mind when deciding if you want to accept the same offer I just made Samsung. You can be lieutenants in the Galaef's Federation Fleet. Someday it might actually mean something important, but right now it just means you're going to have to fight a war and maybe get killed."

"I say 'yes,'" said Sam quickly. "This is a war we've waited for a long time."

Viella was hesitant. She looked embarrassed. "I'm not sure I'm right for the job. I want to say yes," she started, "but am I qualified and will I . . . ?"

"You'll do fine," interrupted Ben. "I wouldn't be asking if I didn't think so. So, just say yes."

"Well, okay then, yes."

"Good," said Ben. "The first thing we have to do is figure out who else is going to be on the staff."

Doesn't sound too difficult, came a response.

Hello Roqford, Ben greeted him. I see you're listening in on my conversations again. How would you like to be a General in the Galae's army? he asked.

Roqford gave a mental yawn. *Okay, came his reply. A prisoner one minute and a General the next - happens every day.*

And then Ben heard a kind of snickering wisping sound and realized it was the first time he had ever heard Roqford laugh. Right now was the time for laughing, however; especially for Roqford considering he had been a prisoner for more than three years, and now he was free.

Viella touched Ben on the arm. "Is something wrong?" she asked. There was a concerned look on her face.

"Not at all," said Ben. "I was just talking to my inside source."

"What?"

"I'll tell you later. But right now I need to know if you know of anyone else who would make a good officer?"

Sam didn't have to think about it. "Dahms, Gaal, and Xygliper."

"Xygliper?"

"Yes. He placed eighth in the Galactic Games in archery.

"Oh, yeah. I remember him," said Ben. "I met him up close and personal a few times at the Federation games. He's an outstanding archer and all round athlete. It will be good to have him aboard. Maybe some time in the near future we'll sit down together and exchange stories about how we got mixed up in this revolution.

"Okay," said Ben, "who else?"

Sam thought for a moment. "There are two of the crew members aboard the G15 who performed with intelligence and quickness when the situation called for it. Their names are Zorn and Brale."

"They already have a commission," said Ben, "but we can raise their rank if necessary and add them to the staff.

"Anyone else?" asked Ben.

Sam and Viella remained silent.

"Alright," said Ben to Sam, "you inform them to meet us in the conference room on board the G15 in twenty minutes." He turned to Viella, "And I'll leave it to you to inform Tillo and Sweyn of their new positions on the staff. Also, I want Curt the Captain of the guard and Lieutenant Sharpie at the meeting."

"Yes sir," responded Viella.

Sam had already walked away to locate his newly appointed officers.

Viella touched Ben on the arm. "What about the bodies?" she asked. She pointed at the corpses in the yard and the warden's dead body on the wall.

"It looks like Lieutenant Lasitor hasn't had time to take care of them," said Ben. "Organize a group of prisoners to put the corpses in boxes, then have them hauled to the incineration plant.

"Oh, one more thing, Viella, at the moment I can't get through to Roqford."

"Roqford?"

"The large cat," said Ben.

"Yes, I know who he is, everyone in the prison knows who he is, but what about him?"

"Tell him what time the meeting is scheduled."

Viella looked surprised, and then asked, "How do I tell him?"

"Just talk to him. He'll understand."

"Okay," she said as she walked away.

Ben motioned to Jacob who was not standing far away. "You'll be one of the lieutenants," he said.

Jacob removed his hat, slightly bowed, and nodded his head. "Thank-you, sir. It's more than I could have hoped for."

Ben noticed Em standing next to the wall. He walked over with Jacob and his two body guards following. "Come on Em," he said. "Let's get aboard the destroyer and get ready for the meeting."

o o o o o

Once he came upon a stream and it brought him closer to another world. The sound of the running water reminded him of his awakening on a planet in the far reaches of infinite space—a planet experiencing war and

strife. He remembered bringing the winds, creating the waves—huge tidal waves, destroying the coastal cities. So long ago. So long ago. It repulsed Eolia. So he left the stream and never went back. Once he heard a beautiful voice, that of a woman, calling his name. "Eolia," it sang in the distance. "Eolia, where are you?" The voice sounded sad, and it made him sad, but he couldn't find her. He looked through all the fields, and still he couldn't find her.

o o o o o

"Come on, Em," said one of the shadows. And Aeolius followed him through the beautiful green fields toward a large oak tree standing mightily in the distance.

Ben led Em up the ramp and after getting directions they finally found their way to the conference room.

Upon entering the room Ben noticed an air of excitement. Dahms, Sam, and three men were sitting at the conference table discussing the events of the day and those which were yet to come.

One young man was finishing a sentence. ". . . after that I was hoping and praying the Galaef was still alive."

"Alive and well," said Ben as he made his way to the head of the conference table. Samsung and Jacob stood off to the side.

Ben had purposely organized the meeting twenty minutes earlier than ordered so he could get to know the officers before the Galaef arrived. He sat down and waited for the rest of them.

Curt and Sharpie walked in. Sharpie appeared distressed as she looked at Ben. "They're questioning our loyalty to the Galaef," she said in a huff.

"This is a time when we have to be careful who we trust," replied Ben. "I know the two of you can be trusted, but the rebels don't know that, yet." He paused and then nodded toward the blond at the other end of the table. "Including Dahms. Come and have a seat. We'll all get to know each other soon enough."

As they were sitting down Viella entered with Tillo and Sweyn.

Ben stood up. "According to my count, we have almost everyone here, with the exception of the Galaef and one other, and Roqford, of course, but he'll be coming along at his own pace. So let's get started."

After they sat down Ben said, "my name is Ben Hillar and I've been appointed as second in command to the Galaef. I don't know how long the appointment will last, and actually I don't care, but while I hold this position I'm going to do the best job I can." The newness of it all was starting to wear off. Ben was beginning to understand the seriousness of his new position. People's lives hung in the balance of his decisions, and nothing was more important.

"A couple of times it has been brought to my attention that the loyalty of the prison guards is in question." Since Ben had spent a lot of time with the guards, especially Sharpie, he knew what their feelings were toward Hurd and his corrupt government, and he also knew if they were to come together to successfully fight Hurd, they had to have trust for each other.

Ben was looking at Dahms as he spoke because earlier she was complaining the loudest about the prison guards. "It seems we've had this discussion before, so again I want to assure all of you that the guards whom I've gotten to know during my stay here are—number one, haters of Hurd, number two, did not know the Galaef was a prisoner here, and number three, with the exception of a few that the warden had shipped in from other planets and a few others who were spies for Hurd, the guards were always trying to help the prisoners." He looked around the room at the other men. "I hope this dispels any ideas that the guards are ogres, just waiting for the right moment to kill us. I know from personal experience that this is not the case."

Dahms leaned back in her chair. Her face seemed to soften a bit. "Let's forget it ever came up," she said, "and get on with the meeting."

Just then, one of the Galaef's elite guard stepped through the doorway. "Sir," he said, looking at Ben, "the Galaef requests your presence on the bridge."

"Yeah, alright."

o o o o o

When Ben entered the room, Xilil was sitting in front of the inter solar system communicator, also known as the long-range communicator, and the Galaef was standing to his left looking over his shoulder at the monitor.

Xilil was frowning as he was busy pushing buttons and giving the onboard computer instructions.

The Galaef looked Ben's way and motioned him over. "Thorne had the communicators disabled on both G15's. Apparently he and his think-tank geniuses have planned for all possible scenarios."

Ben felt like his stomach had just been ripped out of his body.

Chapter Sixty-Two

Ben looked over the members of the make-shift, thrown-together-in-a-hurry council of officers, and then he said, "We have come to that point where there is no turning back. The revolution started the moment the tower in the prison yard turned to dust.

"This means," continued Ben, "that we will have to plan our actions carefully and quickly, only to include force whenever necessary.

"Now I'm going to turn the meeting over to the Galaef." Ben sat down. For the first time in his life he was beginning to feel a bit of impatience creeping into his thoughts. He wanted to take down Hurd as quickly as possible, then turn his efforts to taking down Thorne. He especially wanted to get back to Lyil before any harm could come to her. *Damn, Thorne*, thought Ben.

The Galaef didn't bother to rise from his seat. "Before we start making plans I want each of you to stand up, one at a time, and give a short history about your life and how you came to be at this place and time."

Ben shifted in his seat. His impatience was beginning to bother him. He wanted to get this operation into motion and dispense with all the trivialities. But he knew it wouldn't happen, so he waited, and he listened.

The entire group consisted of three women: Dahms, Viella, and Sharpie, and thirteen men, but this included Em who only participated during times of extreme danger: Taul, Ben, Em, Samsung, Curt, Zorn, Brale, Gaal, Xygliper, Sam, Jacob, Tillo, and Sweyn. And, of course, there was one quadruped, Roqford.

One by one the women and men rose, told a little about themselves, including how they became involved, and then sat down. Finally, it got down to the last three: Ben, Em, and Roqford. Since Em wasn't speaking and Roqford hadn't arrived, Ben started to stand up, but Taul beat him to it. He looked at Ben and then at the other members present. "This is Ben Hillar," he said as he pointed with an open palm. "He has taken Thorne's place as second in command of the Galactic Federation." He paused, then said, "This means when I'm not around or if something happens to me, Ben is in charge. I have given this information, with my voiceprint, to the on-board computer of this G15 and the other G15. If either one of these G15's get within range to communicate with the Federation computer, this information will be relayed, and Ben will then be recognized as the new second in command for the entire Galaxy.

"Furthermore each and everyone of you will be entered into these G15 computers as officers of the Federation. That will be my next task as soon as this meeting adjourns." He paused and then continued. "It should now be obvious to all of you that Thorne is trying to take over the Galactic Empire. If he succeeds, the Empire will fall into a dictatorship and wars will break out all over the Galaxy causing unnecessary deaths and hardships for countless numbers of planetary inhabitants." He let the gravity of the situation sink in before he continued. "The only way for us to stop him is to get me within range to communicate with Galactus VII." The Galaef sat down. "And now I open the floor to discussion."

Tillo stood up. "I don't understand why you need to communicate with the computer planet."

"Because," said the Galaef, "once I am in range, and I let the computer know I'm still alive, I will once again have control of the Galactic warships, and Thorne will lose his power."

"There's only one thing to do," said Sam. Everybody shifted their attention to him. "We will contact the nearest Federation cruiser and"

"It won't work," said Ben.

"Why not?"

Ben felt everyone's attention being focused on him. "Because Thorne has told the computer that the Galaef is dead. As second in command that makes him the temporary Galaef until the computer appoints a new one in two months."

"But the Galaef needs only to communicate with the computer planet, right?"

"Yes, but, in anticipation of your next statement, we have found that Thorne disabled the long range communicators in both G15's, which means we cannot contact any Federation warship."

Sam leaned back in his chair. "What the hell are we going to do?"

Taul stood up. "Without giving away need-to-know information I'm going to tell you as much as I can. Thorne has spent a lot of time over the past few years exploring old computer planets. It is obvious to me that he has gotten hold of an ancient computer with information explaining a failsafe system, which will allow him to reprogram the computer in the case of an emergency. If he can reprogram the computer, he can make himself a dictator and assure that all his future heirs will take their turn as dictators of the Galaxy."

"Then why doesn't he just do it?" asked Dahms.

"Because," replied Taul, "something went wrong with his plans when he lost the key. That's why he didn't have me killed right away. He had to keep the computer thinking I was still in command while he took up the search for the key."

"What key?" asked Dahms.

"I can't divulge that information at this time," replied the Galaef. "When the time comes I will tell whoever needs to know, everything they need to know about the key, but right now the first thing we have to do is overthrow Hurd and put control of the Newusa government back in the hands of the people."

Just then Zorn gripped the edge of the table so hard that his knuckles became white. Gaal half stood up, and Sam put his hand on his phasor. The three of them looked like they had just seen the warden's ghost. "Oh crap," said Brale.

Dahms turned around and gripped the arms of her chair.

Roqford padded softly through the doorway. He looked much bigger and his fangs much longer, up close and personal. Overall he looked scarier than hell.

"Nothing to be concerned about," said Ben. "Let me introduce you to Roqford. I've appointed him as one of our generals."

Zorn relaxed a little, but asked, "How can we use him? We can't even talk to him."

Ben grunted, "I can."

"What?" It sounded like an echo of voices from around the room.

"Only psychics can talk to those cats," said Viella.

"Well," said Ben, "I'm not a psychic, but I've had many conversations with him, starting from when I first arrived at the prison. He gave me a lot of information about the prison, about the warden, about how to cope with some of the problems in the prison, and even about one of Hurd's spies. He told me about the hidden voice communicators inside the prison cells. It was his information and help, which was eventually going to help us escape. He has proven himself worthy, and that's why I appointed him to the staff."

Viella turned in her seat and looked Roqford in the eye. She spoke slowly as if not to startle him into anger. "Yes," she said. "It all makes sense. Whenever you had that far away look, you were talking to Roqford."

"That's correct," said Ben. "He has become a true friend."

Roqford walked over to a corner and laid down in a leisurely catlike position.

"Now that everyone has met Roqford," said the Galaef, "including me," he said as he scowled, "it's time to plan the overthrow of Hurd. I now open the floor to discussion."

Curt stood up and surveyed the group, then he said, "All we need is one G15, . . . and we're sitting in it. With this baby we can knock out the scent tower and take over the city with very little resistance. After that we set up a temporary military government, and then we have the citizens of Newusa vote for a new city council. The citizens will have what they want, and the Galaef's men can repair the other G15 and take on supplies."

"You make it sound too easy," said Brale remaining in his seat, "I admit I don't know a lot about the local politics in Newusa, but I'm wondering about the PC's and the ground forces?"

"Just a moment," said Ben. "What's a 'PC'?"

"Patrol craft," answered Dahms. "They patrol the city, and they are armed with rapid fire phasor guns. "And to answer Brale's question about the PC's," she said as she looked at Brale, "there are two laser cannons aboard this G15 and two aboard the other G15, plus we were able to smuggle three into Newusa. After the scent tower has been knocked out, this G15 can go into seek and kill mode, that is, if they haven't all surrendered by then, which I believe they will have."

"What about the ground forces?" reiterated Brale.

Sam answered the question. "We have more than twenty thousand revolutionaries who are well armed and impatiently waiting to start this war. Once the scent tower is down we won't have any problems with the ground troops."

"Sounds quite optimistic and a bit unrealistic," said Ben. "I'm sure there will be resistance, and I'm sure there will be men and women killed and wounded on both sides."

"I agree," retorted Sam as he waved an impatient hand. "But we will take the city, and the casualties will not be high."

The room was suddenly filled with a loud buzz as the newly appointed Federation officers began talking back and forth in groups of two and three.

The clamor lasted for less than a minute, and then the Galaef took control. "It appears," said Taul as he rose from his seat, "you have presented the problems and come up with some possible solutions. I agree that there will be few casualties, however if any of my officers are killed or wounded, I won't be happy about it, so keep your heads down and let the noncoms do the fighting."

That was blunt, thought Ben. Let's just hope no one gets killed, except maybe Hurd.

"One more thing," said Taul, "whenever a war is planned, communications is a vital part of the strategy. Aboard this craft we have only one comboy and only one aboard the other G15."

Anticipating the Galaef's next statement Dahms said, "Sir, the underground has smuggled forty-four comboys into Newusa along with enough weaponry to arm twenty-five thousand soldiers."

"Good," said Taul as he sat down. "That takes care of that problem. Now how do we take over Newusa?"

Sam stood up. "We'll blow a hole through the western gates large enough for the destroyer to enter. After it has taken out the tower we'll bring out the ground troops to fortify the take over."

Ben stood up. "I've gone over the personnel list, and I find that we have five hundred and twelve prison guards and forty-nine prisoners who are healthy enough to help with the ground assault. If I speculate correctly, one pilot could use this destroyer and shuttle one hundred ten or twenty at a time to a designated area a few miles outside the city gates."

"That's right," said Xilil. "We can do it in five trips." He punched some figures into the computer. "And it'll take approximately six hours."

"With the Galaef's consent," continued Ben, "I'll put Dahms in charge of the ground forces with Curt as second in command. On board the G15 we'll have the Galaef, myself, Samsung, Sam, Sweyn, Tillo, Zorn, Brale, Viella, Xilil, Phist, and Roqford. Sharpie and Xygliper will also accompany the ground troops. If any of the guards, or anyone in this room, as far as that goes, does not wish to participate in this battle, they will have the option to stay behind."

The Galaef nodded his consent.

Ben sat down, and Sam turned to Dahms. "What about the mountain clans? I'm sure they will want to participate in the revolution. You know how they feel about Hurd."

"Yes," said Samsung, "they are good fighters."

It surprised Ben that Samsung said anything, usually he was quiet and stoic, then he remembered that Samsung and Everette were good friends.

"How long will it take for them to get to the city?" asked Sam.

Dahms thought for a moment. "We can't radio them, because we can't take the chance that the communications will be intercepted, therefore one of us will have to take a transport, and since I know the area, it should be me. And because Samsung has lived with them, I'll take him with me." She gave Samsung a questioning look.

But the Galaef spoke up before Samsung had a chance to respond. "No," said the Galaef, "Samsung goes with me."

Dahms responded quickly. "Of course," she said in an apologetic tone. "I only thought that Samsung could help since he knows the mountain people, but I know Everette and some of the others, which means I can do it without him." She paused, and then continued, "Considering it will take me a half day to get there, and two days to contact all the clans, and another half day for them to get to the city, it adds up to a three days."

Silence took over the room as if everyone were wondering about the battle. Ben stood up. "Sounds good," he said. He studied his newly made officers. "Anything else?"

"What about the toral?" asked Sharpie.

"That won't be a problem," said Ben. "You'll have enough fire power and enough men to wipe out hundreds of them."

"Yes, but if we have to kill toral as we wait outside the gates, then the city will be alerted that we are there."

"It won't matter," replied Ben. "What are they going to do—run out and attack a thousand heavily armed men and women?"

"I guess you're right," said Sharpie.

"Well then," said Taul, "two days from this morning we attack. We'll start shuttling the prison guards twelve

hours before the time of attack.." He stood up. "It is a rather simple plan, but the fact is we have a G15 and Hurd doesn't. That makes it simple, and it puts the outcome of the war in our favor." He looked around the room. "Now if there are no more questions or comments, we shall adjourn the meeting, and I want to invite all of you to the Warden's house for food, drink, and leisure time." He waited to see if anyone had anything more to say, then seeing they didn't, he stepped away from the table and walked out of the room.

Dahms looked at Sam. "I'll have to leave for the mountain nation this afternoon," she said.

"Wait," said Sam.

"What?" asked Dahms.

"I . . . Never mind. I guess I'll see you when it's over."

"Count on it," she said.

Ben ended the meeting. "We'll start the attack at 8 o'clock in the morning, three days from tomorrow." He paused. "Well, I guess that's it."

The rest of them stood up. Sam, Gaal, and Xygliper started talking about the attack.

"Are you talking to Roqford," Viella asked Ben.

"Yes, I was," he answered. "He thinks the plan will work, and the sooner we blow Thorne out of existence the better. But more than that I think Roqford likes the idea of being a General."

Viella looked at Em. "What are we going to do with him?" she asked.

"Keep him with us," replied Ben. Though Em wasn't an officer, Ben had brought him along to keep an eye on him and also because in times of emergency he had proven to be of great help.

o o o o o

Eolia stooped over and picked a flower. Life was beautiful in the fields. There was no strife, no worry, no pain. It would be right to spend forever walking the grassy fields of this world. Who would care? Nobody.

He laid under the oak tree and sniffed his flower.

[Chapter Sixty-Three](#)

Sharpie stood out of sight at the bottom of a dark, narrow ravine just outside Newusa at three hundred paces from the western gates. Dahms, a towering figure of a woman at nearly six feet tall, was to Sharpie's left, and Curt, Sharpie's fiancée, was to her right, and then there was Everette, the mountain man, towering over all of them, holding his battle ax in his left hand with a phasor strapped to his right hip—he looked eager and ready for battle. Sharpie and the others were silent as they waited to ascend the steep embankment to start the long awaited war—a war to end Hurd's reign of terror.

It was early morning, and the sun, still lingering behind the horizon, had yet to make its appearance. Phoebe, the smaller of the two moons was slowly setting in the west, casting long eerie shadows off the rocks that lined the top of the ravine. Sharpie shivered, and maybe not just from the cold, bone-chilling, summer air.

It had taken nearly all night for the G15 destroyer to make five trips, transporting the five hundred guards from the prison to a distance of five miles from the Newusa city dome. At that point the guards had rendezvoused with the mountain men and women, and then they traversed through a small, back-bending underground tunnel, with Dahms leading the way. Most of the men and women were now lying and sleeping in the deep ravine, but a few were talking nervously.

Sharpie watched the shadows, which appeared like long black fingers slowly inching their way up the eastern slope of the ravine. What have I gotten myself into? she wondered.

"Any moment now," said Dahms as she looked at her watch.

They were waiting for the G15 to rise out of its secret lair ten miles back, cruise to the western gates, and hit them with a sonic bomb in order to open the dome like a can of Carcholian fish.

At the meeting inside the G15 the previous night, Sharpie had made a suggestion, which was readily accepted by Ben and the Galaef, that once the gates had disappeared, Phist should hit the hole on each side with two more sonic bombs in order to make the entrance bigger for the charging guards and mountain people. Dahms didn't like it, stating that the repair of the dome after the battle would be quite expensive and take several months, also stating that they would have to build fires and temporary barricades to keep the toral out.

And what about the plant life in the city? The cold night air would kill it.

She was out-voted. The Galaef asked her if she wanted to win this battle.

She said, "Yes," and that ended it.

So now they waited.

Sharpie looked in back of her. She could hear the hum of the antigrav motors, a distinct sound made by the G15, coming from a distance behind them. She thought for a moment about Hurd. Dahms told them he would probably be sitting in his plush office, sipping on a cup of Arian coffee, and making plans about the next Run or gloating about all the money he was making from the sale of the crystals. He wouldn't have a clue they were coming, especially with a G15, which was going to make his selfish, self-made world crumble into dust beneath his feet.

And there it was, the G15 cruising along the skyline. Who would have thought that Thorne's plans would be the instrument to bring down Hurd and his corrupt government?

"Let's go," said Dahms.

Sharpie and Dahms scrambled out of the ravine followed closely by Curt and Everette. They stood on an old, abandoned roadway and watched as the destroyer moved in toward the gates. Sharpie knew the revolutionaries had been waiting a long time for this moment. Over the years she had seen many of them walk through the prison gates only to be carried out a few months later in a casket and taken to the disintegration plant. But they kept on coming because they had hopes of seeing a new and fair government—one that would use the wealth, which was pouring into the city, to do good, perhaps to build another dome with a University, libraries, concert halls, sports arenas, tourist hotels, and so on, all the while creating jobs and bolstering the economy for the people. Instead, over the years, she had seen a small group of wealthy individuals become absurdly rich, while the majority of the population was plunged further into poverty—to the point of starvation in some cases.

Having been born and raised in Newusa, she might have become one of the wretchedly poor, but her parents had seen it coming and moved to Carttune, a planet similar to Ar on the opposite side of the Galaxy. From there they were able to help her financially with living expenses and school tuition until she was trained and able to get a job at the prison.

She was in an excellent place in life with a wonderful fiancée. It would have been easy for her to turn her back on the revolutionaries and let them battle it out by themselves; instead, she was taking on their war. *How ironic*, she thought. *After all this time, making sure they didn't escape from prison, now I'm fighting to keep them out of prison.*

"Without the G15," said Dahms bringing Sharpie out of her reverie, "it would still be just a dream. With the scent tower in operation, we would have no hope of overthrowing Hurd's corrupt government."

They watched as the destroyer stopped and hovered in mid air. Its silver sheen reflected amber light from the setting moon and the rising sun, sending beautiful rays in all directions. "An exquisite mask for death and destruction," said Sharpie softly under her breath.

The two guards at the gate saw the G15 coming. One of them pointed at it, then they ran across the street and around the corner. A moment later, Sharpie saw their heads appear from behind the building.

A flash erupted from the G15, and the front gates and part of the hemi dome around the gates disintegrated and, without a sound, fell into small piles of glittering translucent powder, then two more missiles were fired and the hole became three times larger.

The hum of the destroyer's engines became louder as it moved forward and through the gaping hole, and then fainter as it disappeared down Main Street toward the tower.

"We're coming!" yelled Everette as he raised his battle-ax up and down in the air. His voice boomed down the ravine and across the barren plains. The guards and the mountain people, hearing Everette's voice, jumped to their feet and started yelling.

"There's no going back now," said Curt in his usual slow and masculine voice. Curiously he kept looking at the huge hole in the hemi dome. "I knew there was a revolution afoot," he said. "Everyone knows it, but I never thought I'd be a part of it.

"Everyone associated with Newusa is a part of it, whether they are for it or against it," said Everette in his deep voice. "And now it begins."

Dahms looked into the ravine. "We have five hundred uniformed guards and seven hundred mountain men. Normally this wouldn't be enough to take over a city the size of Newusa, but once inside, the underground will be joining us, about twenty thousand men and women. And I expect some of Hurd's patrollers will defect to our

side.”

The city sirens, like the prey in the jaws of a Borskian lion, started to wail their long, blood-curdling tones, signaling to the city that trouble was afoot.

Dahms scowled. "It'll only take them ten minutes to get ready, then they'll be releasing the scents." She paused, then said in a pessimistic whisper, "if the destroyer doesn't take out the tower, we will have to retreat to the mountain nation where we will have to hide for who knows how long."

The Captain smiled thinly. "Why do you say that? The destroyer will obliterate the tower."

"You would think so," said Dahms. "But Hurd is a devious bastard, and he likes to set traps."

Curt was surprised by her negativity, "Now you're having doubts? Why didn't you bring it up at one of the meetings?"

"I guess I was too excited about starting the revolution and bringing Hurd's reign to an end."

"Don't worry about it," said Curt. "You can't set a trap for a G15. It has computer chosen personnel who are trained to the nth degree in the operations of the advanced weaponry and magnetic shields. It's almost impossible to take down a G15."

"I believe you're just having prewar jitters."

Dahms shook her head a couple of times as if to shake away the depression. Her short blond hair waved back and forth just above her shoulders. "You're right. I don't know what I'm thinking," she said. "The tower will fall, the ground troops will do their job, and the war will be finished." She looked into the ravine at the thousand plus warriors. "It's time to move the troops into battle."

Sharpie was quick to react. "That's going against orders," she said. "The plan was for us to wait ten minutes while they take out the tower." Sharpie was all for helping Dahms and the revolutionaries, but she wasn't interested in committing suicide. "If something goes wrong with our plans and the G15 is unable to destroy the tower, the scents will cut us to pieces and our blood will be running red in the streets."

"It just occurred to me," said Dahms, "if we wait, they'll be able to fortify the entrance of the dome with patrol craft and foot patrollers." She pointed at the entrance. "In fact, they're already starting."

Sharpie saw a PC coming slowly down Main Street. "But can the G15 bring down the tower in ten minutes?"

"It's only going to take them three minutes to get to the tower—hell they're practically there already. And while we stand here talking, they're bringing in more patrollers." Dahms looked into the ravine and gave a signal which was nothing more than a wave of her arms, which ended with her pointing at the city.

Twelve hundred men and women scrambled out of the ravine and stood on the edge. They waited for the order to charge.

"Captain," said Dahms looking at Curt, "have one of the com controls contact the G15 and tell them the opening is being reinforced by the enemy, so we're not waiting. We're coming in now."

"Yes ma'am." replied Curt. He walked a short distance down the line to the radioman and gave him the orders.

Sharpie watched as more patrollers joined the ranks around the gaping hole of what had been, a few minutes before, the city gates, and then two more PC's came around the corner. "Hurd got the bad news, and he isn't wasting any time." said Sharpie.

"That's right," replied Dahms. She waited for Curt to come back.

He rushed down the line and yelled out, "The order is for you to start the attack."

"Okay," she Dahms. She held up her hand to give the order.

But Sharpie stopped her. "Look!" she blurted out. "The foot patrollers are fighting amongst themselves."

Dahms put her hand down and watched for a moment. "They've seen the G15, they see the hole, and now they see our army. They know the revolution is starting. And now the defections will begin." She waited.

Several of the patrollers were yelling at each other, but at that distance it was impossible to distinguish their words. Finally, the biggest man of the bunch with a phasor in his right hand shoved a smaller one with his left hand so hard that he came off his feet and flew through the air.

The smaller one turned his shoulder and drew his phasor as he hit the pavement, rolled twice and ended up in a sitting position.

They both pulled the trigger at the same time. Red streaks in the dawn spewed forth its violent, killing force, but the smaller one threw himself to the left as he fired and was saved. The larger one was not so quick and the phasor bolt tore a hole through his chest leaving only a small trickle of blood as the intense heat from the phasor bolt seared most of the blood vessels. He hit the pavement with a thud.

At that moment, the red flash of killing phasors lit up the morning sky coming from everywhere. They came like flames shooting forth from the nostrils of an ancient Earth, mythical Dragon, spewing forth and sending some of the foot patrollers to the pavement in agony and death.

Then the shooting stopped as quickly as it had started. The patrollers broke off into factions with about a third of the foot patrollers racing around and hiding behind one of the three PC's.

Another PC took flight and raced to the end of the block and around the corner of a building a hundred yards to the left of what was once the Western gates. There were twenty or so patrollers racing after it. A small group started firing red bolts at the fleeing patrollers, but the remainder of them appeared to be undecided, and they moved into the shadows of the nearest building to wait and watch.

"I think by adding fuel to the fire we can bring more of them over to our side," said Sharpie.

"She's right," said the Captain. "Now that they see us standing here it'll be easier to get them to defect to our side.

"Let's talk to them," said Sharpie.

Dahms thought for a moment. "Okay Lieutenant," she pointed at the nearest com soldier—a uniformed prison guard with a communications pack and a voice amplifier, "take Jas and move within hearing range. Tell the patrollers they have thirty seconds to come over to our side. After that we attack. . . . Oh and tell them the destroyer will be hunting PC's once the tower has been annihilated. That should convince more of them to join with us."

Curt quickly surveyed the gaping hole in the hemi dome, and then put his hand on Dahms' arm. "Once Sharpie and the com soldier get within hearing range they'll be in range of the phasor rifles."

"Yes, I see your point," said Dahms. "Let's eliminate the possibility of sniper fire. Lieutenant," she said to Sharpie

"Yes ma'am?"

"You see that rock?" She pointed in the distance at a large vertical boulder almost standing on end about half way to the hemi dome.

"Yes ma'am."

"You and Jas use a left-right, weave run—slow and fast at irregular intervals until you get to it, then take cover behind the rock while you give the message."

"Yes ma'am."

Before she started for the rock Sharpie gave Curt a look. "We're going into battle," she said knowing that she was stating the obvious. "If you don't come out of this alive, I'll never forgive you." Then she stormed off toward Jas, and a moment later they were running for the rock.

Sharpie slid in behind the rock with Jas. She pulled the mike out of his backpack, set the small but powerful amplifier next to the rock and said into the mike, "You men, the revolution you have been anticipating has now started." The amplifier shattered the silence in the morning. She continued. "You've seen the G15 destroyer which is on its way to the tower even as I speak." It was possible that some of them were coming from another direction and hadn't seen it. So, to make sure they understood the power it carried she said, "And you can see how it destroyed the hemidome gates. When it has finished with the scent Tower, it will be hunting PC's." She paused, then said, "We are giving you this message to give you the chance to come over to our side. You have thirty seconds to make up your minds." She clicked the 'off' button on the amplifier and put everything back in Jas' backpack.

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After Sharpie and Jas slid in behind the rock Dahms looked at the Captain and asked, "You and her?"

"Yes," he answered. "We're planning to get married in a couple of months."

"An unfortunate play of fate. I'm sorry you got pulled into this."

"Don't be sorry," he said. "Everette was right, when he said, 'we're all in this together.'"

Dahms was silent. In a few moments they would be in combat, and people were going to be killed.

Dahms and Curt were watching through their Distance Magnifiers as all the patrollers, standing in the shadows, walked over to the two remaining PC's.

"They're coming over to our side," she said, and then she started to say, "I'm sure there will be a lot more," but stopped in mid sentence when two PC's came around the corner three blocks to the right with at least twenty patrollers following from the rear. They started firing at their old friends, newly turned foe. Once again red

phasor bolts lit up the dawn.

Being caught by surprise, three of the foot patrollers went down either dead or wounded. One of the PC's near the entrance was hit in the rear and catapulted thirty yards down the street, and when it turned to face the attack it was hit again, but this time in the motor compartment. Blue sparks went flying from the antigrav motor and the craft nose-dived into the pavement. Two men shoved the doors open, jumped out of the PC and headed for cover as the craft burst into flame.

The remaining PC, near the entrance, turned and quickly fired two shots hitting the bull's-eye with both. The attacking PC's went down in flames, but the foot patrollers from behind continued to fire their phasors. The battle became more heated as the bright red phasor bolts kept racing from one side to the other.

As Dahms watched the exchange of phasor fire she said, "Let's give 'em support. Start the attack."

The Captain-of-the-Guard and Everette stepped in front of the soldiers and yelled, "Attaaaaack!" And started running toward the gaping hole in the hemi-dome.

Twelve hundred noisy men and women, yielding their weapons, were quick to follow rushing toward the big hole in the dome—the prison guards in their bright colored uniforms were yelling with fervor as they ran, and the mountain men, dressed in brown mountain leathers, were roaring the rebel yell. All in all it sounded like thunder breaking over the countryside.

Sharpie and Jas jumped up and joined the running rebels.

The phasor fire, inside the hemidome stopped as the patrollers on both sides heard the noise and turned to watch the attack.

Hurd's loyal patrollers stopped their advance and watched. Finally, deciding they were outnumbered they made a hasty retreat around the corner of the nearest building and disappeared from sight.

After reaching the main gate, most of the men and women of Dahms' army spread out behind the buildings and waited for further orders.

There were three mountain men, however, who ran through the opening, then turned right and charged after the retreating enemy. The frenzied excitement of the charge kept them going, and they were still yelling when they charged into the first intersection and were shot down.

Only one of them was able to escape. A phasor bolt hit him in the leg, taking some flesh and muscle out of his calf. He fell in pain and half stunned, but after a moment he was able to pull himself up, and he quickly hobbled to a recessed doorway in one of the apartment buildings—where he waited. His two comrades lie dead in the middle of the intersection.

"Damn," said Dahms. She motioned to the nearest non-com. "Take two men and bring him back for medical attention." She pointed toward the wounded mountain man.

The driver of the one remaining patrol craft shut off the antigrav motors and set it on the pavement. The two doors opened and the two men got out.

The driver of the craft looked around and then yelled out, "who's in charge, here?"

Dahms stepped forward. "I am," she said.

The driver and the other man walked over to her. "I'm Sergeant Critton and this is my partner First Class Lowndow." He stuck out his hand.

"My name is Dahms Rassiter," she said as she shook his hand.

Critton said, "I just got off the radio—the open patroller band, and there's another twenty craft coming to join us. That leaves thirty, but I suspect most of them will remain neutral—waiting to see what's going to happen. I, and the rest who are coming, place ourselves under your command and await your orders."

Just then three more craft turned the corner and cruised up a side street toward the rebels.

Dahms watched for a moment, then asked. "Sergeant Critton, are they friendly?"

"Yes sir."

"Good," she said, and then she turned to the Captain. "I want you and Lieutenant Sharpie to stay with me. Send two of your other Lieutenants with a hundred soldiers up each street parallel to Main Street, and send two craft with each group. Sergeant Critton will be in charge of the craft."

The Captain called his Lieutenants over and started giving them instructions.

The three PC's stopped behind Critton's PC and waited.

Critton seemed fidgety. He said, "Even with some of Hurd's men and PC's defecting to your side it isn't going to be easy."

"I agree," said Dahms. "There's no doubt that too many men and women are going to lose their lives today, nevertheless we have enough men in the underground to take a city three times the size of Newusa." She

paused, and then said gravely, "Nothing's going to stop us."

Just then, as if to contradict her last statement, three PC's came charging around the corner at the far end of the street. One of them had a missile cannon mounted on top.

"What the hell," yelled Curt. "Why didn't you warn us about the missile cannons?"

Sharpie grabbed Curt's arm, and they bolted around the corner with Dahms and Everette hot on their heels. The rest of the men ran for cover just as the three PC's opened fire.

Dahms had never seen these PC's. They had rapid-fire lasers—like a machine gun, but far more damaging. The phasor bolts tore into the fleeing groups of men. A missile landed in the middle of the nearest group and sixteen men went down—most of them dead. There were at least forty men down, dead or dying before they were able to clear the street. They ran in all directions away from the PC's, many of them down the side streets, some into the shrubbery and behind trees, which lined the pavement, and some into recessed doorways.

Critton and Lowndow ran for their PC. They jumped through the open doors and into their seats. Slamming the doors shut they whirled to meet the charging enemy. The three PC's that had joined the ranks of the rebels came out from behind Critton's PC. And together they opened fire. One of Critton's shots was true and the PC to the right crashed into the pavement and went up in flames. Critton made a tactical swerve with his PC and just in time as a phasor bolt tore along the side where Lowndow was sitting. They got off another shot, and then the enemy fired the missile cannon. The two PC's next to Critton's went up in flame.

Dahms was standing at the corner watching Critton maneuver his PC to keep from getting hit. But the phasor bolts were coming too fast. The fire power was too much for them, so the two remaining PC's veered around the corner and flew a short distance down Main Street where they turned and waited.

Their heroics saved the lives of many of the men. The charging PC's had to come to a halt and concentrate their efforts on Critton and the other three PC's, which gave the men time to escape.

"I didn't know about them," returned Dahms. "I told you he is cunning."

"Yeah," agreed Everette. "Hurd's a devious bastard. He's obviously been keeping them hidden in case of a revolution."

"I don't like it," said Dahms, "And I don't mean the PC's. Now I'm wondering what else he's got."

She stuck her head around the corner. The two PC's were firing at the men in the shrubbery and at the men in the recessed doorways. Dahms yelled out, "Lt. Fallon, have the laser cannon brought up here and send fifty men down a parallel street so they can come in from behind."

The two man laser cannon was set up around the corner and just out of sight of Hurd's PC's. Dahms patted the triggerman on the head, and he and his helper stepped around the corner and got off a shot, but it went wide of the target and hit a tree next to the dome exploding it into a thousand burning pieces. The trigger man and his helper jumped back just as the PC's turned and started rapid fire with the laser cannon. It wouldn't be possible to get off another shot.

Critton synchronized his own attack. He and the other PC decided to get back in the action. They cruised down the street and came around the corner in full view—both in close. They each got off two shots and then quickly moved back up the street. All the shots missed, but it kept Hurd's PC's at bay.

Dahm's radioman, Jas, came running up. "It's comboy two," he said.

Dahms grabbed the mike. "Go ahead comboy two." She could hear a commotion in the background.

The lieutenant started talking rapidly. "There's a huge mob of angry people," he yelled. "At least two or three hundred and armed to the teeth. We had to convince them we were part of the revolutionary force before they would stop shooting at us. They've gone on down the block and should be coming upon Hurd's PC's any minute now."

"Okay," said Dahms, "follow behind at a safe distance. Over and out." She jammed the mike back in the pocket of the backpack.

"There's an unruly mob coming down the street behind those PC's." Dahms stuck her head around the corner. "Damn, here they come," she said with an incredulous voice. She edged herself into the street so she could see what was about to become a slaughter. She watched as the men in the PC's saw the mob coming and turned their craft around and opened fire. The men and women leading the mob saw the PC's and tried to turn back, but the force of the mob behind them was too great, and they were pushed into the line of fire. It became a gruesome sight. The mob kept coming and the people were being cut down like Borsian Pigs in a slaughterhouse. The men and women started climbing over the corpses and kept on coming, firing their phasors, swearing in angry voices and shaking their fists at Hurd's patrollers. Finally, some of the men and women on the edges of the mob fanned out and took true aim hitting one of the PC's in the engine

compartment. The men in the other one had had enough. They turned and were about to flee when another phasor bolt tore through their engine compartment and brought them down in flames.

The mob, in a heightened state of anger, reached the PC's, burned holes through the locks with their phasors, yanked the doors open and pulled Hurd's men from their seats slamming them to the ground. What happened next wasn't pretty. Dahms could only imagine as the mob swarmed over the men kicking them, pounding them, and hitting them with the butts of their rifles.

Dahms motioned the comboy over. She pulled out the mike and turned on the voice amplifier. "You men down there," she said as she stepped into full view. Her voice boomed down the street. "My name is Dahms Rassiter, and I am second-in-command of the revolutionary forces. We're coming down, so hold your fire."

The mob lost interest in their task at hand and started cheering, dancing around, and firing their weapons into the air.

"I thought your forces were organized," said Sharpie as the four of them hurried down the street."

"So did I," replied Dahms. "Which one of you is in charge?" she yelled out.

The mob stopped dancing around and one of the men came forward. "I think he's at the bottom of that pile," he said pointing at the dead or injured people.

"In that case," said Dahms, "I'm putting you in charge. Have your men go through that mound of people, find out who's still alive, and get them some medical attention. After that leave ten men, one with a comboy, to secure this intersection and then bring the remainder to Main Street." She turned to Curt. "Get Critton and have him mount this missile cannon on his PC. It's going to make life easier when we encounter more of these PC's."

"Yes, ma'am," replied Curt. He left in a run.

Dahms, Sharpie, and Everette started toward Main Street.

The lieutenant with his fifty men came around the corner. He ran to catch up with Dahms. "More rebels are coming. Looks like four or five hundred strong, but this time they're organized. They're actually in formation by rank."

Dahms was quick to say, "Lieutenant, take your fifty men and one of the rapid fire PC's, meet and join forces with the rebels. Tell them I have put you in charge, then skirt the hemi dome until you get to the northern gates. Start your march from there, securing each intersection as you go. Move it!"

Her gaze jumped to the mountain man. "Everette, take half your men and go the other direction. Secure the intersections as you go. Once you get to the southern gates, march toward the center of town. We'll meet you there."

"Will that be enough men?" asked the lieutenant.

"Trust me when I say there'll be more revolutionaries joining up with you."

"Yes, ma'am." He and Everette started off in different directions.

Curt joined Dahms and Sharpie as they started their march down Main Street. The next three intersections, as they advanced toward the center of town, were taken easily. Hurd's patrollers offered little resistance as they dropped back rapidly. More of the rapid fire PC's showed up and there was, from time to time, some exchange of fire, but seeing the overwhelming size of the revolutionary army, this gunplay didn't last long. The ranks of the rebel army had swollen considerably as the word of the attack had spread, and the men and women of the underground appeared from their apartments or from their places of employment. They carried weapons, mostly phasors and stunners, which they had hidden away, waiting for the war to begin.

But it didn't stop with them. More and more people, not part of the underground, were amassing. They came from the stores, the factories, the government buildings, and the apartments—all sorts of people, young and old, big and small, men and women. Dahms was amazed by the civilians joining the ranks. Those with no combat experience and no weapons were ready to battle for their freedom from poverty and frustration, caused by poor living conditions and semi starvation. They thronged the streets yelling and cursing Hurd's name.

Somewhere in the rebel crowd Dahms saw an old lady carrying a broom. *If not for the scent tower, this government would have been overthrown long ago*, thought Dahms.

There were so many people Dahms had to use some of her military force to keep them from running to Government Square. She didn't want another slaughter. She had her lieutenants give the people orders to hold the intersections. This would give them something to do, making them feel they were contributing to the cause.

Dahms, Sharpie, and Curt, with their soldiers behind and their scouts out front, continued their march toward the center of town. The next two intersections were taken with no conflict.

"It's too easy," said Dahms to Sharpie and Curt. "Hurd must be planning to make a stand at the tower with

the rapid fire PC's fortifying his position until the scents can do their job.”

She peered around the corner of the fourth intersection, and seeing that Hurd's men were no longer present she signaled her men to cross. The scouts had already moved ahead three more intersections and had reported that all was clear.

A hundred men crossed the intersection, then came Dahms and Curt with Sharpie following behind talking on the combox to the scouts.

Suddenly a red flash lit up one of the apartment windows down the block to the right, and the next instant Curt, the Captain of the Guard, went down with a thud as he hit the pavement. A phasor bolt had ripped through the right side of his chest and out the left side of his back.

"Damn," swore Dahms, "sniper fire." And then she yelled, "get a med up here, quick!"

As the intersection cleared, with rebels scattering in all directions, Sharpie bent over her Captain. There was a gaping hole in his chest. "What have you done?" she said in stricken grief." She sat next to him and gently cradled his head in her lap. She rocked back and forth as she looked on in horror.

Suddenly another red flash and a phasor bolt just missed the top of Sharpie's head.

This time Dahms, peering around a corner, saw where it came from. She yelled at a group of men hiding in the walkway of an apartment building. "Second building on the left—five floors up and third window to the right—start firing."

The men quickly moved into position, aimed their rifles, and started pumping the window with phasor bolts.

Dahms pointed at another group of men. "Get him out of the intersection," she ordered.

The men ran out, lifted the Captain, and moved him to safety—close to where Dahms was standing. Sharpie followed, still in a state of shock.

Curt was lying on his back with his eyes closed and his mouth hanging open, when the med bent over with an instrument to examine his life functions. He looked up at Dahms and shook his head. "Nothing can be done," he said as he stood up.

Dahms, with great concern written all over her face, looked at Sharpie, then averted her eyes, put an arm around Sharpie's shoulders, and looked down the block at the apartment where the sniper fire had originated. "You don't know how sorry I am," she said in a tone of grief. "Hurd and his corrupt government are going to bring sorrow to a lot of us today."

"It doesn't matter," replied Sharpie with an angry tone. She shrugged Dahms' arm off her shoulder and wiped away the tears. "I will never forgive him." She threw back her shoulders. "Let's get on with it," she said as if nothing had happened.

Dahms swore under her breath and then called forth a noncom, carrying a Seek. She pointed at the apartment. "Put it right through the window," she said.

The soldier pointed the small metal tube in the general direction, looked through the scope, adjusted his aim, and pulled the trigger. An instant later, a flash and then a tremendous explosion emerged from the window with a bright fire licking out of the building and lighting up the sky. As the dust, debris, and smoke cleared, there was a large black hole where the window had been a moment before.

"He was probably no longer in there," said Sharpie.

"Probably not," said Dahms. "But he's still in the building." She called a Lieutenant over. "Take some men to guard each exit. And then do a floor by floor search until you find him." And then she added with a low angry voice, "Take no prisoners."

She turned to Lieutenant Bradow. "Have one of your Sergeants keep ten men to secure this intersection. The rest of us are moving ahead."

The next thirty-seven intersections were taken with little resistance as Hurd's men continued to drop back. Finally they came to the intersection of Main and Tower Avenue. Dahms stepped out from behind the department store building and looked to the left, down Tower Avenue where she could see the last of Hurd's men scurrying from Government Square through the large double doorway and into the Tower Building. There were approximately thirty PC's with missile cannons and rapid-fire phasor guns hovering three feet off the ground guarding the entrance.

Just then Everette and his men stopped on the opposite side of the square. Everette peered around the corner at the PC's guarding the entrance to the tower and waited for further orders.

In spite of Curt's previous optimism, Dahms still had a bad feeling. As she looked at the tower where the PC's were waiting, she was afraid to look up, but finally she steeled herself hoping to see the top of the tower disintegrated. "Oh my God," she blurted out.

Sharpie followed her gaze.

Lieutenant Bradow stepped beside her and also looked up.

"It's still intact," said Dahms almost in a state of shock. "And where the hell is the destroyer?"

Sharpie and Lieutenant Bradow remained silent.

"Do you see it?" she asked frantically.

"No," said Sharpie. But this single word became stuck in her throat as she watched the top of the tower. She grabbed Dahms' arm. "Look," she said in horror.

But Dahms had already seen it. The doors at the top of the tower opened and a scent was hurtled into space. It plummeted toward the rebels with great speed, while scenting the blood it was programmed to spill.

Chapter Sixty-Four

Hurd was an early riser and was known for getting to the office and starting work before the sun came up. And since he was there early, everyone was there early. If anyone showed up late, they would lose their job and would find themselves on the street begging for food. It was only right that a person put in an 'honest day's work for an honest day's dollar,' (in this case a tal). Who wrote that? It seemed he had read it in a history book.

He walked through his secretary's outer office. "Good morning," she said as pleasantly as possible.

"Yes it is," he said as he walked on by. The door to his office slid open and there was Teddy Roosevelt looking down from behind his desk. He walked around and sat down. His most recent project of building an air force and acquiring two larger ships, probably G15's, was starting to take shape. This pleased him greatly. With the money he had acquired from the black market, selling Zen I crystals, he had purchased ten heavily armed air fighters and was now in the process of training pilots to fly them into combat.

But then he would have the problem of finding pilots or finding men to train as pilots for the destroyers.

It occurred to him Thorne could help get the pilots he needed from the Federation armada. After all Thorne was beholden to him for his help in taking the Galaefship and for putting Taul Winler in prison.

Mentally Hurd drooled. With the air force he was putting together he could easily take control and become absolute ruler of Ar. The other cities on Ar would be bowing down to his authority and paying the taxes he would demand. Soon he would have enough money to build his palace like the Galaef's palace on Galactus VII. He would build an elite army, which would give him the power to do away with the city council, then all would hail him as the supreme leader of Ar.

He knew things couldn't be better. He picked up the steaming cup of coffee from the top of his desk, took a sip, and leaned back in his chair thinking about the possibility of becoming the president of a Galactic Sector.

Just then a guard came rushing through the doorway.

Hurd looked up in anger. "How dare you interrupt me!"

"Sir," said the guard panting, "it's the rebels."

This got Hurd's attention, and he quickly forgot his anger. "What about the rebels?"

"They're attacking, sir."

"Attacking? You mean an all out attack against our forces?"

"Yes sir."

Hurd jumped up. "Call the scent room and tell them to release the scents, and tell them I'm on my way up. Then call the guard room and tell them to man the turret."

"Yes sir."

As he rushed past his secretary, he said, "Push the button. We're going on red alert. And this is not a drill!"

The red alert had been practiced a thousand times if not more. All the guards would go to their positions. The patrol craft with the mounted phasor cannons would be manned and sent into the enemy ranks, and the hidden turret on top of the tower would be brought on line with two men inside ready to fire on any flying craft attacking Hurd's tower.

Hurd hurried down the hallway toward the elevator. The scent room was three floors up, strategically located near the top of the building where it was difficult to fire on from opposing forces, but easy to release the scents. Once released from that height their plummet would reach an alarming speed before they tore into the adversary.

Hurd stepped into the elevator and punched the button. *At last*, he thought as the elevator started moving, *the*

rebels have attacked. They must have been confident to finally reveal themselves, but he would crush them like a bug beneath his boot. He was ready and today was the day. And a good day it was.

Hurd entered the scent room with a smile on his face. He hurried down the aisle passing the scent racks as he went. He came to the last scent rack and turned left around the corner. Much to his chagrin the doors to the tower were still closed. The men were standing around waiting. To the right was the computer room, and again, the men were standing and waiting as if they had nothing to do. "What the hell is going on?" blurted Hurd.

The captain pointed at the autoviewer. "There's a G15 headed this way. If we open the doors they'll put a sonic bomb through the opening and the tower will become nothing but a little pile of powder.

Hurd was startled and puzzled by the news, then he became angry as he realized what had happened. "It must be one of the G15's from the prison." Now he understood why the rebels had started the attack.

Hurd smiled. "But we have a little surprise for them, don't we?"

"Yes sir," replied the captain.

"Is the turret manned?"

The captain put on a set of headphones and punched a number on the console. "Control room to turret," . . . , "Control room to turret," . . . , "Are you on line?" . . . , "Yes sir. We'll keep this line open."

"Well?" asked Hurd impatiently

"The turret is being manned by Em and Neb . . ."

"What?"

"I'm sorry sir. It just slipped out. We nick named them Em and Nebbie because they're always talking about saving the city from attacking rebels." In a pensive tone he continued, "The turret is being manned by Commander Tral and Corporeal Jymme, sir."

"Fine. Are they ready to fire?"

The captain was still listening with the headphones when a shocked look crossed his face. "What?" he yelled out. "Say that again."

"What is it?" asked Hurd in an anticipating, angry voice.

"Sir, they say they've just had a malfunction with the turret's computer. It won't respond to their commands."

"Damn," yelled Hurd. "Get our best tech up there, right now!"

The captain signaled to one of his men. "Get Turney up to the turret right away. And tell him to take his tools. They've had a malfunction with the computer."

"Yes, sir," said the man. He hurried away to the communications booth.

"Damn," said Hurd. "Of all times for the computer to break down. It had to be now!" Then he calmed down and smiled as he thought of something. "Fortunately we have another surprise for them."

"Sir?"

"The entire outside of the building is made of norimuinatit. Nothing can penetrate this building, not even a sonic bomb." Hurd became more serious. "Tell the turret not to remove the holoscape camouflage until the tech has fixed the problem, and they're ready and on line."

"Yes sir."

"Then to hell with the G15. As soon as we knock it down, the rebels will be like meat in a grinder."

[Chapter Sixty-Five](#)

High above the rocky terrain, the G15, like an ominous bird of prey, moved silently toward the city of Newusa bringing with it a terrible arsenal of destruction.

Ben watched through the dusk of the morning light. He peered into the ship's viewer screen. The gates of the city dome, still in the shadows of the low mountains, loomed large in the distance. The two sets of gates, one which was structured with locks and three sets of huge sliding doors to allow larger machinery to pass in or out and a smaller set of sliding doors, used for traffic consisting of people or smaller vehicles such as two man patroller crafts, were built into the huge base of the dome for the purpose of keeping the city from being exposed to the outside elements of the planet, and also to keep out the toral. Controlled by two men stationed in a room next to the gates on the inside of the dome, they were operated and opened for only those with clearance.

This morning they would be opened by force.

"The gates await us," said Ben. And then he thought, *Soundlessly they will become a pile of glittering dust to be trampled and scattered under the boots of the charging revolutionaries.* Ben had left the city through these gates when he was transported to the prison, but this time, when he reentered, there would be no gates.

When the gates were less than half a mile away, the Galaef, in a booming voice, said, "Fire when ready, and then take us to the tower."

In spite of all the wars, which broke out on planets or between planets, Ben realized the Galaef had never been in a battle. Personages of high royalty were not intended to participate in war, instead they remained in a safe and secure location while the warriors went into battle. In this situation, however, the Galaef wanted to be in control, to make sure everything went according to plan. After all, yesterday he commanded the entire Federation fleet, which included millions of warships built to keep the peace, or for war if needed. Today he commanded one destroyer.

Taul sat in the commander's chair at the far end of the oval plot-table, watching intently with a keen, but concerned look in his eye. He gave the orders and those around him obeyed, not only because he was the Galaef, ruler of the Galactic Empire, but because he had an air of authority which came naturally to him and which battered down on those around him and made them slaves to his will. It seemed to permeate outward from his being. Ben was sure this was one of the traits the computer looked for when choosing a man to be the next Galaef.

Phist sat at the opposite end of the plot table watching the screen in front of him and piloting the ship along the chosen course. He had his feet on the peddles maneuvering the speed, while his right hand turned a little yellow ball, half of which was protruding from the surface of the table. His left hand operated a small toggle stick, and the ship moved silently toward its destination. Zorn sat at the sonic bomb control station, while Brale and Xilil sat at the rapid-fire phasors stations with their fingers on the triggers.

There was nothing in Newusa, which could stand against the tremendous power of the G15, and this made Ben smile, as he thought about Hurd's reign coming quickly to an end.

"Remove the gates," commanded the Galaef.

Zorn obeyed and pushed the button.

Ben watched the viewer screen as the gates suddenly disappeared. They fell to the ground in white, glittering powder, the finer particles floated in the air creating an eerie white haze, which reflected the morning sunlight in all directions.

Zorn fired two more shots and then there were three half circular holes in the hemidome reaching to the ground and allowing the cold summer air to creep into the city.

"Here we come," said Ben. To say the least, he was not happy with Hurd. This one man (with the help of Thorne) had completely ruined his archaeological expedition—one which had yielded the most amazing discovery in thousands or hundreds of thousands of years.

"That's right," said Sam as he nodded his head in agreement and vigorously stroked his red, handlebar mustache. "Get ready for the reckoning."

The reckoning, indeed, thought Ben. During his studies and in-depth delving into the artifacts of lost civilizations, he had seen the effects of insanely greedy dictators, and it wasn't pleasant. So he understood Sam's resentment. After all these years the day had finally arrived to throw down Hurd's invidious government and stamp out his hateful oppression. The long time sought after peace and happiness would become a reality, and fairness would become the bottom line for government. Starvation and poverty would be eradicated from the lives of the people, as would unfair imprisonment, torture, and death.

Ben continued to watch the screen as Phist brought the destroyer lower, until they were no more than thirty meters off the ground, and then he piloted the ship through the hole and up again. They flew slowly toward the middle of the city coming ever closer to the infamous tower.

As the destroyer cruised between the buildings, the nether screen, located to the Galaef's left, revealed people looking up at them and then, like little ants, they quickly scurried away to find shelter, hiding from the coming battle. *Or perhaps,* thought Ben, *to grab their weapons.*

Brale, who was also acting as communications officer with the ground troops, motioned to the Galaef. "Dahms wants her ground troops to start the attack now, before Hurd can reinforce the opening created by the sonic bombs."

"Tell her to go ahead," returned the Galaef. "It's only a matter of minutes before we take down the tower."

The destroyer moved into Government Square and flew to the level of the scent release doors.

For the second time the Galaef said, "Fire when ready."

They had decided earlier to destroy only the top of the tower, which would alleviate the threat of the scent. The remainder of the tower, with the majority of the people in it, would be preserved and would only be destroyed if deemed necessary.

Zorn set the coordinates, targeting the top of the tower, and pushed the button. There was a flash on the screen as the sonic bomb was propelled with great speed from the G15.

Nothing happened.

Only the paint on the outside of the building disappeared from the effects of the sonic bomb, and the blue-green sheen of norimuinatit sparkled brightly in the morning sunlight.

"By the Zorgs!" yelled Phist. "Hurd built the tower with norimuinatit."

"Why didn't it work," yelled Sam with a look of horror on his face.

Brale answered him. "It didn't work because sonic bombs have no effect on norimuinatit."

Sam jumped out of his seat and started to say something, but the Galaef interrupted. "Remain seated," he said. And then he commanded Brale and Xilil to burn a hole through the scent release doors with the phasors. "Then we'll proceed as planned," he ended.

Sam was still standing when Phist explained to him that as long as they were hovering outside with a loaded sonic bomb cannon, Hurd's men wouldn't be able to open the doors to release the scents.

Sam sat down and watched.

"Depending on the thickness of the norimuinatit," said Brale, "it could take up to thirty minutes to cut the hole. We're aiming for the space between the door and the doorframe, which will speed up the process."

Fifteen minutes had passed. Ben watched as the two continuous phasor beams slowly cut through the door and the doorframe causing molten metal to build up around the edges and to run down the crack—some of it dripping on Government Square far below.

Suddenly the ship lurched.

"What the Hell?" yelled Ben as he gripped the sides of his seat.

The lock-in system kept the phasors on target, but Ben and the rest of them were thrown violently about in their chairs. Roqford had to grasp with his paws around the base of the Galaef's chair to keep from being hurtled across the room. If it hadn't been for the strap-ins, many of them would have been thrown onto the deck.

The ship lurched again.

"We've been hit!" yelled the Galaef. "There's a phasor canon on top of the tower. Activate the shield. Phist what's the damage?"

Phist pushed a button in front of him and the shield went up protecting the ship from anymore hostile shots. He brought up a hologram of the ship and pushed several more buttons on the panel. It showed a red path to the middle of the ship. "They knew exactly where to shoot," he yelled. "Two shots—one to open us up and the next to take out the engine. The engine is going down and so are we."

The gun fired twice more. The red beams leaped out, struck the shield, and were reflected harmlessly into the air. The destroyer lurched and then began to careen out of control.

"We can't maintain it!" yelled the Galaef.

"By God," said Sam, "the tower's got to be destroyed. You understand. It's got to be destroyed."

Phist was trying desperately to bring the ship under control. "It's damaged too badly," he yelled. "We won't even make it to the streets below. We're going to crash." The sound of panic had turned to desperation in his voice. If they were to drop from this distance, it would mean death for all of them.

"Bring it up," yelled Ben. The phasor beams suddenly shut down. The circuits were burned out.

"What?" yelled Phist without turning his head. He was concentrating on the ship.

"Bring it up," ordered Ben. "Our only chance is to land on top of the tower."

"We'll give it a try," returned Phist.

With the engine winding down, the ship wobbled from side to side as it struggled to rise in the air. Once it came so close to the tower Viella let out an audible gasp. But finally with a lot of finesse Phist coxed it over the top.

They were only a few feet from the top of the building when the engine gave out.

"Everyone hang on," yelled Phist as he gripped the arms of his chair.

The ship crashed down hard, tipped to one side, and then rolled up on the other side, rocking back and forth a few times before it came to rest. The impact was so great that the Galaef's chair was ripped from its mounting,

throwing him and the chair across the table toward the other side of the ship. The side of the chair glanced off Em's forehead sending him reeling in his chair. The chair with the Galaef in it slammed against the bulkhead, slid down the side, and came to a stop in an upright position.

Ben undid his strap-in and rushed to the Galaef. "Are you hurt?"

"No," said the Galaef as he released himself from the chair. "But you better look at Em."

Blood was soaking through matted hair close to Em's right temple and running down the front of his head. His eyes were closed and his body was limp.

Viella grabbed a medical kit and ran to his side. She wiped away the blood and sprayed the wound with a coagulator and disinfectant. "There's nothing broken," she said as she ran an analyzer close to his head and face.

Ben was feeling for a pulse. "His heart is still beating," he said. Ben's frown depicted concern. "We'll have to check for a possible hematoma." He began digging through the box Viella had set on the floor.

"Not now," yelled the Galaef in a commanding voice. "The war won't wait that long." He looked at Brale. "Open the rear emergency hatch," he ordered. "We've got to take out that phasor cannon." He quickly stood up and went to the control-room weapons locker motioning for Brale to follow. As the door slid open the Galaef started handing out phasor handguns and rifles first to Brale and then to the other crewmembers.

Brale grabbed the phasors from Taul, placed the hand phasor on his right hip with magnetic cloth strips, and holding the rifle in his left hand, he ran out of the control room.

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Brale ran down the corridor to the emergency evac room. He opened the door and slid down the pole to the exit hatch. He kicked the latch with his foot, and then bent down, unscrewed the hatch, and jerked it open. He dropped five feet to the outer hatch and proceeded as before. Daylight flooded the room. He dropped another five feet to the top of the tower.

Viella was right behind him, until they came to the final hatch—the roof was too far for her five foot frame. She stuck the handgun in her pocket and dropped the rifle to Brale, and then she lowered herself through the hatch holding onto the rim until her feet touched the roof. She let go, moved away from the opening, and crouched down. "See anything?" she asked.

"No," replied Brale. "Fortunately we're out of the line of sight of the turret."

Just then Sam dropped to the roof, and then Tillo, and then Sweyn.

o o o o o

"Let's go," said the Galaef looking at Ben and Samsung.

"Okay," said Ben. "Let's go." He took the phasors from the Galaef and turned to the three remaining crewmembers. "To the roof," he said.

Zorn and Xilil took the phasors and ran out of the control room, but Phist was still fooling with the controls to the engine. Suddenly, the hum of the engine could be heard as it sprang to life.

"Let's go," repeated Ben. "We're wasting time."

Phist looked up. "Yes, sir," he said. He put his right foot into the horizontal slot and pushed down shutting off the engine.

Ben was behind Phist who was behind Samsung as he exited the control room. *Roqford*, Ben yelled mentally.

I'm here, said Roqford.

I know, but can you get down the pole?

No problem, came the reply.

Ben followed Phist, slid down the pole and dropped through the inner hatch, and then dropped through the outer opening. The hard chromoplastic roof felt smooth under his sole pads.

The Galaef dropped to the roof. "What's the situation?" he asked.

Sam looked over his shoulder. "The phasor is mounted in a norimuinatit bubble. We won't be able to train our phasors on it long enough without getting cut down ourselves."

Roqford dropped to the roof, his front paws landing first, then his back paws.

"We've got to do something," said Sam. "We've got to get to that control room. The longer we stand here

the more blood will be running in the streets. Right now they're being slaughtered by the scents."

Taul looked at Ben. "There has to be a way."

Sweyn turned and faced the Galaef. "Why don't we cut a hole through the roof with our phasors? We could drop into the control room and finish the job."

"No," said Ben. "It'll take too long to cut through the norimuinatit."

"Do you have an idea?" asked Viella.

Ben didn't like it. His idea would probably result in the death of several of them. "There is a possibility," he said slowly.

The Galaef wasn't feeling patient. "Out with it," he snapped. "We've got lives to save."

Ben pointed at a small room on top of the roof, which was thirty meters from the phasor cannon housing. "We need to get three men behind that lift-shaft building. Two of them from that vantage point will charge the bubble while the third directs a phasor beam at the viewer opening. At the same time two men, one from each side of the destroyer, will charge while the rest of us, from this vantage point, will shoot phasor beams at it."

"It won't work," said Sam. He looked horrified. "It's mass suicide. With one sweep of the cannon all four men will be cut in half."

Ben considered his comments, and then dismissed them. "There's a possibility of one man getting through if all four of them run and roll, and run and roll with random patterns. Once he reaches the bubble he jams a chromobomb into the opening of the ventilation shaft and hits the deck."

The Galaef didn't look happy with this idea. It was the first time Ben had ever seen him look nervous. "The possibility of success is slim," he said. "Does anybody have a better plan?"

Everyone looked about, but no one said anything.

"Damn," said the Galaef. "If we had had both destroyers we would have made it."

Sam spoke up. Reluctantly he said, "It looks like we will have to try Ben's plan." He wiped nervous sweat from his brow.

"I know," answered the Galaef. He turned to Ben. "Okay, proceed with the plan."

Ben looked at Tillo. "Can you make it to the lift building?"

"Yes Sir," said the huge mountain man.

"Once you get there, you provide the cover fire with your phasor. Xilil and Sweyn, you go with him." Ben didn't bother to tell them what their jobs would be. Everybody knew they would be two of the runners, going for the opening in the turret with chromobombs in their hands.

Ben continued with his orders, "Samsung and Sam will be the runners from this side. Viella and Brale, you fire the cover shots."

Ben couldn't help but wonder why fate had thrust him into a situation which demanded that death was no longer a pretense as it was in the swording ring, but rather as real as lying down and never getting up again, as real as the heart stopping and never beating again, as real as the brain never thinking another thought. Ben had been put into a leadership role to determine who was to die and who not for reasons dealing with politics—a phase of life for which Ben had never had any interest. He was happy with his swording, his job as a college professor, his archaeological digs, and his writings dealing with archaeology. There were those who loved the thrill of the political game, like moving pieces on a chess board, setting up the right scenarios, and then moving in for the victory, moving in with the exaltation of power. But Ben was no more interested in being caught up in politics than a bug was interested in being caught up in a spider web. Now, not only was he involved, he was the leader sending men and women to their deaths.

Ben gripped Tillo by the arm. "When you go, go together. You'll have a better chance." He paused, then added, "And remember to roll."

The three men nodded and got into the crouched position of a runner. They were ready to sprint.

Ben gave the unwanted command, "Go."

The three men bolted for the lift shaft. Xilil was on the outside, but he wasn't as fast as Sweyn and Tillo, and about midway he was a couple of steps behind the other two.

Ben was angry as he watched the three men putting their lives in danger.

After they had gone half way, the bubble swung around and bore down on them. Xilil hit the floor head over heels. Sweyn too flew to the roof, but Tillo misjudged the timing of the enemy. The phasor beam flashed out and did a sweep of the runners' pathway. It swept over the heads of Xilil and Sweyn, but Tillo started his roll too late and was in the line of fire.

It caught the top of his head and burned it off. Tillo fell toward the roof. The death throes flipped him

around and he landed on his left side. His leg was bent under him at an unnatural angle.

Sweyn and Xilil rolled into a running position and continued their charge toward the lift.

The enemy realized what had happened and began the sweep again, but it was too late. Xilil and Sweyn sped behind the lift.

"Tillo's down," Viella cried out. Her hands covered her mouth hiding the expression of horror on her face. She started to cry. Soft sobs left her throat.

"This isn't the time," said the Galaef looking at Viella, then he said to Ben, "Only two men made it, and you said we need three."

Ben nodded his head and looked at Brale. Thinking back about a conversation Ben and Brale had had the night before, Ben said, "Now you get the action you've been longing for all these years. Maybe more than you should want."

"Yeah," said Brale hesitantly as he surveyed the distance between him and the little building.

Ben saw the look in his eye. "It looks like a five mile run, doesn't it?"

Brale nodded his head. "It doesn't matter," replied Brale. "Let's do it. We've got to hurry. As Sam said—the scents are slaughtering men and women in the streets." He dropped to the runner's crouch. He looked at the lift shaft and took off.

His feet padded in long swift strides on the smooth metallic roof. From the corner of his eye he intently watched the bubble. It turned into position. A bright beam shot out bringing with it, death. At the same time Brale rolled and slid in beside Tillo's corpse.

The beam arced down anticipating his roll. It shot over his back and then burned down and into the chest of Tillo's corpse.

Brale was back on his feet, but quickly rolled again. A second beam shot over his head. He rolled into a running position, ran several feet rolled again and jumped behind the lift, just as another beam flashed behind him. There was an expression of triumph on his face.

"Damned if he didn't make it," said Sam.

Ben turned and watched Viella as she tightened her grip on the butt of her phasor. "Three men have made it through the first part," he said as he looked at the other men, "but now four have to make the second run, and two of those four, you and Sam," he said as he looked at Samsung, "will be running from behind the destroyer, which is at least sixty meters. If you're going to have any chance at all, you have to be cagey when you run. You have to swerve at unexpected times. You have to roll when you see the phasor bearing down on you. And more importantly, you have to be fast."

Samsung nodded his head, and didn't say anything, but Sam stroked his mustache and said, "Damn straight," he said it nervously, and then he added, "This is nothing compared to Hurd's Run."

"Alright then. When I give the signal." Ben shouted and raised his arm so the men at the lift shaft could see him. Xilil was standing to the right side of the lift. Brale was standing behind him, ready to jump out and give cover fire. Sweyn was on the other side beyond sight. Viella was in position, looking anxious, maybe too much so. Sam was standing in front of her.

Good luck, Ben, said Roqford. He was lying behind the destroyer licking his left paw. There was almost a laugh in his mental voice. It was as if he knew something that Ben didn't.

But Ben didn't notice. He was too intent on the bubble. "Get ready," he boomed out. He started to yell 'go,' but he stopped and turned. He heard an unexpected noise. It sounded like the humming of the destroyer's drive motor. Impossible.

Ben put his hand against the hull. He could feel vibrations setting up a tremor in the ship. The destroyer was moving. It lifted off the ground a few inches and slammed down against the roof. It tilted on its axis and started careening to the left.

"Look out!" yelled Ben.

Samsung, Sam, and Viella turned and ran toward the Galaef as the destroyer tilted to the left and crashed again. The hard metal of the destroyer caught the back of Zorn's head and sent him reeling to the roof. He jumped up and ran to the rear of the ship rubbing his wound.

Roqford streaked past them toward the back edge of the tower, keeping the destroyer between him and the phasor cannon. "He's got the right idea," yelled Sam over the humming of the engines. "We've got to move."

Together the five of them ran from underneath the destroyer. It lifted off the ground again and this time, careened toward the turret. It crashed into the roof again and jumped four feet into the air. Its momentum carried it half the distance toward the turret. The engines shut down. The humming noises stopped. It started

sliding. It appeared that its weight would carry it over the edge of the tower to crash into the streets below, but instead it smashed into the turret. Its one hundred and forty tons of metal tore the turret from its mount and bounced it over the edge like a rubber ball careening toward hell. The two men inside screamed frantically as it disappeared. The destroyer came to halt with part of it hanging over the tower.

Ben stood up from his crouched position. "What the hell happened?" he asked. He started toward the destroyer.

o o o o o

Eolia stood contemplating a leaf hanging from the branch of a tall, beautiful tree in the meadows between the high snow capped mountains. He could see into its network of life in, which the cells were working as a colony to serve the being. Sunlight was converted. ATP was being created and spent for life functions. Carbon dioxide and water were utilized to produce glucose. The Krebs cycle was a complete picture in Em's eye. He could see it functioning in its entirety.

He understood everything about the mechanics of the tree. How it grew. How it lived. How it propagated its species. And how it died. But he didn't understand where the being came from which gave it the means for consciousness.

He looked deeper, scanning the molecules and then the atoms, flashing energies in the microcosmic worlds beneath, but the answer wasn't there.

Maybe one of the visitors, those who came to the fields, could tell him. He considered asking, but as he watched, the leaf suddenly began to crumble. It disappeared. Where did it go? He looked up. The mountains disappeared and then the fields.

He could hear a loud rushing in his ears. It was the wind blowing up a storm with hurricane force to destroy and tear the cities apart. The waves were crashing down on the rocks sending rivers of water into the city flooding the buildings and the homes, and drowning out life. The thunder was loud and the lightning brought the vision of the horror in the streets. The clouds tumbled in anger, being wisped apart. The wave rose two hundred feet in the air—a tidal wave—and crashed down on the city destroying everything under its crushing fury with millions of tons of water.

The clouds became red like a red lantern in the black of night, illuminating and sending forth ominous feelings of danger and despair. They spread the light over the destruction below, and soon the waves were red and also the rocks. The lightning streaked through the clouds and it too was red.

The red overwhelmed and the storm faded. The rushing became faint. And the lightning was gone.

o o o o o

As Em came out of his dream state and opened his eyes he could feel the danger his friends were facing outside the ship. Could he help? He didn't know. He looked about the destroyer in which he sat, then he raised his hands from the sides of the chair, and explored his arms. He undid the strap-ins and stood up. He walked to the pilot's chair and sat down. He flipped the engine-on switch. He put his hands on the controls and let his mind go out to the ship. He felt its being. He knew it was a multipurpose machine. It carried. It transported. It threatened. It killed. He became part of its existence. He inspected and found injuries. He knew its weaknesses and its strengths. It would serve its master one last time.

The danger must be eliminated. He jammed his foot into the power-on switch while his hand swept across the generator beam. The engines began to hum. The ship came to life.

His fingers raced swiftly over the controls. The screen flicked on, and before him he could see a metal ball from which the feeling of danger emanated.

The ship rose a hands breadth from the surface of the roof, then leaned to the left and struck the edge.

Em's fingers raced continually across the controls. The ship rose again and came down hard. The force bounced it into the air. Em rotated a small yellow ball and struck out with his left foot activating the drive unit. The ship jumped forward.

It was all the force Em needed. With precision timing he slammed his right foot down and cut off the ship's power.

It fell to the roof and slid toward the turret. Em could see it in the screen until the last few feet. It disappeared from sight and then he felt the impact. The turret flashed back on the screen and disappeared over

the edge.

Again he had done a service for those in need, his friends, but he could sense danger was still threatening to destroy lives. He wanted to slip back into his world of peace, but he knew his services were needed. In the back of his mind he could still hear the rushing of the wind, the crashing of the waves, and the loud booming of thunder, like giant hands clapping the air.

He shrugged it off and opened his eyes. He rose from the chair. With probing fingers he felt his body. It was different than the one in the other world. It was solid, more material, and denser. It was strong and healthy. It would be adequate in this world.

As he walked down the corridor a flood of memories came rushing back. In his mind he saw his rebirth in the computer complex and the events that his brain had participated in thereafter. He pictured the mountains and Viella. He could see the pit and the ensuing battle. He knew now the fight was not over.

He slid down the pole and dropped through the hatches to the roof. There were two groups of people standing near the destroyer. They were involved in a heated discussion. He heard one of the men say, "The ship might come to life again and plunge over the side. Nobody can go aboard."

Two more men were walking toward the groups.

Roqford was next to the ship when Em dropped to the roof. Roqford was lying on his stomach with his head up, waiting and watching. *Hello*, he said as Em suddenly appeared. He had been expecting him.

Hello, repeated Em mentally. It never occurred to him that the cat shouldn't be able to talk.

The men and woman in the groups turned and stared at Em. They had looks on their faces as if they had just witnessed the resurrection of a mythical God, springing from the womb of time.

"Are you with us?" asked Ben.

"Yes," answered Em. He was quite aware of his surroundings.

Viella looked shocked. "He can talk," she said out loud.

Taul took charge, "Listen," he said to Em. "I don't know if you are cognizant of the present circumstances, or if you even want to help us, but we can't stand around and discuss it. We have to go down the stairs to the next floor and destroy the control center."

Em didn't hesitate. "I'll lead," he said. "It'll be easier for me to find the way." He took command and no one thought to question his ability, not even the Galaef.

Em pressed his hand against the palm lock. His awareness coursed through the mechanism. It found the code, which opened the door. The numbers coursed through the electronic circuits, and the door slid open.

With a look of wonder on her face, Viella asked, "How does he do that? I don't get it." There was an inflection of amazement in her voice.

"You are absolutely right," agreed Ben. "I would like to know how he does that. If only we had the time. If only we had been able to study him—to talk to him."

[Chapter Sixty-Six](#)

Ben was listening as the Galaef and Brale were discussing what to do next, but Em ignored them and stepped into the stairwell. Ben and Samsung were quick to follow, and as they did the Galaef and the others fell in behind.

Em walked down the stairs and stepped onto the top landing. He moved toward the door. Again he used his magic. He put his hand on the code lock, then punched the palm lock with the butt of his hand. The door slid open.

Ben watched as Em hesitated. Why was he waiting? Suddenly Em ducked into the hallway as a red beam shot over his head and through the opening. It just missed Ben as he jumped out of the way. Em brought his phasor into action. The blue streak leapt out, and the man fell to the floor in stun.

How the hell did Em know that man was there? Or maybe he was just being cautious.

As Ben, Samsung and the others followed, Em hurried down the hallway leading toward the front of the building. They came to a wide corridor, which led to the left away from the corridor they were in. It appeared the corridor was at least twenty feet wide. There were ten closed doors on both sides. It traveled approximately two hundred feet and ended in a corridor which was vertical to it at the other end of the building.

Em looked to the left down the long corridor, paused a moment, and then continued straight hurrying toward

the scent room. He passed from the opening of the wide corridor with the others close behind him, but still in the intersection. As Ben continued to watch, one of Hurd's elite guard step around the corner at the far end of the wide corridor and fired a red bolt. Much to Ben's chagrin and certainly to the Galaef's displeasure, the bolt hit the Galaef in the leg creating a big black hole in his calf muscle. He went down in pain, cursing.

Ben and the others scattered in both directions moving to safety and out of the line of fire. When Ben looked around he was surprised to see that the Galaef was still lying on the floor writhing in agony. Why hadn't he pulled himself to safety?

Ben started back to help the Galaef, but a red phasor bolt tore down the hallway just missing the top of his head. He turned and ducked behind the corner of the corridor.

He leaned around the corner with his phasor with the intention of returning fire. He hoped they could get to the Galaef before he was shot dead, but before he could squeeze off a round a whole barrage of phasor bolts from several of Hurd's elite guard lit up the hallway.

A door at the nearest end of the hallway opened, and one of Hurd's elite guard ran out. He grabbed the Galaef pulling him into an upright position, and putting a gun to his head he backed down the hall with the Galaef in tow.

Brale cleared his throat, hesitated, then said to Ben, "We could stun them both."

Ben looked perplexed, but didn't hesitate to say, "No. If we do that, then they'll both be lying in the middle of the hallway with phasor bolts being fired over and around them on both sides. Although not probable it's possible the Galaef would be hit again. I think instead that Samsung should go after him."

Ben looked at Samsung. "How about it?"

Samsung nodded his head, "Yes. I will get him."

"Good," said Ben. "If anyone can rescue him, it'll be you. Xilil, Phist, Brale, the three of you go with Samsung. The rest of us will continue on to the scent room."

o o o o o

As Em, Ben and the others hurried onward, Brale cranked his head sideways and looked down the corridor. "There are two of Hurd's elite guard in the corridor at the far end. I believe the others have gone on with the Galaef."

At random intervals the two guards looked around the corner and fired a red bolt, which burned into the wall of the hallway where Brale and the others were waiting and talking—formulating a plan.

Finally, Samsung said, "I will run down the hallway zagging back and forth to dodge the phasor bolts. As I run I will stay away from the side walls. You men stay here and fire shots along the sides of the walls. This will make the enemy think before they stick their heads around the corners to fire phasor bolts. Set your phasors on kill."

"I will come with you," said Brale. "To give you support."

"Foolish man. If you come, you come at your own risk."

It occurred to Brale to follow Samsung's every move. He had a feeling that Samsung knew how to avoid phasor bolts.

Without further talk, Samsung, with Brale right behind him started running down the hallway.

Xilil was on the left side of the hall hiding behind the corner with Phist on the other side. They popped their heads around the corner and started firing red phasor bolts.

Hurd's guard, on the right peeked his head around the corner and brought his gun around with his right hand and fired a shot. He ducked back just in time to avoid a shot fired by Phist.

The guard on the left showed himself and fired a shot at Samsung and Brale, but he wasn't fast enough, and a shot fired by Xilil tore into his head. He was thrown backward falling to the floor, dead.

The guard on the right wheeled around and fired another shot at Samsung.

But Samsung seeing the guard, even before he pulled the trigger zagged to the left. The bolt missed Samsung by two feet, but only missed Brale, by one inch. *Crap*, thought Brale, *that was too close*.

Phist fired two more bolts in an attempt to keep the guard at the far end of the corridor from getting off another shot.

Coming close to the far end of the corridor Samsung ran to the door on the right, and hit the 'door open' button. As the door slid open he bolted into the room with Brale following closely.

Samsung came to a halt and turned around in time to see Brale bolting through the doorway. "I'm

impressed,” said Samsung. “You’re still alive.”

“That’s because I followed your every move.”

Brale watched as Samsung, without further comment, aimed his phasor at the front corner of the room, obviously where he believed the guard was hiding on the other side of the wall. He fired.

The phasor bolt burned a hole two-thirds of the way through the wall. The second one pierced the wall and went on through. It missed the guard’s head and face, but came close enough to burn off his nose.

The guard dropped his phasor and screamed in pain. Still screaming he ran down the corridor.

He’s probably looking for a drinking fountain or a bathroom where he can find water to put on his face, and the hole where his nose had previously ordained his face, thought Brale.

Samsung and Brale emerged from the office. Phist and Xilil ran down the corridor, then with Samsung leading they hurried around the corner to the right and started sprinting. They came to an open doorway on the right. Further down on the left was an elevator.

Before anyone could run into the room, Brale yelled, “No. It’s a trap Why would they leave the door open to let us know where they have taken the Galaef?”

Samsung looked around the opening and then pulled quickly back. Three phasor bolts tore past the spot where his head had just been.

The red light from the phasor bolts caused a momentary red flash throughout the room. Being close to the open doorway, Brale and Samsung could see racks and racks of weapons.

Brale shook his head. “I know he is not in there. They’re planning to use the Galaef for bargaining, in case Hurd loses the war. But in order to do that, they need a room with communications. There won’t be communications in an arsenal room.”

Brale with the others following ran past the open doorway and down the hall to the elevator.

“You see the floor indicator? That’s the floor where they’re hiding the Galaef.”

Brale followed as Samsung and the others stepped onto the elevator. They got off on the thirty-fourth floor. They searched from room to room until they came to the council meeting room. When the door slid open they could see the Galaef propped up in a seat on the first tier at the far end of the room on the left. There were four guards in the room, and one of them was holding a phasor to the Galaef’s head.

Samsung didn’t wait to negotiate. He shot the guard on the right at the far end of the room. A guard to the left on the second tier ten feet away popped up from behind the seat and fired a shot. Samsung ducked to the right, ran to the left. He jumped off the arm rest of the nearest seat. He landed on the second tier. The guard fired another shot, but Samsung, proving to be a superb athlete, performed a three hundred and sixty degree turn with his body—which will throw off the attack of any enemy in a close quarter Situation. Samsung’s foot lashed out and kicked the phasor out of the guard’s hand. He quickly moved in closer throwing a punch to the man’s solar plexus. The man went down gasping for breath.

As another guard raised up from behind his seat to fire a shot at Samsung, Brale and Phist simultaneously let loose with their phasors tearing a hole through his chest.

The guard holding the phasor to the Galaef’s head ducked behind the Galaef and yelled out. “If you advance any further the Galaef dies.”

“What do you want?” asked Brale.

The guard said, “I’ll tell you what I don’t want, I don’t want to go to prison. I want my freedom. I want to change my allegiance to your side. You grant me this, and I will let the Galaef go unharmed.”

The Galaef was ready to agree. “You have my word on it.” he said.

But the guard was smarter than that. “You’re a politician,” he said. “You, I don’t trust.”

Brale put down his phasor and walked until he was but fifteen feet from the man and said, “You see, I have put down my weapon. You could kill me at any time. But I am here to tell you that if you let the Galaef go, you will have your freedom.”

Much to Brale’s chagrin, the guard said, “I don’t trust you, either.”

Samsung holstered his gun and walked up beside Brale. “You have my word on it,” he said.

The guard stood up and dropped his weapon. “I don’t know you, but I know you are from Newnippon, and I know your people are honorable. So, you I trust.”

Corporal Winterrose, while waiting for orders, was standing with the other men next to the scent racks. He was watching with bated breath. If a large enough hole was created, a sonic bomb could do some major damage to the machinery, not to mention that he and the others would be wiped out of existence. It occurred to the Corporeal that his sympathies may lie with the oppressed peoples of the city, but nevertheless he wasn't anxious to be killed by a sonic bomb. After all, once you're dead, it doesn't matter who wins—you're still dead.

As he continued to watch, the Destroyer's phasor burned metal and filled the room with smoke. A hole was beginning to form, and hot molten norimuinatit dripped onto the plastoglass scent-release rack emitting fumes, which had a pungent odor and caused a stinging sensation in the eyes. Breathing was becoming difficult.

"Switch on the ventilation system," yelled Hurd.

"It's on, sir," said the Captain.

Hurd tied a cloth around his face and head, covering his mouth and nose.

The Corporeal shifted his position and moved forward until he could see the screen above the console. The G15 was firing a continuous phasor beam at the scent release doors. It had been firing for the past fifteen minutes, and although the phasors of a G15 were a hundred times more powerful than a hand held phasor it would still take a half an hour to burn a small, but large enough hole for a sonic bomb to be able to do damage.

"Where the hell is the turret?" yelled Hurd. He was seething with anger.

The Corporeal standing next to communications said, "They just came on line, sir."

Suddenly a red bolt, and then another quickly following the first, hit the front left side of the G15.

"Direct hit, sir!" yelled the Captain. "Direct hit!"

"By the curse of the Zorgs! Take that you dirty pigs!" Hurd started shaking his fist at the scent release doors. "Shoot 'em again," he yelled. "Shoot 'em again."

"They're out of control, sir. They're careening to the right."

"Tell the turret to shoot again!" yelled Hurd, and then started laughing. "We got 'em now."

"Sir, the turret reports they shot two more times, but the destroyer had its shield turned on."

They both watched the screen as the destroyer, while wobbling like a spinning top when it slows down, started to ascend toward the roof of the building.

"Sir, they're landing on the roof."

The top of the building shook under the weight of the destroyer slamming down.

"It won't matter," growled Hurd as he braced himself. He was disappointed he wasn't able to watch the G15 plummet to the street below killing everyone inside. "There's nothing they can do on the roof except eat more phasor shots from the turret." He pointed at the scents. "Get the doors open and put our babies in motion."

The Captain punched a button on the console and watched for the doors to slide open, but nothing happened. He punched the button again: still nothing. He jumped out of his seat and ran over to the doors. "Sir, the doors were welded shut by the destroyer's phasor."

Hurd's smile left his face. "So, they think they can stop us." He started to say something, but his face became red, and he started to sputter.

"We need to call in a technician with a phasor-beam metal cutter, sir."

"Do it."

"Yes, sir."

Twelve minutes later two technicians were busy cutting between the crack of the door and the doorframe.

"Now that the G15 has been disabled," boasted Hurd in a confident voice as he patted the scent sitting on the launching pad, "we will kill all the rebels and put an end to this insane war." And then under his breath he added, "It'll only be a matter of putting my plans to work to take over this planet." Suddenly his smile vanished and he glared at the technicians. "Hurry up," he yelled. "What's taking so long?"

No one answered him, and the technician kept working. Finally, after a few, long and torturous minutes, "Won't be long now," said the technician. "I'm starting to see daylight."

Suddenly the building shook like the aftermath of an earthquake, and the Captain, watching the viewer, could see the turret being vaulted over the edge of the building. "Oh my God," said the Captain.

"What now?" growled Hurd.

"The destroyer just slammed into the turret and knocked it off the building."

Hurd was livid with rage. "What the else can go wrong?" he blurted out.

"It won't matter, sir. They can't get through the doors."

"That's right," said Hurd a little calmer. "Bring some guards up from the basement to deal with them."

"Yes, sir."

"And as an extra precaution," he added, "send three men to guard the door from the inside."

"Yes, sir." The Captain called out, "Corporal Winterrose."

He came running. "Sir?"

Take two men. Go to the back and guard the door.

"Yes, sir."

The Corporal ran to where the men were waiting while the technician worked on the doors, singled out two men, and then the three of them disappeared down one of the rows and behind the racks.

No more than a minute had passed when Corporal Winterrose reappeared around the corner and started toward the arsenal room.

"What are you doing, Corporal?" asked the Captain.

"I'm going to get three phasor rifles, sir. In case we need them."

"Okay Corporal. Carry on."

Corporal Winterrose entered the room, grabbed up three phasor rifles and slung them over his left shoulder. It was awkward with all three of the rifles on one shoulder, but he needed his right arm and hand, his shooting hand, swinging free and easy for a very special reason.

o o o o o

TWO YEARS BEFORE, Mr. Deacon Winterrose—a young man of twenty-nine, who made minimum (better known as a starvation) wage in a grocery store, was hurrying home one night after curfew. He had just left an underground rebel meeting in the tunnels and had stayed too long while talking to one of the leaders. Now the scents would be out and hunting.

The eerie shadows cast by one of Ar's two moons fell in random patterns from the buildings and onto the streets below. Although he had done it before he didn't like being out when the scents were on the prowl. It was hard to see them in the dark shadows, and if you didn't see them in time the only warning was the whirring of the motors just seconds before their razor sharp blades hacked you into bloody pieces.

He lived close, just a block and a half from the opening into the underground tunnels. And before he emerged he watched the sky above his apartment building. When all looked clear he sprinted out of the building and down the street as fast as he could run.

As he approached his 'home sweet home,' or, in this case, his lair of safety, he felt a sense of relief. Another few moments and he would be inside and out of reach of the scents. He would go to bed, get a good night's sleep, then rise in the morning and go to work—knowing in the back of his mind that he was doing his part and hoping that Hurd would soon be overthrown.

But just before he reached the door to his apartment building, a man stepped out of the shadows nearly causing Deacon to have a heart attack. Being startled made his heart race even faster than that caused by the running. "What the hell?" he blurted out without thinking.

"Mr. Winterrose?" asked the man.

"Yes?" he answered. His heart still raced, and he was undecided as whether to knock the man down and run into his apartment or stay and find out what he wanted. He was leaning toward the first when the man said, "I was sent by Rogae X."

"Man, you scared the wits out of me." He looked around. "Let's get into the building."

After they had entered and the door slid shut, Deacon asked him for the password, and then being satisfied that the man was on the level, he asked, "What do you want?"

"It's not me," said the man. "It's Rogae X. He sent me to tell you that he has falsified your records. After much consideration he has decided that you are the best suited of all the rebels to infiltrate Hurd's regimen of Elite Royal Guard.

Tomorrow morning you are to report to Captain Halax on the third floor of Hurd's Tower. You have just been transferred from another division for your excellence in performance. Your name is Corporal Lance J. Winterrose." The man paused and then asked, "Do you have any questions?"

"Are you kidding? I have a ton of questions."

"Fine. Don't ask. Just report and do what you're told. It is Rogae X's plan to eventually promote you to the scent room." Without further ado the man turned and hurried out of the apartment building.

Fourteen months later there was an opening in the scent room and due to Corporal Winterrose's excellent

record and a good word from Rogae X, he was transferred to his new position.

o o o o o

He shifted the weight of the three phasors trying to find a more comfortable position. He rounded the corner and walked toward the two men. He drew his phasor and shot twice. They were both paralyzed as they hit the floor, and they would stay that way long enough for him to do what he had to do.

He set two of the rifles down, holstered his hand phasor, unbolted the door, and opened it. It was time for him to help the rebels on the roof. If he could get them to the scent room, they would have a chance of subduing Hurd's Elite Royal Guard: twenty-two of them plus Hurd.

Chapter Sixty-Eight

Em put his hand on the door and then said in a tone of resignation, "It's bolted from the inside, and judging from the strength of this metal it will take hours to burn through it with a hand phasor."

Sam drew in a long breath and puffed it out making his mustache stand up. A worried look crossed his face. He aimed his hand phasor and started shooting at the palm switch with continuous fire.

"It won't do any good," said Ben. "You're just going to deplete your power pack." As he said this he was desperately trying to think of an alternative plan. He had to think of something, otherwise thousands of rebels were going to die being hacked to pieces.

Then the door started to open.

Em was still leaning partially against it and had to quickly brace himself to keep from losing his balance. Abruptly he found himself face to face with a phasor rifle and looking into the eyes of the man behind it.

Corporal Winterrose jumped back and then, not wanting to make any noise, he whispered, "Crap, you startled the hell out of me."

Sam raised his phasor and started to shoot, but Em pushed his hand down. "Wait," he said.

"'Wait' is right," whispered Corporal Winterrose. "I'm on your side. And I was just coming to give you a hand."

No time for chatter, thought Ben. He pushed his way past Sam, Em, and Corporal Winterrose and into the scent room. He stepped over the two men lying on the floor. "Come on," he said and started down the walkway behind the scent racks.

Corporal Winterrose caught up with him and grabbed his arm. "They're still working on getting the doors open," he said.

"Getting the doors open?"

Corporal Winterrose had a blank look on his face. "Yeah, didn't you know?"

"Know what?"

"The destroyer's phasor welded them shut. I thought you did it on purpose."

"No we didn't," replied Ben. "But it's damn lucky for the foot soldiers that we did."

"How many men are there?"

"Twenty-three, including Hurd."

Ben turned and pointed to the men behind him and then to the different rows. He wanted them to spread out.

The lights were bright, which made him feel like a duck in a shooting gallery. He walked stealthily down the corridor, and when he was three quarters of the way to the end, he came to a halt. He could hear Hurd's men talking at the other end of the scent rack. He slowly peeked around the corner.

From this vantage point he could see nothing but two men about ten paces away. They were talking quietly while staring toward the front of the tower, probably watching the cutting of the doors.

He signaled for Em and Viella to stay behind, and then quickly stepped past the aisle. He went to the end of the corridor and again peered around the corner. Now he could see the control room and the scent release doors. *Damn*, he thought as he pulled back. *The doors are open, and they're getting ready to launch a scent. I hope to hell that's the first one.*

And then he could hear Hurd giving the commands. "Bring the scents," he yelled.

Two men walked over and unloaded a scent from the first rack. They carried it to a small launching pad near

the opening and set it down, then they walked back for the next scent. The four men in front of the control panel started working, pushing switches and programming information into the computer.

The small drive motor began to hum and the scent lifted silently off the pad, into the air, and shot out the opening.

It's time to act, thought Ben. From the corner of his eye he could see Roqford slinking down the aisle between the computer banks. He motioned to Em, pointing at his phasor and then pointing down the aisle, thus giving him the message to shoot the two men.

Ben made sure his phasor was set on stun and then he surveyed the situation. There were four men standing in front of the control panel and one in front of the computer banks. In the middle of the room near the launching pad stood a patroller with black stripes around the sleeves of his uniform. This was the man in charge when Hurd wasn't around. Two more men were standing near the door of the repair shop with cutting tools in their hands. They had been working to free the doors. Hurd was standing on the opposite side of the launching pad, and the two loaders were walking back to get another scent.

Ben spun around the corner, aimed his phasor, and squeezed off a shot. The loader nearest to him went down. That was the signal for the rest of the rebels. Ben moved his hand with the phasor in it, slightly to the right, aimed, and squeezed off a second shot. The man with the stripes on his sleeve stiffened and fell to the floor.

Almost simultaneously Sam, who had snuck past the two loaders near the middle of the scent racks, stepped out at the far end and brought down the other loader near Hurd. At the same time, Em unerringly squeezed off his two shots. Sweyn raced to the furthest scent rack, on the far side, and fired a shot at one of the repairmen. It caught him on the shoulder with enough force to spin him around and knock him to the floor, paralyzed. The other man ducked through the repair shop doorway before Sweyn could fire again.

Hurd, with a seething red face, dropped to the floor behind the small launching pad. He drew his phasor with vengeance and fired at Ben. But his angle of fire was poor and the red streak burned into one of the metal scents.

Em stepped beside Ben. He switched his phasor from stun to kill and started cutting through the control panel with a continuous beam. Wires sparked, screens went dead, control circuits ceased to function, and indicator lights on the control board blinked out. Small spirals of smoke wisped into the air and small rivulets of metal oozed onto the floor. The scents would no longer be flying.

Viella had worked her way to the far end of the room and crawled down the walkway between the computer banks. When the action began she stood up and fired two shots at the outside controllers. They both went down, but as she started to withdraw a hand reached out, closed around her wrist, and yanked her forward. Her stunner went spinning to the floor.

She had been unaware of the man standing on the other side.

"Bring her over here," yelled Hurd from behind the launching pad. He was motioning to the man in a hurried manner. "Quick, you fool. Hurry!"

Ben saw Viella being dragged across the floor. Her free arm was flailing about in protest, but she couldn't reach her captor. He had her back to his chest and was using her as a shield.

Ben brought his phasor to bear on the man dragging Viella, but he couldn't get a clear shot. He turned and fired a shot at Hurd, but it was high off the mark as Hurd ducked behind the pad again.

"Stop!" yelled Ben at the man who had captured Viella. But the man ignored him. Ben found his line of fire and pulled the trigger. The blue beam shot across the room and hit Viella full in the chest. She went down leaving the controller exposed and vulnerable. Ben fired another shot and the man went down in back of her.

"You think you can stop me." There was anger in Hurd's voice. "But you're just a fool like the rebels." He fired his phasor, and the red bolt hit near the top of Viella's head. "I have my phasor aimed at the girl. If you don't throw down your guns, I'll kill her."

Ben turned toward Sam. If he could . . . No, he was in the wrong position.

"Throw them down, now," yelled Hurd again.

Em had no chance. Ben surveyed his position, but the pad was in his line of fire.

"Alright," said Ben. He stood up and threw his gun on the floor.

"And the rest of you," said Hurd in a loud voice. "Do it now."

Sam stepped forward and tossed his gun on the floor. He was followed by Gaal and Sweyn, who did the same.

That's not all of you," yelled Hurd. He was counting as the guns hit the floor.

Em threw his gun down.

"It won't do you any good," said Ben. "Your scents are no longer operational, which means you've lost the war." Ben was pointing at the burned out control panel. "Let the girl go and negotiate with us. Perhaps we can keep you out of prison by banishing you to another planet where you can live a meager life with your wife. Maybe we'll even throw in the picture of Teddy Roosevelt."

Ben's last remark infuriated Hurd. He stood up and aimed his phasor at Ben. "You've ruined my plans for a magnificent empire." His face was distorted with rage. "I'm going to kill you," he growled between clenched teeth. He began to squeeze the trigger. "Die," he whispered.

A blur of gold streaked through the air with unimaginable speed, and it brought with it, death. It seemed to Ben that it was impossible for an animal to move so fast.

A swipe of Roqford's paw struck Hurd's gun hand forcing it to his chest before he could pull the trigger. At the same time Roqford's head butted Hurd with such force as to knock him off his feet. He sailed over the guardrail and through the opening of the scent doors.

That ended the negotiations with Hurd.

As soon as Sam saw what had happened he rushed over to the opening and stuck his head over the ledge until he could see Hurd falling away. "I'm the one who stole your cigars, you dirty bastard!" he yelled.

Ben looked out the opening just in time to see Hurd plummeting toward his death, while at the same time Hurd raised his fist and shook it in anger as if to say, 'if only I could get my hands on you for stealing my cigars, I would punish you severely.

And that was the end of Hurd.

Sam left the opening and hurried over to Viella. She would be paralyzed another twenty-five or thirty minutes, but she could hear what he was saying. "We've done it," he said. "We've defeated Hurd, and now the city belongs to the people."

Ben could almost see a smile beneath her frozen face.

[Chapter Sixty-Nine](#)

Ben stood looking over Xilil's shoulder watching and hoping that soon Thorne's attempted usurpation would come to an end and that his control over the Commander would be quickly taken from him and returned to the Galaef. He wanted to get back to his research, but more than that he wanted to get back to Lyil. Being second in command of the Galactic Empire was not something he had ever hoped to achieve. It seemed a burden, which he could do without.

It pleased him that the city had fallen to the revolutionaries with little loss of life and in a short amount of time. It gave him hope that Thorne would fall just as fast. How could Thorne possibly hope to succeed? There were too many failsafe systems designed by top-level strategists and by the computer planet. It was only a matter of time before Thorne would fall into one of these traps, and his short reign as Galaef would be finished.

Philosophically speaking, it occurred to Ben that in the long run, evil cannot win, because evil always annihilates whatever it touches. That doesn't mean that good always prevails. What it means is that evil never self perpetuates, because evil is a destroyer and once it's on top, it cannot stay there. Since it destroys everything, it also destroys itself.

Thorne and his evil plans would go down, but would he take the Galactic Empire with him?

Hurd and his evil, little empire were destroyed, but Newusa remained intact, and now the good would take over and make the city prosperous and make life enjoyable for the people.

How abruptly Hurd's evil reign had ended.

Once the city militia was informed of the death of Hurd they quickly surrendered their weapons and patrol crafts. There were only a few who held out—four militia snipers and three patrol craft who were loyal to Hurd until the end. All the men in Hurd's tower surrendered immediately, making it easy to secure the building. And finally the holdouts were dealt with.

Dahms, Everette, and Sharpie marched triumphantly into Government Square with the revolutionaries behind them. The sounds of whooping and yelling filled the air with jubilant excitement as the men and women of the city congregated with the prison guards, the mountain people, and the city revolutionaries.

In order to keep the crowd under control, the Galaef stepped up to a microphone, which had been placed on

the top step in front of Hurd's tower. As he addressed the people the din grew quiet. "Today will go down in the history of Ar as a great victory for the people of Newusa." His voice was amplified and echoed off the buildings around them. The people let out a great cheer for truly today was a happy day. "Now you can rebuild your government," he paused, "one that will be for the people and not for the dictator." Another eruption from the overjoyed crowd. "Tomorrow there will be a meeting of the revolutionary leaders to decide how to start your new government. Since I know these people personally, I have confidence they will create the best form of government for your city." Another loud cheer. "Until then," he continued, "a huge stash of canned and frozen food has been discovered on the first five floors of the basement of Hurd's Tower. There are also fresh vegetables from the hydroponic gardens." He put his hands on the railing and leaned forward. "Shortly we will be distributing this food to all of you." The loudest cheer of all rose from the sea of people and pounded against the buildings like a wave against the rocks. The Galaef turned and limped as he made his way into the building.

The Galaef had ordered a floor-by-floor search of Hurd's tower to make sure all weapons were commandeered and all of Hurd's personnel had surrendered to the revolution.

It was during this search that the unexpected happened. A long range communicator was discovered on the top floor of the East wing.

Ben and Xilil could see the joy on the Galaef's face as the three of them, with Frosty guarding the rear, hurried to the communications room. Once the Galaef could communicate with the flagship's computer, Thorne's usurpation would come to an abrupt end.

Xilil finally finished putting in the code. He hit the 'send' button and sat back watching the screen. Several minutes later lettering appeared on the screen: "Incorrect code. Resubmit with target coding."

Xilil looked up at the Galaef. "Sir, there is something wrong with the password."

The Galaef frowned. "Put it in again," he growled.

Although Ben hoped Thorne's attempted usurpation would come to an end as soon as possible, he was beginning to have doubts. "Thorne has changed the code," said Ben.

The Galaef was quick to respond. "That's impossible," he answered. "The reigning Galaef is the only person who can change the codes. He looked down at Xilil. "Resubmit," he said.

Ben watched over Xilil's shoulder as he punched in the code and then the coordinates. Because of the distance to the computer planet they had to wait several minutes before the message came up on the screen. "Sir," said Xilil, "the flag ship is orbiting Galactus VII, but it will not respond to the given code."

There was a look of disbelief on the Galaef's face. "That's not possible," he said. "Try it again."

Xilil punched in the code and the 'send' command. Several minutes later he looked up. "Same thing, sir."

The Galaef's face turned white. "It's not possible. I'm the only one who can change the codes."

Ben frowned. "Maybe he found something or some information on Galactus V showing him a way to override the codes."

"No," said the Galaef vehemently. "The computer on the flag ship is programmed so that only I can change the codes. There is no possible way" His voice trailed off into thought. "We'll use the emergency failsafe code. No one knows this code, but me." He put his hand on Xilil's shoulder indicating for him to get up.

The Galaef grimaced from pain as he took a step then sat down. He punched a new code into the communicator and hit the 'send' button.

A few minutes later, the Galaef, looking visibly shaken said, "It's been changed." He thought for a moment. "There's only one thing left to try." He paused as he started punching numbers into the communicator. "It might be he wasn't able to change the codes to the Federation headquarters on Galactus VII."

He hit the button and sat back. Several minutes later he started shaking his head.

"I don't like what I think you're telling me," said Ben. "If he can change the codes, does that mean he can take over the Galactic Armada?"

"Not yet," boomed the Galaef. "First he has to get inside the computer planet and reprogram the computer, and as I have said before, he needs the key to do that."

"Yeah," said Ben, "but now I have to ask—where does he need to go to get the key?"

The Galaef paused. He was trying to decide whether or not to divulge this information. Finally he said, "Somehow Thorne found out that the Galaef's personal secretary wears a ring which is a key to the vaulted door of the computer planet. Once inside, the ring also acts as a map to the control room which is located several thousand miles deep within the computer through a virtual maze of corridors."

Ben's hopes of getting back to a normal life were quickly disappearing. "So now we can only hope that Myra didn't return to her home planet because if she did, Thorne would have been quick to grab her."

"Actually," said the Galaef slowly, "that's not the case. When Thorne came to visit me in prison he made it quite clear that the only reason I was still alive had to do with finding Myra. He had already tried her home planet and found that she had falsified her documents. The fact is she's from somewhere other than what her documents read."

Ben was outraged. "What the hell kind of people do you have working for you?" he yelled. "First Thorne has you thrown in prison and now you find out Myra lied on her documents?"

The Galaef was surprised that anyone would use this tone of voice with him, but considering the circumstances he decided to overlook it. "Are you reprimanding me?" he asked in a sour voice.

Ben calmed down a bit. "Sorry," he said, "I got carried away. But the whole situation is absurd. All these years I've been lead to believe that the Galaef is one hundred percent secure in his reign. The only threat he has to worry about is assassination. Now, suddenly we have Thorne doing the impossible—changing codes and taking over the Galaefship, and we have Myra losing herself somewhere in the galaxy with Thorne probably hot on her trail. All in all it appears we're not in a good situation.

"I can only agree with that," said the Galaef, "but the fact that she lied on her documents is a good thing. It means we have a chance of finding her before Thorne."

"How is that possible?"

"We will look for the flight of a lone, ten-man destroyer by setting up an internet with freighters and cargo ships. With this internet there's no doubt we'll find the planet. After that it's a matter of finding Myra before Thorne." He looked down at Xilil. "Get on it and let me know when you've found the planet."

"Yes sir."

A voice from the corner spoke out in a quiet and somber tone. "Sir?" It was Frosty.

The Galaef stopped in mid stride as he was about to leave the room. "Yes?"

"It's about my family, sir."

"Of course," he said. "In all the turmoil I forgot. Xilil . . ."

"Sir?"

"Before you start the search for Myra's planet get the coordinates for Frosty and Mordrous' families, contact the command posts in those locations and have their families moved to a secure location."

"Yes sir."

Taul looked at Ben, "I doubt that Thorne's even thinking about their families at this time."

"Probably right," said Ben.

And with that they left the room.

[Chapter Seventy](#)

As the translucent metal-door slid quickly into its recess, Professor Ahmand Benjamin Hillar, now second in command of the all-powerful Galactic Empire, stepped through the doorway and into the conference room of Hurd's Tower—shortly to be renamed. As he came to a halt and looked about, he found himself standing in a large oval room built with seven levels in a tier-like construction with each higher level radiating out. With the exception of the floor at the bottom of the room, each level was approximately six feet in width with chairs and tables and built-in horizontal viewer screens. On the bottom floor was a huge conference table, which seated, at the very least, forty people. He noticed that coming in from four different directions were wide stairways which led to the bottom floor.

Ben wondered why Hurd had such a large conference room with the enormous table. He never had any conferences with more than five or six people at any one time. Must have been part of his future plans—king of an empire with people bowing at his feet.

Ben walked down the steps toward the table. The soft, luminescent light hidden in the ceiling high above cast his moving shadow upon the steps, which were covered with blue El carpet.

A hum of excitement was in the air as the people in the room were talking loudly or whispering amongst each other. There must have been at least a hundred and fifty men and women sitting in the chairs on the tiered-levels. They consisted of people who had been prominent before Hurd's takeover. Many of them were previous business owners who were released from prison the day before. Others were scientists, architects, doctors, and religious leaders. And there were a few Ben hadn't met.

Ben knew these people were exultant that Hurd's reign of terror and horrific deeds was at an end, nevertheless, he noticed that most of them had disgruntled looks on their faces.

Half way down the steps he observed the key players sitting around the conference table. Dahms was sitting next to the head of the table at the near end of the stairs, which he was descending. She was turned sideways talking to someone on the first tiered level and this presented her profile to Ben's point of view. He could see she still had that look of business about her. She certainly wasn't one to sit around or dance around celebrating their victory when there was work to be done.

To the left of Dahms were two empty seats and then there was Sam, Viella, Gaal, Xygliper, and Sweyn. On the other side of the table sat Zorn, Brale, Phist, Donn, Xilil, Everette, and Moonmaid. Rogford was lying in front of the chairs on the first tier opposite Dahms. His huge chin was resting comfortably on his paws. It wasn't surprising that no one, in the upper tiers, was sitting close to him.

Finally, there was Em who was sitting at the far end of the table. Ben thought it was strange how, several times the night before, and then again in the morning, Em kept getting that vacant look in his eyes. Then he would shake it off as if he were resisting a force pulling his mind into another world. It seemed, at any moment, Em would be leaving them again.

Ben sat next to Dahms. Without offering a greeting, which was typical of Ben, he said, "I heard you had some excitement with Hurd's body yesterday."

"That's right," she answered. "Some of our citizens got a little enthusiastic and hung his body by the neck in Central Park. Damn," she said, "I don't care how evil he was he didn't deserve that. So I had his body cut down and sent to the cremation plant."

Dahms had spent the rest of the day in the Newusa City prison going over the list of prisoners. She decided who was to be released and who was to be left in prison. As it turned out, the majority—almost ninety percent of the prison population, was released, including her parents. Before the prisoners left the confinement, she made a promise, which Ben thought was appropriate, but might be hard to keep. She told the prisoners that their possessions and financial holdings would be returned to them exactly as they were before Hurd seized them.

It was obvious that Dahms, in spite of her business-like attitude, seemed a bit fidgety. She sat tapping a pencil on the top of the table.

"Anxious for the meeting to get started?" asked Ben.

"We have a lot to do," she answered.

"Indeed we do." Ben knew things would go smoothly with Newusa. A new government would be created. And the citizens would go back to work earning a decent wage, bringing with it prosperity for all those who wanted it.

But that was the good news. On a higher level the fate of Newusa, in fact the fate of the entire planet of Ar could be in danger. If Thorne was powerful enough to wage war with the Galaef, it would put Ar in the middle. With these two powers battling over the Zen I crystals it was possible that the human population on Ar would be wiped out.

Ben looked up as Bo Whimple and Tylr Rono walked down the stairway and sat at the other end of the table. Two members of the infamous city council. It didn't surprise Ben that they sat away from the revolutionaries.

A moment later Juez and Went Chen entered the room. Viella jumped up to give her father a hug, and Sam walked over and shook his hand. Now the council was complete.

Dahms had made it known on several occasions that one of these members was Rogae X, but for matters of security she would never say which one.

After a few minutes of discussion amongst Sam, Viella, Juez, and the other council members, Juez motioned, for those who were standing, to sit, and he started the meeting. "I see new faces here today. So, I will first introduce myself. I am Juez Tybo." There was no applause. He introduced the other council members and then said, "Before we start with the discussion of the new government. I want to clear up the mystery of Rogae X." He had the other three councilmen stand up and without much ado and with a wave of his hand, indicating himself and the other councilmen, he said, "We are Rogae X."

A loud murmur started through the congregation and then some laughter.

Ben noticed a surprised look on Dahms' face. "By God," exclaimed Ben. "Hurd had all four council men plotting against him. Did you know about this?" he asked, looking at her.

"No," answered Dahms quietly, but harshly. "The man I formed the underground with was Went Chen."

"I'm sure they had their reasons for not telling you."

"Yes. For the same reason I never told anyone about Went—a matter of security."

Juez raised his hands to quiet the congregation. "Soon after Went Chen and Dahms formed the underground, Went came to me, knowing my feelings about Hurd and his corrupt government, and asked me to join them. It wasn't long after, that all of us formed a pact to do everything in our power to overthrow Hurd.

"With the help of Dahms we started smuggling weapons into the tunnels under the city. We formed a hierarchy in the underground army with Dahms as the General. There were Commanders, Captains, Lieutenants, Sergeants and so on. We trained them for combat and got them ready for the revolution.

"We even did things which might seem trivial to some of you, such as sneaking food out of Hurd's cache and getting it to the starving families.

Eventually our plan was to get enough of our men stationed in the scent room so we could take it over and start the revolution. As it turned out we only had one man in the scent room when it started, but he was able to help the Galaef and his men when they attacked." Juez ruminated for a moment and then continued. "I am explaining this now because I want you to know that none of us, once the pact was agreed upon, ever supported Hurd. We all played our roles, which kept Hurd from suspecting anything. I was the antagonist to Hurd, which is what I was before the pact. So, it wasn't hard for me to continue in that role. Went and Bo played the docile and wimpy councilmen who would agree to anything Hurd wanted. Tylr played the councilman who would do what Hurd wanted, but questioned his decisions. All in all, we made it look like a council in turmoil with Hurd always getting his way.

"But in case one of us was caught and executed or imprisoned, we agreed that the others would continue the plot to overthrow Hurd." He paused, which was enough for the people to jump to their feet and start a long and thunderous applause.

The uproar had taken Ben and the crew of the G15 by surprise, but Ben and the others acquiesced by standing and joining in. *After all*, thought Ben, *these councilmen have defeated a very powerful man, a man who had a regiment of personal bodyguards and many loyal followers, a man who had an army and a scent tower.*

Ben found himself clapping harder. We're applauding not only Rogae X, but the fall of depression, oppression, and starvation, and the rise of a new and better way of life for the people of Newusa.

Juez raised his hands and the applause began to taper off until the noise of the people shuffling to sit down was all that remained. "Now to the order of business," he said. "As leaders of the revolutionary government, we have made several edicts which will be in effect immediately. First, we have decided that Dahms will retain command of the city by acting as Provo marshal. There will be no pillaging nor plundering of the city stores nor personal property. Any violator will be treated as a criminal of the city." He had a stern look, one that made Ben think punishment would be harsh. "To this purpose Dahms has already set up a watch detail with patrollers armed and ready to enforce the law. They have been instructed to keep peace in the city, but to let the people have their freedom. In other words, there will be no curfew.

"And secondly," continued Juez, "Dahms will continue . . ."

Ben heard a noise and looked behind him. The double doors, at the top of the stairs, had slid open and the Galaef limped through the doorway. He was followed by Frosty, Samsung, and two other bodyguards.

The Galaef had been taken to a Medical facility where surgery had been performed and DNA regeneration had been started, but it would take a couple of weeks before the regeneration was complete, until that time he would be limping around in pain—he refused to take drugs, calling them the 'devil's magic wand.'

Juez looked up, and seeing the Galaef, he said, in a commanding voice, "All rise."

The entire assemblage rose to their feet in tribute to the leader of the Galactic Empire.

"Continue with your business," commanded the Galaef. He positioned himself midway between Sweyn and Bo Whimple before he sat down. His two bodyguards stood at attention on opposite ends of the room while Frosty stood directly behind him. Ben knew the Galaef would not interfere with local politics unless it infringed upon or threatened his own plans.

Only Juez remained standing as all the people in the room sat down. "Secondly, Dahms will continue," he repeated, "to keep law and order until an election for a new city council has been conducted. The time for reform is now, but it will not be done in a haphazard, unorganized manner. A committee has been established to organize the election, which we have determined will take place in two months. This will give the candidates time to do their campaigning. If the committee determines more time will be needed, then it will be so ordered." He looked around the room. "Any questions, comments, or suggestions, please speak now."

A man on the fourth tier stood up. "How do we know we won't end up with another Hurd?" His face turned

red as he asked the question.

Juez responded with confidence. "We have asked ourselves that question, and we have decided to form the new government with the city being divided into fifteen sections. Elections will be held to elect a fifteen-member city council, and the entire city will vote to elect a Mayor. During decision-making the Mayor will have two votes, which will give him a little more power than the council members.

"Also, a committee called, 'The Committee of Government Affairs,' will be formed for the purpose of monitoring the official and personal affairs of the city council members and the city patrollers. It will be the committee's job to keep the council members and the city patrollers honest by making sure none of them are being bribed."

The man who had asked the question nodded his head in agreement. And then he shouted out with vehemence, "But I also think we should elect Rogae X to the new city council, considering what they have accomplished—giving us back our lives."

The congregation again stood up and started a thunderous applause.

Juez raised his hands in the air in an attempt to quiet the members of the meeting. "Please, ladies and gentlemen, please save the applause for the end." But no one could hear him over the deafening noise.

The applause roared and echoed throughout the room.

Rogford, not being used to all this noise put his paws over his ears. Finally as the noise continued he stood up and glared at those around him.

Ben watched him wondering what he was doing. And then he realized the noise was irritating Rogford, and he wanted it stopped. And it wasn't difficult for Rogford to get his way. When a six foot cat with three inch fangs protruding from his mouth stands up it can be very disconcerting. The people like a house of falling cards, stopped applauding and abruptly sat down.

Rogford walked up the steps and laid down in front of the door. It appeared if there was another outburst he was going to leave the meeting.

"Now," said Juez, "if you will hold your applause until the end of the meeting, we will be able to get through this more quickly. As far as any of the members of Rogae X running for city council, we haven't made that decision as of yet. After the ordeal we've been through we're not sure we want to continue in that capacity." He paused and then looked around and asked, "Are there any more questions?"

A woman on the seventh tier stood up. "When will our businesses be returned to us?" she asked. The stringy hair, the circles under her eyes, and the thinness of her body made it obvious she was one of those recently released from prison.

Juez looked sympathetically at the woman. "Myrna," he said, "the newly elected city council will have to make that decision, but I'm sure it will be very soon."

"It can't be soon enough," she said with anger in her voice. She sat down.

He nodded his head and continued. "There will no longer be a prison at the crystal pits. The buildings will be partially torn down and restructured to house the miners, who, by the way, will earn a very good wage for their work.

"The Galaef has several prisoners there, but they will be transferred to the city prison and kept there until we receive notice from the Galaef to release them or transfer them to the prison planet.

"Next, the Run, which murdered so many of our valued citizens, will be turned into a zoo and amusement park, thereby turning this bad memory and horrendous feat of atrocity into a pleasurable experience for our citizens and their children.

"And finally, we will have trials to determine who of Hurd's guards are responsible for the criminal acts committed against the citizenry of Newusa." He looked around the room.

"And now I will turn the meeting over to the Galaef. We will hold all further questions about our fair city until the Galaef has finished with his business."

Juez sat down, and the Galaef rose to his feet. His face looked distraught and almost portrayed a look of embarrassment. "As most of you know," he started, "Thorne is attempting to usurp the Galaefship. He has already commandeered the Flag Ship and returned to Galactus VII."

A murmur arose through the audience, thus making it appear that most of them didn't know. It occurred to Ben that these people were still reeling from the victory of the revolution and hadn't had time to catch up on Galactic news.

The Galaef continued. "There is only one way he can succeed. He must get into the control room of the computer planet. But since the internal structure is composed of millions of corridors making it virtually an

impossible maze, and since the control room is located several thousand miles beneath the surface of the planet, and since no one can enter the computer except the Galaef and those with the Galaef, then Thorne will need me to get in."

The silence, that fell over the congregation, lasted for only a moment.

"That's only half the truth," said Em as he stood up. "It's true he needs to get into the control room, but he doesn't need you to do it."

All the eyes in the room turned to this new face. Most of the rebels, including those of the ground forces, had never seen this man. Who was he? Who dared to rebuke the Galaef? Some of the rebels looked to the Galaef's bodyguards—waiting, but they made no move.

Most of the crowd returned their attention to Em—a most unusual man. His eyes were a glassy sheen. His manner radiated confidence. It seemed his mere presence commanded respect.

He walked around the table to a position opposite the Galaef and stood in front of an empty chair.

The rebels waited for the Galaef's angry rebuttal, but it didn't come, instead, he said, "It's the only half I can reveal."

Ben became a bit anxious about Em's attitude toward the Galaef, but what could he do? What could anybody do? Em was not really a part of the present Galactic Empire. Or was he? The night before, Ben and the Galaef had briefly discussed Em, this man from the past, this man with strange abilities. At one time, they were excited about finding him in the computer complex. But now the circumstances had completely changed, and they were confused about this man's ability to know things he shouldn't know. It was obvious he couldn't have come from ancient Earth. Could he have? So, where did he come from, and what did he know of the present? How intelligent was he, and could he be of help in their present crisis as he had been during the revolution? Ben hadn't had much time to question or talk to Em since he had become coherent. After the taking of the city, Ben had gone his way to take care of business with the Galaef, and Em, according to Ben's sources, had gone to the library to educate himself as much as possible on the history of Ar and the Galactic Empire.

So, now what?

Em laid his hands on the chair in front of him. "The secret is no longer valid," he said. "Thorne knows about it and that makes it public. It's time to declare the situation as it stands so we can make plans."

The Galaef had a surprised look on his face. "I'm not certain what secret you're referring to, but let me assure you, when discussing the Galaefship, there are certain areas of classified information which I am not at liberty to discuss."

The audience had now become riveted to the conversation between the Galaef and this stranger.

"I am referring to the ring and its bearer," said Em. "Anyone who has the ring can get into the Galactus VII control room without the Galaef. The fact that Thorne and I figured it out means it has not survived the test of time and therefore was never a good failsafe system." He paused, but for only a moment. "When you are on the throne again, you and the great minds of the Federation must devise a better system for safeguarding the Galaefship and the computer."

The Galaef gave Em the wary eye. Was it bordering on absurdity to think that this man could have deduced this information merely by reading books about the Federation? "How do you know about the holder of the ring?" asked the Galaef.

Em stood up straight. "During the ceremonial inauguration," he began, "the new Galaef gives his personal secretary, or an aide of his choice, a ring. This ring will be worn until the death or retirement of the Galaef at which time it will be returned to the vaulted treasury in the palace waiting to be placed upon the finger of the next chosen aide.

"It's considered to be just a ritual. And everyone who views the inauguration or reads or hears about it believes it to be just that, but you and I, and unfortunately Thorne, know that it's more than that. It wasn't difficult to deduce from the information at hand and from Thorne's trips to Galactus V and his confidence in taking over the Galaefship."

The Galaef suddenly felt as if his territory had been violated.

"Who wears the ring now?" asked Em.

"Myra," answered the Galaef. "But she escaped when Hurd took over."

"And that's why Thorne doesn't have command of the Galactic Empire at this time? He needs the ring?"

"Yes," said Taul.

"That means he doesn't need you, but he does need the ring. It's the key to the internal operations of the

Computer Planet. It's the only means by which the computer can be reprogrammed, and the only means by which the computer can be made to accept him as the new Galaef of the Galactic Federation, which will give him the power to invoke war whenever he deems it appropriate."

The rebels and the Galaef's new staff finally understood the secret. They began talking excitedly amongst themselves as Em stood silently behind his chair.

The extent of this new revelation meant the Galaef was expendable.

Everette slammed his huge fist down on the table. "That means the traitor can wipe out Ar to get to the Galaef and not be concerned about it." His voice boomed throughout the room.

"No," said the Galaef without hesitation, "there are three reasons why not: first, at this point in time he thinks I'm dead. And secondly, Ar is one of the major exporters of the Zen I crystal, and thirdly, he has found out something about the computer which allowed him to take over the flag ship and to change the communications codes. This is a change which only the Galaef has the authority to make.

"Since you now understand about the ring, you can also understand that Thorne doesn't care a whit about me. And because of this, he will never destroy Ar."

Everette gave out a huge sigh of relief and sat back.

The Galaef looked at Em. "Thorne won't make a move until he has the ring."

"So now comes the crucial question," said Em. "Where is the ring?"

The Galaef's eyes flashed around the table from face to face. Would it be wise for all these men to know where Myra had landed? "What good can it do to let everybody know?" he asked.

"What difference does it make?" asked Em. "It appears you haven't been tortured. So, you must have told Thorne, under threat of torture, where her home planet is located."

The Galaef grimaced. "Actually it was under the threat of a mind melt, which I'm sure you've never heard of, but let me assure you, it's something you will never want to experience.

"But as it turned out, I didn't know where Myra was from, so I sent Thorne on a wild goose chase."

"In that case he will be coming back," stated Em.

"Not likely," returned the Galaef. "I'm sure that since he thinks I'm dead, and once he finds out that the planet I sent him to is a dead end, he will think to take the same course of action which I took last night." Taul hesitated still finding it difficult to reveal classified information and then without revealing any, he said, "We set up a security net to track her. About nine hours later a cruiser in the Telnar sector reported Myra's ten-man destroyer cruising through their command lines without preauthorized notification. When they hailed her, she explained she was on the Galaef's business, and that they must tell no one."

"So, where did she land?"

The Galaef gave him a hesitant look.

"We need to make plans," said Em. "Plans to retrieve the ring."

"Yes," said Taul. He wavered a moment longer and then, "The cruiser continued to track her until she disappeared into the Ural mountain range in the northern hemisphere of the Linnel continent of Janus V. And when I say she disappeared I don't mean behind a mountain or into a group of trees, I mean she simply vanished."

Ben watched as Sharpie quickly leaned forward and whispered in stunned revelation, "the Witch World." The crowd of people became silent like the proverbial tree, falling in the forest with no one to hear it. The eyes of most, expressed horror as they stared at the Galaef. Even as Telephone Six was the exception for producing the only quadruped intelligence throughout the Galaxy, Janus V was the exception, or maybe better expressed—was notorious as the only planet producing an intelligence which lived on the dark side. For lack of a better term, they were known as 'evil witches.'

Ben's mind raced as he remembered that the oddity of the planet, and what made Myra's flight from Thorne peculiar, was the absence of electricity on the planet. That in itself doesn't sound strange, but when you find out that nothing electrical will work on the planet, that all magnetic fields are totally disrupted and that space ships cannot land nor take off from the planet, then you understand the mystery involved.

Ben thought of his Galactic Empire history lessons in high school. It was eighty thousand years ago a corporal in the Federation armada volunteered to land on Janus V by means of a space pod hanging from parachutes. His mission was to study the people of the planet close up. He then sent information back to the armada during the daylight hours by the use of a reflective surface and Galactic code - a series of dots and dashes.

Over a period of twelve years he relayed information of the many horrors he had found on the planet and

especially about the witches and their supernatural powers, which allowed them to change normal human beings into monstrosities.

Then one day his signals stopped, and they never heard from him again.

Gaal broke the silence in a low voice. "You had a witch on your staff?"

"It was not of my knowledge," stated the Galaef. "Her documents had been falsified." The Galaef didn't feel it was right that he should have to defend himself, but considering the situation . . . "You're overlooking the fact that not all inhabitants of Janus V are witches." He said more calmly.

"Witches?" asked Em. "Beings with supernatural powers?"

"Yes," answered Ben. "There is irrevocable proof that feuding cults of witches live on the planet. And, I might add, much to the dismay of the Galactic Federation, spaceships cannot land nor take off from the surface of the planet, at least, that's what we used to think."

"But no one knows," added the Galaef returning to his previous thought, "how many of the inhabitants actually belong to the cults. It is estimated that only a small minority of the population deals with witchcraft."

"Yes," said Ben, "but there are enough of them to control the planet with feudal states."

"Then Myra is probably a witch," stated Em. "It's the only logical answer. How else could she have escaped the clutches of Thorne? She must have known about Thorne's plans the whole time. She didn't interfere because she had plans of her own, but somehow her plans were thwarted, and she had to escape."

"Very unlikely," said the Galaef. "She was computer chosen . . ."

"It doesn't matter," interrupted Em. "There's only one thing to do. We have to find Myra and retrieve the ring."

"That won't be so easy," said Ben. "Even if someone does find Myra and recovers the ring, how will they get off the planet?"

"Yes, but along that same train of thought, how will Thorne's men get off the planet?" asked Gaal.

"We can't take the chance," said the Galaef in a commanding voice. "We have to retrieve the ring before Thorne, and if it can't be transported off the planet, it has to be destroyed. That means somebody has to go to Janus V."

Ben grimaced inside and tapped his right foot in agitation. He knew what was coming.

The Galaef was standing in front of his chair, obviously waiting for a reply, waiting for a suggestion or a plan as to how to find her, but Ben didn't say anything. The whole situation was absurd.

Finally, after an uncomfortable few moments Viella said, "It will have to be Em. He's the only one who has a chance," she paused and then continued. "He has the insights, or some type of intuitive power, which none of us have. It will be this power which will aid him on the witch world."

Everybody looked at Em. It was his turn to reply, to accept or to turn down the expedition. They waited in silence.

"I have come into a strange time," he said as he looked at the Galaef and then at Ben. "A time of small and large upheavals, and considering the Galactic Empire—unrest on a grand scale. But now it becomes my time. It is the only time of my conscious memory, and I therefore must accept the responsibilities that come with it."

"I will do what I can, not because I believe in the present political system, but because there are billions of lives which would be lost in a galactic war, fought over the greed of power." Em turned his gaze to the Galaef as he finished his statement.

The Galaef stood erect. "The needs of the many must be considered when maintaining the integrity of the Federation. It has always been that way and always will be." He looked at the Aeolian Master in a kingly manner. "What is your plan?" he asked. "And what will you need?"

"I will need men to navigate and fly the G15 to the outer orbits of Janus V," he answered. "And then I will need men to go with me to the surface of the planet."

"Okay," said the Galaef, "I'll send Zorn and his crew to get you to the planet." He paused as he looked at his officers sitting around the table. "Now we need volunteers to go with you into the Ural Mountains."

Ben watched as the rebels looked around the room averting their eyes like school children not wanting the teacher to call on them. He understood what was going through their minds. No one was excited about going to Janus V. They had just fought and gained their freedom from Hurd. They weren't in a hurry to be stranded on a planet of witches, in a land of spells and demons, a land of the infamous outlanders, and a planet from whence no one returned.

It occurred to him that no one might volunteer, but after a few moments Sharpie stood up.

"Even though I'm not a man," she said in a disgruntled voice, "I'll go. The fact is I need a change of

scenery."

Ben knew what she really needed was to get away from the memory of Curt.

The next person who stood up was a surprise to Ben. It was Jacob. "Sir," he said looking at the Galaef. "At the moment I am unemployed, and I do have a fair amount of knowledge in hand to hand combat plus training with weapons, which do not require electricity. If it would please Mr. Em I would like to go along?"

"Fine," said Em.

"Anyone else?" asked the Galaef.

Brale stood up. "Excuse me, sir."

"Yes?" asked the Galaef.

Dahms expected him to point out something they had overlooked.

"Sir, considering Myra's ship did not crash on the planet gives us hope that we might find a way off once we locate her, and therefore, I would like to go, sir."

The Galaef was hesitant. "I believe you will be of more use to me here, especially when we go to Galactus VII."

"Yes, sir," said Brale. He sat down.

The next person to stand up was Samsung. "I will go," he stated.

The Galaef shook his head. "I am surprised that you will not, at this time, go to your home in Newnippon. As a Lieutenant in the Galactic Federation you will go home with great honor, and I will be sure that they give you a warm welcome, perhaps even a parade. After what you have done for me and Newusa, you deserve the honor.

"Nevertheless," continued the Galaef, "I must decline your offer to go to Janus V. I believe you will be of more use to me on Galactus VII when I return a few days from today."

Samsung nodded his head. "I need no parade. I will go with you to Galactus VII." He bowed and sat down.

The Galaef looked at Em. "You have two volunteers," he said, "but to be successful, I believe you're going to need at least one more." He was looking at Ben as he finished his statement.

Ben scowled as he rose from his chair. *I knew this was going to happen*, he said to himself. *Except I didn't know he would be keeping Samsung, the best warrior in the room, and Brale, the most analytical mind in the room. Isn't this great, I'm going to the Witch World with a butler, with a woman who's angry because her fiancée died, and with a man who might turn into a zombie at any moment.* And then he said out loud, "I guess I'm not going to need this." He drew his phasor from its holster and dropped it on the table. Just when things seemed to be getting better, they were getting worse again. "Nothing to it," he said sarcastically. "We'll drop onto the planet, and with my expertise in sword play, I'll fight a couple of bad guys, retrieve the ring, and be back in no time. It'll be a walk in the park, as the ancient Earthians used to say, or a piece of desert as they also used to say."

Dahms laughed loudly. "The saying isn't 'a piece of desert.' That's a dry, arid landscape where very little grows. And it's not 'a piece of dessert,' which is something sweet we eat after a meal. The saying is, 'It's a piece of cake.'

"You know, my colleagues and I could never understand why you didn't come to Ar and interview people from the four cities when you were doing your digs and writing your history of Earth. There's a lot we still remember, after all it only six hundred years ago."

"Yeah," said Ben. "Yeah, it was a gross oversight on my part. I realized that when I saw the picture of Teddy Roosevelt on the wall behind Hurd's desk.

"But right now it doesn't really matter, does it? I am on my way to the witch world, and I'll probably never return."

The Galaef stared at Dahms. "We're getting off the subject." He looked around. "Are there any more volunteers?"

Xygliper stood up. "I'm not so sure it'll be a piece of cake, but since phasors don't work on Janus V, you're going to need my skills as an archer."

"Now you have four." The Galaef waited a moment to see if anyone else would volunteer. "It's settled then," he continued, "you will leave as soon as we repair the G15's."

Suddenly a voice seemed to resound throughout the minds of everyone in the room. *Not quite*, said Roqford.

Em, Jacob, and Ben looked up at the cat lying by the door. Many of the other people in the room looked around with startled expressions on their faces.

I might as well go too, he said. He continued to lick his paw.

END

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It is difficult to find ALL the errors when proof reading. If you find any, please bring it to my attention at jgr1@cox.net. Thank you.