

**THE DARK LIGHT
COMMANDO INC. 1**

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CHAPTER 1



Firestorms blazed across a blood red sky. Illuminated in their fury stood a lone structure. It's two stone towers, decaying and in ruin, reached upward from the surrounding wasteland, seemingly in a gesture of defiance. It resembled a castle from a dark, nightmarish fairytale, but there was no beautiful princess inside to rescue—only lingering horror and death.

A wall of stone, weathered and beaten, surrounded and sheltered all within, as a shroud protects a corpse. Viewed from the small volcanic ridges that ringed the valley from almost a kilometer away, the towers rose above the high wall like the fangs of an inverted snake.

Inside, within a large dimly lit chamber, a malevolent form paced back and forth. Dark thoughts of hate clouded it's mind. The time was almost at hand. They would be made to pay. The universe would crawl before him as it had done more than a millennia ago.

Long ago his march of conquest had been stopped. His minions had been forced back to their own planet. The audacity of the creatures; they had forced him to seek shelter in his own city.

“The fools!” he said to himself. After all he had done to them, they would not kill him. Instead, they exiled him to this world—sealed in by an impenetrable dimensional lock. His prison was inescapable—that he knew. Attempts at recreating the portal on this side had met with total failure. All he had was an entrance with

no exit. The swirling chaos beneath the small arch he had created had been a great disappointment. The same conditions which kept them trapped had distorted the dimensional warp generated by the arch. There was no way to tell where the portal would transport anyone who entered. He had tried. Many of his minions had been sent through, but the last heard of any of them were their screams of terror as they disappeared from sight. So here he would remain, until someone activated the machinery of the arch within the old city.

The world provided for them would have been considered a paradise for any other. But for he and his warrior creatures, it was a nightmare world of bright colors and living things. It took but a little time to correct that problem.

The planet had paid dearly for his failed attempts at escape. Unstable in nature, the portal had disrupted the frail ecological balance causing global disaster. The magnetic poles, altered by the energies released by the portal, caused the upper atmospheric firestorms that continued even now. The intense heat ravaged coastal areas by melting polar ice fields. Tidal floods two hundred meters high washed away all animal and vegetable life wherever it touched. Areas not flooded were subjected to incredible heat. Whole forests were reduced to burning ash while above ground water supplies dried up under the continued onslaught. The former inhabitants had died by the millions. Heat and dehydration had left nothing but their bleached white bones. And still, he would have killed an entire galaxy of planets to escape. Eventually, an ecological balance was found. The violent intensity reduced to something more endurable for those remaining.

Stepping over to the open balcony that connected to his private chambers, he faced his many subjects. He might even consider them his children; his experiments, some successful, some not, could be seen here. This world was no longer beautiful and neither were its inhabitants. All was now in his image. What were great forests, trees reaching to a blue sky, now was barren wilderness. What grew was

what he chose. What lived was what he allowed. Tentacled feelers quivered with almost orgasmic delight as he faced those who would willingly give up their worthless lives for their god.

They were ready. After an eternity of preparation and planning the opportunity to escape was about to present itself. The fools were in his city. Soon they would find the sacred chamber, and once the great machines were activated, he and his army would sweep out and destroy their rescuers. They would leave this insignificant speck of dust and chaos would again reign over the galaxy. He would bring terror to all, and death to those who would not worship him.

Moving out onto the ghostly lit balcony, his large body seemed to radiate the power of the heavens. To those dim witted creatures below, he thought, he resembled nothing less than a god. With clawed tentacles spread, he spoke to his minions.

“My people, listen closely. The time is near. For a millennia we have been imprisoned. Vengeance shall be ours! We will swarm through the galaxy. Those who stand in our way will feel the bite of your jaws on their soft weak flesh. I promise you, my children, their blood will nourish you. You will feel their strength become your own. You will teach them fear and terror. The terror that only comes from prey when it finds nowhere left to run. We will take that which should have been ours so long ago. We will conquer. We will rule. It is our right!”

A chant began to rise from the many creatures assembled, a chant that quickly spread. “DONAR!...DONAR!...DONAR!” Donar looked and knew they were ready. They would take, and they would kill. Do anything he wished. Donar opened his mouth into a horrible grin. His great sharp teeth flashing to his blood thirsty audience. His reptilian head moving from side to side, taking in the spectacle before him.

Down below, his werewolf guard patrolled inside the great wall. They circulated amongst the others, always searching for those who were disloyal. Disloyalty was punishable by death. The sentence

served immediately by the overzealous guard. Rarely was there anything remaining of the traitor to dispose of. The mutant wolves loved their work. After all, with no other game to hunt, it met their daily minimum nutritional requirements. Under their dark fur their skin was a hard armored shell capable of withstanding extreme physical punishment. Loyal, bloodthirsty, and almost indestructible, these would be the creatures his army would be built around. He was not a fool though. The werewolves were ambitious by nature and had to be watched closely.

Donar thought briefly of the others cheering below. Some he would take. The others would remain here. Though loyal to him, many of them had come from weaker stock or were living products of failed experiments. The predatory wolves that he had mutated would serve as his warrior guard, the others would serve as nothing more than simple cannon fodder.

The werewolves had been the successful culmination of his experimentation since being stranded here. The others, results of early haphazard experiments, were the evolutionary equivalent of insects in comparison. They varied greatly from each other, with one exception. An army of walking nightmares, their hate radiated more strongly than a thousand suns. Hideous parodies of life scattered throughout the planet. Genetic monstrosities seemingly put together without thought. All the result of his experimentation. The perfect army. An army created with the overwhelming desire to kill, and to enjoy it. These were truly his children.

A voice came from behind. A voice of horror which brought dread, and usually death to all but a few who heard it. "My lord, we are ready."

Donar turned to face his war chief. Modok was a horror even to his own. Primate in form but with huge crustacean-like claws at the end of muscular arms, Modok struck fear and terror in even his own troops.

“Good, Modok. Time is short,” he said as he walked back into the chamber.

“My lord?” Modok asked hesitantly. “What of the old man?”

Donar turned quickly. His eyes drilled through the mutant creature—down to the depths of his dark soul. “I still have need of him. We will leave him his little helpers, but remember he must remain here alive and unharmed.”

“But lord, if you have the knowledge, why must he be kept alive?” Modok realized his mistake as soon as he finished the question, but even that was a fraction too late.

Wrapping a long tentacle around Modok’s muscular neck, he pulled him up level to his long scaly muzzle and the sharp teeth they contained. “You will not discuss Atlo with me again. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Modok whispered hoarsely; he was using as much air as Donar would allow him. His point made, Donar threw him down to the hard stone floor. Modok, rubbing his bruised throat, stood slowly with his head down and walked back to his master.

The next time Modok brought the subject of the old man up, he would kill him. If his creations knew that he was not omnipotent, his own life might be in jeopardy. The old human had taught him almost all his many secrets—but for one. Even after he subjected him to torture, Atlo would still not reveal the final mystery that would make him all powerful. In time though, he felt confident that he would. It was only a matter of how many had to die before Atlo would talk. It would not save any of them, but Atlo didn’t know that.

Donar stepped to the far wall where he laid a tentacled arm onto a small inset console. The wall quietly slid aside to reveal an assortment of deadly weapons. Modok lumbered over and chose a huge battle ax. He hefted it over his huge misshapen head and grinned in anticipation of what was soon to come. He and his master had done this a number of times in the past and he looked forward to it each time.

Donar moved to the other side of the long inner chamber where he picked up a strange silvery metallic object. The object resembled three tubes of different lengths, welded together to form one unit. “That’s a very good choice my friend,” Donar said, a bell sounding as he pushed a small button on the side of the console.

In answer to the signal an emaciated young humanoid female walked in with a serving tray. Dressed in frayed rags, the elflike servant turned toward Donar with her head bowed, her eyes pointed to the floor. Her beauty repulsed him. She was a genetic misfit. An early experiment of Atlo’s, she was a failure without many uses—but one.

Donar pointed the metallic object in his tentacled hands at the servant who stood just outside the weapons chamber. “Child, come to me,” he said almost fatherly. The servant came closer and turned to face her master.

“Yes, my lord?” Her voice quivered in fear as she approached.

A beam of blinding light leapt out of the collection of tubes and struck her. The spear of intense energy pierced the young girl’s body, almost cutting her in half. Her high pitched scream filled the chamber as Modok jumped up and down howling in glee.

“But you see, times have changed and we must adapt.” Insane laughter filled the chamber. Donar turned and snarled at his war chief. “Fool! Bring me the sorcerer. There is still much to do. Before you go. Dispose of that,” he said, a tentacle pointing at the nearly severed body.

“Yes, my lord,” Modok said, fear in his voice as he hung the huge axe back on its bracket on the wall and quickly grabbed hold of the small creature before he left the chamber. Donar still held the energy weapon, its upper barrel still glowing with the incredible power it had just released.

He thought that even with all of these powerful weapons, he still needed the old sorcerer for his plans to succeed. There was a small line that separated his science from the other’s black skills. He had been a useful convert before his exile and had used his imprisonment

to perfect his craft. The creature seemed to possess a power about him that transcended the normal bounds of science. How Snatak accomplished some of the things that he did, he didn't even know, but if Snatak proved useless to him, he would again use the resources of his laboratory deep within the bowels of the old castle. Donar sealed the weapons chamber and moved back to the window to once again bathe in the chants of the crowd.

Minutes later he could hear a light knocking at the door of his chamber. Sitting, he rested his energy weapon in his lap.

“Enter.”

An ancient elfin figure entered. Resembling a two-legged rat with long pointy ears and whiskered snout, the old sorcerer stood before his king, his tattered brown robe clinging to his slight body. “You wished to see me, my lord?” the sorcerer asked, his head bowed.

“Yes, Snatak. Sit, we have much to discuss.” The sorcerer sat by Donar's side. They had failed in the past. This time all would succeed.

CHAPTER 2



It was a planet that by all rights should not have existed. Alone, it orbited a small yellow sun at the far edge of Orion's belt. Named Solo, it was basically a large unremarkable chunk of rock, until now. A planet of mysteries, the Alliance Science Academy had commissioned a survey ship to investigate further.

A dark cloud shrouded sky and barren landscape greeted the science team upon entering a geo-synchronous orbit. Long range sensor scans found no life, though a city and vast network of roads was discovered. A city like no other. Ruins which seemed to stretch across the wasteland for hundreds of kilometers. But for all the signs of advanced civilization, no life was found.

Selecting a landing site within site of the ruined city, the survey ship settled down just long enough to off load the science and archeology teams and their equipment before lifting and leaving orbit. Fifteen scientists, made up from various races that comprised the Alliance had started to investigate the ruins while cataloging any artifacts found. Fleet headquarters had also provided a small contingent of guards to insure security.

In the security shack, setup in one of the many vacant rooms on the outer boundary of the city, Lieutenant Ank contemplated his post. For over a year nothing had happened. Boredom had set in. A disease, he thought, that robbed a warrior of his edge. The scientists

had gone into the city every day, sometimes remaining there longer than either he or his squad had liked. He knew though that the human, Doctor Clarkson, had recently discovered a chamber containing strange machinery. Despite the apparent age of the ruins, the machinery appeared untouched by time. Ank told his men that Clarkson and the others were to be allowed to go wherever they pleased, but a security officer was to accompany them to any newly discovered chambers. Once established, they would set up cameras to monitor everything from the viewscreens before him.

Ank watched as scientists scurried around the chamber like little mice. This brought a bemused expression to his dark muzzle. A feline from Cada III, Ank's people were descended from the carnivorous cats that roamed the tropical planet long ago. At almost seven feet tall, Ank was an imposing figure, even to his own people. They had been warriors and hunters. Here, he and his men were nothing more than highly trained baby sitters. The supply ship was due in the morning, and with it his replacement. Ank hoped that whoever was replacing him either enjoyed boredom or was in a semi-permanent coma. This planet was so far off the usual galactic trade routes that except for the occasional military cruiser sent to bring supplies or crew replacements, they had no visitors. Noting that his shift was ending, Ank put a large furry paw on the com panel to call his relief.

"Corporal Anderson, report to security immediately," Ank growled into the communicator. Sitting and monitoring in the small confining security office was tiring enough, but to have to remain any longer than he had to would certainly not make his present disposition any brighter. Lateness was not a trait to be tolerated in his command.

"On the way, sir," the voice came back over speaker. Ank enjoyed the effect he had on some of these humans. When Anderson arrived, Ank decided he would enjoy "chewing him out". After all, he had to take his enjoyment where it came. Before Anderson arrived, Ank

made a final sweep of the video screens that monitored the current chamber that Clarkson and his people were working in.

In the large chamber, dominated at one end by strange alien machinery, and on the other by a huge hemispherical arch, Doctor Peter Clarkson watched with a keen interest at the progress of his team. The chamber had been discovered through the use of high frequency sensor scans. There seemed to be no way in, but a small explosive charge had been used. The blast excavated a perfect entrance for he and his people to enter.

When Clarkson entered, a strange chill had descended. He didn't understand why, but there was an malevolent feel to this room. Lights had been set up, and he noticed that his assistant, Doctor Paul Michaels, was trying to get his attention.

"Yes Paul?" Clarkson could see Michaels staring intently at some drawings on the wall. Michaels was his special projects assistant. Ten years his junior, Michaels had that youthful enthusiasm that he himself was now lacking.

"Peter, come and take a look at this. What do you make of it?" Clarkson peered at the drawings on the wall and was inwardly repulsed by them.

"This is amazing," said Clarkson. The drawings were hideous. They depicted chaos in its purest form. Death and destruction seemed to be the running theme. Creatures of undeniable cruelty marching out of some sort of circular structure. "Paul, get pictures of this. I want it all on sensor tape."

Michaels ran his scanner along the drawings, cataloging every image. "Peter, could these drawings represent the creatures that lived in this city?"

Clarkson shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. Give me a hand over here." Clarkson examined the console to his right. He knew the city was incredibly old, but the machinery looked untouched by the years. Neither Clarkson, Michaels, nor any of the others could find any operating surfaces on the silvery metal. No buttons, switches, or

any other recognizable controls could be found. Clarkson gently laid his hand on top of the closest console and felt a surge of power jump across his hand. As he quickly pulled his hand away the machinery seemed to come alive.

The arch began to glow a bright incandescent yellow. Power feeding the machinery as bank after bank became active. Michaels looked at the arch in surprise. Obviously, Clarkson had somehow accidentally activated the console. It was as if it had been waiting for the touch of another living being all this time. But what had they done? Turning to Clarkson he saw that the doctor transfixed by the sight of the glowing arch.

“Peter, are you all right? Should I get the others?” There was no response from Clarkson at first, but after what felt like a very long second he turned to the younger man and nodded. After all, he did as the voice inside his head commanded.

Below the arch Clarkson could see the rear of the lab begin to quiver as if it were intense desert heat. Moving as if in a trance Clarkson moved his hands over the glowing unit. Power levels began to increase as the arch glowed more intensely.

“Doctor Clarkson...Peter, what are you doing?” Michaels called out. He had already signaled the other researchers and hoped they would hurry over. He moved over to where Clarkson was standing, trying to separate him from the glowing control unit.

The power levels increased as an image seemed to be forming under the arch. Having the reality of a mirage, the image seemed to waver. Seemingly possessed, Clarkson shoved Michaels away from the console and moved his hands over its seemingly blank surface.

“We must increase the power!” Clarkson called out. “Donar must be free!” The others finally arrived in the chamber but there seemed to be little that they could do at this point. All they could do was to stare at the arch as the image of an angelic figure began to appear.

“Look!” screamed an Antarean scientist. Almost Christ like, the figure seemed to reach out of the arch.

“Who are you?” Every eye turned to Clarkson. The Doctor seemed close to losing his sanity. “What are you?”

The image smiled. The voice that followed boomed through the cavernous chamber.

“I AM GOD OF COURSE!”

“Oh Shit,” Michaels said softly as his hand went to a small communicator on his belt. He brought the small device up and activated the frequency for the security station. “Security, this is Doctor Michaels in chamber 102, we have an emergency! Security come in please!” his terror filled voice screamed.

Michaels noticed the security monitors on the wall and hoped that his plea for help was heard. The angel laughed at the futile attempt, an evil cackle that filled the chamber. As it came closer its features started changing, growing more hideous. Large, sharp teeth quickly appeared, the face growing more reptilian as it came closer. From the arch, other figures emerged.

The gates of Hell seemed to open as they poured out of the glowing portal, the hideous paintings on the wall came alive, each clutching a strange metallic device. Without warning, the strange devices lashed out. Beams of intense energy struck the startled scientists. Michaels made a desperate lunge for the door, but came up short as a shaft of light speared through his body. He was dead before his charred body hit the chamber’s cold floor. The last thing that Doctor Peter Clarkson and the thirteen remaining scientists heard, were the sounds of their own screaming.

In the security shack, Ank reacted with amazing speed for a being of his size. After witnessing the incredible inhuman massacre of the entire science team, he signaled a red alert. Alarms sounded as he slid over to the com panel. Frantically, he activated the unit. “Attention, all security teams report to chamber 102. I repeat we have an emergency. Aliens with heavy weapons are firing on the scientists in chamber 102. All security teams report there immediately.” Ank turned, seeing Anderson finally entering the shack.

“What’s up boss?” Anderson asked. He could see that whatever had caused the emergency was almost out of hand. He had never seen Ank nervous like this before. Then again, before now, there was really no reason to.

“Something got into the chamber with the scientists. Look at the monitor.” Ank pointed at the main monitor. What Anderson saw sent a chill down his spine. Blood, everywhere, splattered all over the chamber walls. Bodies, or at least parts of bodies littered the large room. Ank rotated the camera to scan in a 180 degree arc. The room seemed empty except for one large simian figure. It held something round in its huge pincer-like claws. Ank adjusted the magnification as the creature turned and held its prize in front of the camera. Dripping blood, the two security men could see that it was the decapitated head of Doctor Peter Clarkson.

Ank reached again for the comm panel. “Security report. Donaldson, Noel, Ganth, answer me!” Ank growled into the console. He looked again at the grotesque scene on the monitor. The thing was aware that it was being watched, this Ank knew. It turned and let out an unearthly howl. Its teeth bared to the camera were red with blood. The howl turned to insane laughter as it hurled the unseeing head of Peter Clarkson. Ank flinched as the head hit the camera, and the monitor went dead. Anderson looked over to Ank, a look that Ank had seen before. The terror in his eyes was apparent.

Anderson started to pace nervously across the small room, his voice quiet as he began to talk to himself. His voice grew louder as his pacing progressed. “Dead. They’re all dead. They’re dead,” Anderson repeated over and over again.

Ank reached over and grabbed a large patch of Anderson’s blue duty uniform in a tight grip. With very little effort he threw the human roughly into the closest wall he could find. Ank held him by the throat, pinning him to the reinforced metal wall.

“Listen to me. You will do as I say. Do you understand me corporal?” Ank growled in a voice that he hoped would terrorize Anderson almost as much as what he’d just seen.

Anderson nodded weakly as he was gently lowered to the floor. Ank moved over to a cabinet by the side of the door. He quickly entered a coded sequence into the lock causing a panel to slide open to reveal a collection of lethal looking weapons. He handed a powerful laser rifle to Anderson and took one for himself.

“Anderson, take the emergency rations and load up the land skimmer. I’m going to warn off the supply ship, destroy the equipment, and then get both of us the hell out of here.” Ank turned back to the communications console as Anderson left the room, the door sliding open and then back into place.

There wasn’t much time left as he activated the circuits to the hyperspace transmitter. Ank adjusted the transmitter frequency as the door behind him slid open. “Anderson, that skimmer had better be loaded because I’m almost finished here,” he said, adjusting the communicator.

“You are correct my friend, you are finished.” The voice that answered did not belong to Corporal Anderson. Ank turned quickly to see a large, robed, two-legged reptile. It held some sort of weapon in its tentacled arms. By its side stood a large wolfish creature. Standing upright, the creature held the same tri-barreled weapon in its paws that the lizard held.

“You will not be sending a message,” Donar said, the weapon pointing at Ank’s chest.

“Where’s Anderson?” Ank growled. His anger was growing more furious by the second.

“I need your supply ship to carry me to other worlds,” Donar replied, as if not hearing the question, his tone softening in its intent. “You see, I have so much to teach. But you are right, we must not discuss this without your friend.” Donar turned to the corridor and called to his war chief. “Modok, bring the small creature here.”

To Ank, Corporal Anderson seemed to glide through the door, his feet barely moving. The simian he had seen before on the monitor followed only a few feet behind him. Anger and disgust boiled in him as Ank discovered the reason for this. A huge ax was buried deep in Anderson's back and Modok was walking him in by the handle.

Modok turned to his evil lord and smiled, "You see my master, the old ways are effective too." With a nod from Donar, Modok pulled Anderson closer to him and sank his powerful jaws deep into the human's neck. Blood spurted from severed arteries, coating Modok's face and chest in a crimson spray. Finally, the tendons and bone severed, Anderson's head fell to the floor, coming to a rest at Ank's feet.

"No!" Ank screamed. The fury building within him pushed him to action. Faster than Donar believed possible, Ank swung up his rifle and fired from the hip. The beam of intense blue light sliced through the air. Donar quickly snaked a tentacled arm around the werewolf standing at his side, pulling the foul creature to him. The beam of energy struck the hideous living shield, melting a sizable hole through its chest armor. At close range, not even the werewolf's hard natural plating could protect it from the intense laser blast. Donar threw the dead creature to the ground and fired his own weapon. The beam sliced through the communications console, the force of the explosion throwing Ank like a broken doll against the weapons cabinet, stunning him. Modok moved towards the security chief, his claws held out in front of him, but Donar stopped him with a long tentacle.

"Leave him, Modok. We must prepare for our transportation." He could see that Modok was greatly disappointed, but obeyed his instructions. "After all, our friend isn't going anywhere."

Ank could hear them laughing at him as they disappeared. His thoughts were of failure and embarrassment as unconsciousness finally claimed him.

CHAPTER 3



Several light years away, an old man stood by the view port of his office and gazed out at the asteroids and stars that seemed just beyond his reach. His name was Clayton Brooks, former Alliance Fleet Admiral, and currently the head of Commando, Incorporated. Brooks walked back to his desk and picked up the communications report that had just been placed there. He looked at the message again, reading it word for word. In a fit of anger he crumbled the printout into a small ball and tossed it at the innocent little fern in the corner of his office. He had enough on his mind, he thought, without having to worry about receiving that stupid buffoon from Fleet Headquarters.

Two days before, a special request had come from Admiral Olstad at Fleet Operations on Earth. It seemed that one of their military transports had turned up missing while on it's way back from a supply run to a group of scientists doing an archeological survey on some newly discovered planet.

Unfortunately, this planet fell outside Alliance jurisdiction, but well within the area claimed by the Dreedan Empire. While the Dreedan Imperial council had reluctantly allowed the Alliance to send a small science team to investigate the mysterious planet, there was still an extremely tentative truce between the military establishments of both governments. Brooks wasn't surprised to see that the

agreement meant a share in whatever was discovered. It was felt that the appearance of an Alliance battlecruiser in the area might provoke a military response from the Dreedans, thus damaging the already fragile truce. Because of this, Olstad wanted his people to look into the disappearance of the missing cruiser and science team. Again, unfortunately for Olstad, the team was already on a case.

Brooks looked again at the crumbled ball of paper sitting very quietly alongside his fern. The communication not represented the third attempt by that idiot to pay them a visit. He had ignored the other two and would have treated this one the same way if he had the choice. Brooks sat back down and wondered quietly just what he'd done to deserve this. Taking a deep breath into his sixty-nine year old lungs, Brooks reached out and flipped a switch on his comm panel.

"Griffin, get in here and bring a current status report with you," Brooks bellowed. Griffin was his executive assistant and personal verbal punching bag. He was also his old second in command from the years before Commando Inc. Needless to say, and despite the abuse he inflicted on him, he trusted Griffin with his life.

"Coming, Admiral," responded the voice through the speaker.

Even though Griffin knew that there was no further need for titles, it seemed that Brooks would always be the "Admiral" to him.

The door slid open and Griffin entered. He was a man in his early forties with a very sparse head of hair and a waist line that seemed ready to consume him. Except for this, he was immaculate in his Commando Inc. issue white duty uniform. A deep blue stripe ran down each sleeve and a patch over the left breast sporting the Commando logo: an eagle from Earth with twin bolts of lightning grasped in each claw. Griffin entered the office to see Brooks sitting; the chair turned to face the view port.

"Sit down Griffin and give me the bad news." Griffin took the seat facing the desk and started to fill the Admiral in on the state of current events.

“Yes sir,” Griffin responded as he sat himself down. “Start with anything in particular?”

“Might as well get the nonsense out of the way first.” He was still facing away from Griffin, but the disgust for the upcoming topic was apparent.

“Olstad, sir?” Griffin guessed.

“Right. First him, and then current mission status,” Brooks said, obviously looking forward to moving on to the next topic.

“We’ve already received a confirmation from Olstad’s ship. His E.T.A. to the belt is four hours twelve minutes,” he said glancing at the chronometer on his wrist.

“That pompous idiot doesn’t seem to take no for an answer.”

Brooks shook his head from side to side in disgust at the thought that this man was one of the few trusted with the security of the Alliance and its worlds. “Griffin, just let me know when he enters the perimeter. Next.”

“Carson seems to have made progress in locating Senator Weltman’s daughter. His latest report, logged in at 0800 today, states that they’ve just entered orbit around Tanda IV and will advise upon completion of the mission.”

“Very good,” Brooks said, still looking aimlessly out the view port. “Keep me apprised. Now get out, I’ve got a lot of thinking to do.”

“Yes, sir.” Griffin stood from the chair, did a perfect about face and marched out of the spacious office.

Brooks thought of his team out in the field and the mission that they were currently engaged in. Senator Frank Weltman had called him seventy-two hours ago pleading for help in locating his missing daughter. It appeared that on a vacation to Utopia, a tropical paradise and the “in” spot for the rich jet setters of the galaxy, her ship had been stopped.

Whoever stopped them had killed the crew and her male companion on board. The freighter that found them had reported no sign of the senator’s daughter, just the bodies of the crew. Brooks had sug-

gested to the senator that the matter be handled by Alliance Security, but Weltman wanted the matter resolved quietly and discreetly. The most important fact though was that Frank Weltman had been a very good friend through the years and would get all the help that Commando, Incorporated could provide. Since his team had that rare moment between assignments, the case would not interfere with any of their other duties.

He figured that if anyone could find the missing woman, it would be Mark Carson. He and the others had handled more dangerous assignments in the past and Brooks tried to tell himself not to worry. It was hard though, when they were all like the children he never had time to have.

Brooks closed his eyes, thinking that the quiet and solitude would clear his mind enough to give him some answers. The only thought that did come to mind was that he was becoming too old for this. He didn't feel that just a few short years ago. When the idea for his organization had taken root in his mind Brooks was still an admiral in the Alliance Star Fleet. As an admiral he noticed the never ending bureaucracy that went along with any critical decision. When these decisions were finally made, it was usually too late to help anyone.

His breaking point had occurred when terrorists had hijacked a starliner with its crew and passenger complement of one hundred-sixty-two people. He had watched with amazement as negotiations for their release had failed. A strike team was sent in eventually, but found that ninety-six of the hostages had been killed and the terrorists gone. One of the dead had been the daughter of Dolan Wilson, one of the Alliance's wealthiest arms manufacturers.

This was a man with the drive as well as the resources to make his vision come true. Brooks had come to him with his proposition shortly after the funeral. Dolan, a powerful man, seemed helpless after his daughter's death. The terrorists had disappeared and Alliance forces seemed in no real hurry to locate them. Brooks remembered the meeting with Dolan Wilson as if it was yesterday.

It had been a chilly fall day almost three years before when he entered the offices of Wilson Industries. Taking the computerized lift to the main office level, Brooks introduced himself to the pretty red-headed receptionist.

“Excuse me, I’m Admiral Clayton Brooks. I have an appointment with Mister Wilson.”

“Of course sir. Please have a seat, I’ll let him know that you’re here.” Brooks appreciated the fact that Wilson employed people for these jobs and not the impersonal machines that seemed to be the standard now in the business community.

“Admiral Brooks,” the pretty receptionist called from her desk. Brooks checked his chronograph and saw to his relief that he had only been sitting for a few minutes. “Mister Wilson will see you now. Please come this way.” She led him to a set of double doors that pneumatically slid silently aside.

“Thank you very much for your assistance, my dear.”

The redhead smiled and ushered him into the office. Wilson was sitting behind an antique wood desk, a large pile of documents resting off to the side. Seemingly awaiting for a signature that he was in no hurry to make.

“Come in and have a seat, admiral. Tell me, what can I do for you?” Wilson stood as Brooks approached the desk, his hand held out.

“Thank you, Mister Wilson. I won’t take up much of your time,” Brooks said as the two men shook hands and sat down.

Brooks didn’t hold back as he told Wilson his entire vision. The creation of an organization to battle the horrors of galactic terrorism. An organization that would be there to help when no other would. He had already drawn up the proposal. He handed Wilson a printout of what would be needed, and how much it would cost to finance an undertaking of this kind. When he finished his sales pitch, it felt as if he’d aged years in the last few minutes. Wilson just sat there, the proposal on his desk, his eye’s taking in every small detail.

But after what seemed like hours, but was only minutes, Wilson looked up at Brooks and spoke those fateful words.

“Admiral, I want you to know that if we do this, we do it right.” Wilson looked back down at the proposal. “If we begin immediately, how soon do you estimate completion?”

Brooks could not believe his ears. “If I started making the arrangements now, probably about eight months to a year working around the clock.”

“Admiral, in that case we have a deal. I trust you will take care of all details. And admiral, from now on call me Dolan.” They had stayed up for thirty-six straight hours laying the ground work for the organization that they would later call Commando Incorporated.

After leaving the meeting with Wilson, a blank check in his hand, Brooks went back to Fleet Headquarters where he submitted his resignation. All his attention was needed for this ambitious project and he needed to sever all connections to his past for Commando Incorporated to have a chance to succeed.

An asteroid of immense size was selected to be the home of his dream. Alliance engineers spent six months hollowing out the mineral laden ball of rock and another four to build the complex structure within it. When finished, the base would consist of a massive docking bay, facilities for weapons control, communications, the most sophisticated laboratory complex in the Alliance, as well as living quarters for the one thousand man and woman compliment. The security of the base was made simple by the placing of a state of the art sensor array as well as energy weapons on neighboring asteroids that could detect and destroy anything within the perimeter of the asteroid belt.

Next a ship was built. Drawn from Brooks’ own specifications and built by the greatest minds in the galaxy, the ship would be one of the fastest, most powerful starships in space. Equipped with a powerful sentient computer and the most advanced weapons system that money could buy, the ship would carry his field team wherever they

were needed. The only thing that had been left for consideration was the recruitment of the team itself.

But all that was done a few years back. Here he sat with the immenseness of the universe behind his back. He stared at the holographic picture of his special operations team he kept on his desk. In the couple of years that they'd worked together Brooks truly thought of them as if they were a family. First there was Doctor Joshua Grant. The tall wiry black man had been with him ever since the beginning. He had known Grant since he was a child and eventually drafted the young man right out of the Alliance Science Academy. He was one of the first members of the start up team and a great many of the design innovations incorporated within the Pulsar were his. The sentient computer, named Ernie by the development team was also a development from the mind of Joshua Grant. With the immense size and sophistication of the Pulsar, Ernie had the capability of monitoring and controlling all ship's systems. More than that, Grant had made a name for himself when he helped settlers on Arton III ward off an attack by Dreedan raiders. The perfect combination of brains and courage.

Standing next to him was a woman. Beautiful and graceful, she had hair so long and blonde, that on first sight could make a man melt. Her deep blue eyes seemed to be able to peer deeply into the soul of whoever looked into them, and in many ways she could. Her name was Melanie Patula and this petite woman had been found to have one of the highest psi ratings that the Science Academy had ever tested. Melanie could not read minds, but she could receive psychic impressions from any object that she handled. Brooks considered a skill of this nature of utmost importance in the areas they would be exploring. They had found more than one missing person in this manner. Interpretations of the impressions though made things difficult. She could also take care of herself. A statement that many men could swear to.

From the planet Helos, in the Vega star system, life was hard for a woman. A civil war with its continual fighting had reduced a great civilization to barbarism. Vicious gangs had taken over the streets. Rape and brutality had been a fact of life on Helos. The life expectancy of the average citizen was, depending on their gang affiliations, not very long. Melanie had grown up in the streets, and had somehow survived till an Alliance exploration team had landed on Helos.

They had found her on the outskirts of one of the devastated cities and had become her first friends in a world where the words friend and trust were unknown. Members of that exploration team had been captured by one of the more savage gangs. Melanie had somehow engineered an escape back to the ship where she was offered a way off of the planet by the ship's captain. She quickly accepted and returned with the survivors of the crew. The captain's name was Clayton Brooks. In the fifteen years since her escape from Helos, Melanie had refined her skills and discovered new ones. In the process she had also become a first rate doctor and doubled as the team medic.

His eyes drifted over to the third member of the team, and perhaps the one that he felt the closest kinship to. Mark Carson, the team leader, was a darkly handsome man of thirty-five. Brooks had been a close friend of Mark's father and had followed the younger Carson's career in military intelligence with a keen interest. Mark had grown up on Earth and had been ushered into the Fleet Academy at an early age by his father. Thomas Carson, Mark's father, had been part of the Fleet appropriations committee and a council member. It was easy for him to secure an Academy vacancy for his son. For Mark, this only brought extra pressure on himself to succeed. And succeed he did. Mark became an expert at almost every weapon developed, from the blade to the laser.

Rising quickly through the ranks, Mark was given command of a Special Forces unit which quickly covered itself with glory during the Alliance/Dreedan conflict of ten years before. Carson had led a team

of three behind the Dreedan Imperial lines and had successfully destroyed an important sensor network. This allowed Alliance cruisers to enter what at the time was Dreedan space to rescue an Alliance diplomat and his family. After the conflict, Mark was recruited into a special covert intelligence department of Fleet operations. The training given Mark before had seemed easy compared to the hell that he was put through for his new duties. Mark was taught to kill. His body and mind were trained as never before. If the situation called for it, Mark was very capable of killing with his hands or anything else he could obtain on the spur of the moment. Simple objects, he was told, could be transformed into something lethal. Mark learned, and like everything before, he became an expert.

Brooks continued to follow the career of Mark Carson, even though a great deal of it was classified. Carson had been sent to all sections of the galaxy in whatever mission that Intelligence had given him. To Brooks, who never knew the details of any individual mission (and Carson would never tell him), Mark Carson seemed to come back a little changed each time. But Carson had succeeded every time. His exploits became almost legendary—until his last mission. As an admiral, Brooks was privy to some of the details of that final assignment.

Alliance Intelligence had received word that terrorists were planning an assassination attempt on the Dreedan delegate to the Alliance/Dreedan peace conference. Should they succeed, war would certainly follow. Though most of the details were sketchy, Brooks discovered that Carson was sent in part to coordinate security for the conference, and to a greater extent find the assassin and stop the attempt. The only other information that was available to him was that the mission was a success, and then he returned to Earth where he submitted his resignation from the service, and disappeared.

Brooks never knew the full story until months later. Using all the resources at his command, he traced Carson back to Earth. He found him sitting on a beach in southern California, eyes watching the sun-

set, and a container of dark liquid by his side. It wasn't hard to figure out what was in the container. Brooks remembered back to that meeting, sitting on the cooling sand and also staring at the sunset.

"Hello, Mark. How are you feeling?" He looked over at Carson and could see that retirement wasn't going well. He seemed to have lost a lot of weight since seeing each other last, and the drinking didn't help.

"Hi, admiral," Carson said aimlessly, his eyes still glued to the sun going down in the distance. "What do you want?"

The Admiral took another look at Carson, not believing that this was the same man. "I was worried about you, son." Brooks took the bottle from Carson's hand and looked at the label. "I thought you had better taste than this." Carson took the bottle back and took a long drink from the plastic container.

"Well, times have changed."

Carson agilely got to his feet and started to walk away. Brooks stood up, forcing the blood back into his legs he started off after him. Brooks stuck out his hand and grabbed Carson's arm. Carson stopped short, and for a moment Brooks thought the younger man was going to strike him.

"Mark, what happened to you?"

"What do you care?" He seemed as though a great weight laid on his shoulders. Carson looked at Brooks and his expression seemed to soften, and then tense as he made his decision. "Alright." Carson pointed over to an outcropping of rock, gesturing for the admiral to accompany him. "Pull up a rock, admiral, and remember there's going to be a test after I'm done."

Carson told him about the mission in detail. About his arrival on Rigel IV and his search for the assassin. During his time on the planet he had fallen in love with a member of the Dreedan security team. Dandi was beautiful: a humanoid female of blazing red hair and deep blue skin, the attraction seemed there from the moment

they met. Long walks, wonderful conversation, and after a while, a long bout of passionate love making in his quarters.

The night before the conference was to begin Mark woke to find Dandi gone from his quarters. Wondering where she had gone in the middle of the night, he dressed and walked over to Dandi's quarters hoping to find her there. When he found her room empty he started to worry. Mark decided that while looking for her, he might as well run through his security checks. He looked all through the complex but decided that if she was outside, there was nothing that he could do until morning. Before returning to his quarters he decided to stop for one last check of the conference chamber before the first of the meetings were to begin in a few short hours. When the door slid opened he saw a sight that both confused and angered him. There was Dandi on the floor beneath the conference chamber. She was finishing up the wiring on what appeared to be some kind of explosive.

As Carson continued the story, Brooks could see that it was getting more difficult for his friend to stay in control. It turned out that the assassin was Dandi, a member of a fraction of the Dreedan society that didn't want peace. She saw him standing at the door and pulled out a small blaster from her belt. She told him how sorry she was, but it was something that she had to do. To Carson, she seemed sad, as if she was wrestling with a decision she didn't want to make.

She pointed her gun at him and told him there was nothing personal, that it was just business. He saw her finger tighten on the trigger, and in one swift motion sent a small concealed dagger flying at her. Reflexes, conditioned by years of combat had thrown him clear of the beam from the gun. The dagger though flew true, slamming itself into the middle of her chest. With a soft sigh Dandi collapsed weakly to the floor.

"I went over to her and held her in my arm's as she died." Brooks could see the tears streaming down his face, and could tell that Carson was having a problem finishing his story. "Do you know what

she said to me just before she died?” Brooks shook his head, not knowing, but probably suspecting. “She said she loved me, and that she was sorry—then she died.”

With this, Carson turned his head and with great effort held back the tears. He had long ago shed all the tears that he would for Dandi, but it was a relief to finally be able to tell someone. Somewhat calmer he raised his head and faced Brooks. “After that, I realized I’d had enough of the killing and the lies. So I ran. I took the next ship back to Earth, submitted my resignation and became a drunk. Nice story, don’t you think?”

Carson could see that Brooks looked angry. He found out just how angry the former admiral was when Brooks turned to face him.

“Listen to me, Carson. The time for this self pity nonsense is over. I need you for something important, so don’t give me any of this bullshit.” Brooks could tell that he finally had Carson’s attention. “We’re going to get you cleaned up, and then you’re going to listen to a proposition that I have for you.” Carson could only nod as Brooks led him off. What he later heard had sobered him up quickly.

Brooks reflected as he sat at his desk that he had held that conversation with Mark Carson more than two years ago. Mark had come around, but in many ways still remained an introvert. He wondered how Carson and the others were doing. He reached for over to his comm panel and called Griffin. With any luck maybe there was some word from Carson. Griffin entered and handed Brooks a comp tape containing the current status update.

“Griffin, I don’t have time for this.” The look of impatience on the admiral’s face was apparent. “Just tell me what’s going on.”

“Well sir,” Griffin seemed confused as to where he should begin, but seeing Brooks’ impatience changing to annoyance he continued. “Admiral Olstad’s ship just entered the perimeter. He should be here in about twenty minutes.”

At hearing this bit of wonderful news Brooks gently cradled his head in his hands trying to ward off an intense headache that burned

right between his eyes. In a gaze that seemed to plead for good news he looked up at Griffin. “What about Carson?”

“I queried Ernie. He said that Carson and the others were meeting a suspected raider.” Brooks saw that Griffin seemed a little bothered by something.

“Anything else? What’s wrong now?” Brooks saw Griffin twist uncomfortably in his chair.

“It’s Ernie, sir.” Griffin said slowly.

“What about Ernie?” Brooks asked. Pulling this information out of his assistant was beginning to get a little on his nerves.

“Well he asked me not to call him back, at least not until the mission was over,” Griffin stammered out.

“He what!” Brooks shook his head, not quite believing what he was hearing.

“Ernie told me that while he was coordinating the mission from Pulsar, my constant interruptions were becoming an annoyance,” The embarrassment of the situation was becoming evident in the spreading redness across Griffin’s face.

Brooks shook his head. This was becoming too much for him to take. “Griffin,” Brooks said quietly, almost a whisper.

“Yes sir?” He was gleefully anticipating the orders that would allow him the joy of doing a complete overhaul on the disrespectful computer. He would show Ernie who was boss.

“Griffin,” Brooks continued in that same low tone, “Please have the landing bay prepare for Olstad’s ship, I’ll be there shortly.” Brooks stood up and pointed a wrinkled finger at the door. He spoke two words. His voice now loud enough that people outside the door wondered if the incoming ship could hear him. “Get out!!!” Knowing that this wasn’t exactly what he was prepared to hear, Griffin bolted for the door.

Exhausted, Brooks sat back down. He didn’t have the heart to tell Griffin that Ernie wasn’t the only one who shared that opinion. Reaching over, Brooks pushed a small touch sensitive pad by his

desk. A small door slid aside on the wall revealing a monitor. Sitting back in his chair, Brooks keyed in the channel for the landing bay and watch as Admiral Olstad's ship came in, the large shell shaped doors closing behind it. He hadn't been looking forward to this. Rising from his chair Brooks headed for the door, and then to the landing bay to welcome his guest. He only hoped that Carson was having better day then he was.