

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.

o o o o o

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."

o o o o o

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."

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