

CHAPTER 1

There are few things that remain constant in this universe, as does the battle for power. Domination has always, throughout the millennium, been the goal as battle piled on top of battle and dominion over the many races changed almost as seasons change. Conflict would escalate to almost biblical proportions, as war, persecution, and racial injustice would engulf star system after star system. Such were the scale of these engagements that all political reasons as to why the conflict began were all but lost to the combatants involved. Hate replaced reasoning, as all control was lost. Military goals were replaced by the senseless need to exterminate the other side. A new “crusades” was born. As the expression goes; “To the victor, goes the spoils.”

The universe has itself “turned over” many times since the big bang. Great civilizations have come and gone. Dust is all that remains of most. One of those civilizations, the Chaad, reached a level of technology and prosperity unheard of in galactic history. Their influence was like a bright light, touching deeply all those that it came in contact with it. But with all the wonders that they possessed, there were those that wanted to corrupt it; to perverse all the good that the Chaad visited upon world after world. There is written in the Bible of Earth, and a number of other worlds, about a great battle in the heavens between the forces of light in their chariots of fire and iron and the evil forces of darkness and its minions of darkness and death.

Such a war engulfed the Chaad. That has always been the fate of an open society. The attacks on the Chaad colony worlds came very quickly as every planet was laid waste by the unknown enemy. The once peaceful people were presented with a deadly dilemma. Either die as a race with their convictions of peace intact, or fight. They choose to protect their remaining world. Their culture, once based on artistic exploration and enlightenment, turned to the manufacture of machines of war. The battle was joined. As colony world after colony world was devastated, the Chaad pulled in closer to their home world where fighting became more furious. Conflict continued generation after generation with the still unknown enemy called the Jek’tan. No Jek’tan was ever captured, as no Jek’tan would ever surrender. The Jek’tan took no prisoners and there was talk within the Chaad that the Jek’tan fed off the bodies of those taken. Legends began to replace science as images of hideous creatures in metal combat suits began to run rampant through the weary battle forces of the Chaad. More races joined the conflict. Some were forcibly recruited by the forces of the Jek’tan while others joined the Chaad. In the end, it didn’t matter. The concepts of good and evil became muddled as all sides were reduced to barbarity. Weapons became more sophisticated as mighty ships reduced each other to radioactive dust. The Chaad, as sophisticated as they had once been, were not a warlike people, but they learned. As the body counts rose on both sides, the forces of light began to slowly push the Jek’tan back. The cost rose into the billions, and then the trillions as the Jek’tan burned world after world during their retreat. The Chaad paid the price for their success as a single Jek’tan ship found a small hole in the defense net

surrounding their home world. Defensive ships met it too late as it drove into the capital city. The engines, set to overload, detonated one-hundred meters above the surface. The resulting explosive force reduced twenty percent of the planet's surface to radioactive dust. The immediate death count was in the millions, but the end to the Chaad home world came slower. The radioactive dust was sent in the atmosphere where it blocked out the light of its twin suns. Many died from the resulting fall-out and many more from what was later termed a nuclear winter. Ice covered the once beautiful planet as its people slowly died.

The Chaad forces, it is said, heard about the death of their planet as they forced the Jek'tan back to their own home world on the other side of space. As they approached, the Jek'tan made their final stand. But to their amazement not one enemy ship came to challenge them. Sensors registered the arrival of a thousand Jek'tan destroyers, but none joined the battle. Instead, the planet began to revolve, faster and faster and hell came to the Chaad fleet. Fires flashed from the surface and Chaad ships fell from the sky. Their ships were struck down one after the other as the world below them spun madly. The remaining ships broke orbit and regrouped outside of the system. What had been a fleet of hundreds was reduced to a scant ten. They had one weapon remaining. One capability, that even in a fight that had lasted for generations, they had resisted using. They had the ability to create and launch an artificial singularity — a black hole. It was decided that nine of the ships would draw the fire of the mad Jek'tan planet while the remaining one would launch the devastating weapon. All ships came in on different vectors firing. The Jek'tan planet seemed to sense the attack and Chaad ships started to die. One by one they died as the lone remaining ship began its attack run. Unfortunately, it fell short of its launch point and the captain fearing their immediate destruction launched too early. The warhead detonated. The blackhole formed and instead of destroying the Jek'tan home world it seemed to have another effect all together. The gravity well caused by the newly created singularity caused the Jek'tan world to spin even faster then the Jek'tan had ever intended. The crew of the final Chaad ship witnessed the planet simply spin itself out of existence. Not going with a bang, but a quiet whisper as it faded from sight. Legend has it that this last "chariot of the gods" returned. Most of her crew either dying or mad. Rumor became myth and myth became legend as the tale of the disappearing Jek'tan war world vanished as surely as did the planet it told about.

The Chaad had not faired much better over the course of time. With most of the colony worlds in ruins, the Chaad had withdrawn to the confines of their homeworld. The war had taken more than a toll on materials and resources, it had changed the Chaad people as well. No longer would the Chaad bring the fruits of their civilization to the universe. Their advancements in science, and the arts would benefit no one further. What does not grow, withers and dies. The Chaad simply allowed themselves to fade out and die. After a time all trade with the outer worlds had ended followed by all contact. Eventually, they faded to a memory, to legend and then to nothing as the universe went on without them.

Over the millennium, many had investigated the legend and searched for worlds of the Chaad and the Jek'tan. It has been told that riches and power await those who find them.

Some say that only death awaits those who try. It had been the Holy Grail of a modern universe, but only a myth or legend, until now...

CHAPTER 2

“Life should not be this complicated,” Mark Carson silently thought to himself. Eight days of trying to mediate a border dispute between the equally violent and annoying Tarks and the Elutions did nothing more than give him a headache. After all, he was many things, but not a diplomat. His esteemed employer, mentor, and sometimes father figure, Admiral Clayton Brooks thought otherwise. Why he and the crew of the Pulsar were even involved was a mystery to him. This seemed more of a job for the Alliance Diplomatic Corp than a problem for Commando Incorporated and his crew. But still the Admiral assured him that it would be a simple matter, and that both the Tarks and Elutions would respond more to someone with his - how did the Admiral put it; his “A” type assertive personality.

The meeting had started well with representatives from each side requesting the negotiations be held in a neutral place. Carson had suggested the briefing room onboard the Pulsar. So it had begun as the representatives boarded the small, but powerful starship. Ank, the Pulsar's tactical officer was not quite as confident as Carson was and insisted on remaining armed while their “guests” were onboard. The first days of the negotiation process reached its high point as the Tark ambassador pulled out a small blaster and attempted to vaporize his counterpart. Carson rewarded the effort by breaking the wrist of the Tark ambassador in three places. Not an easy thing to do since the wrist of the simian-like alien was about the same size as Carson's muscular forearm. The Elution ambassador had not remained silent as he too pulled out a small needler from a hidden ankle holster and attempted to fire first. The blaster burn on the table was a testament to the speed in which Ank was able to pull his own weapon to bear and put a hole through both the needler and the table.

After Melanie Patula administered to their injuries Carson assured both sides that the next time anyone drew a weapon, it would be their last. With this final obstacle out of the way, the negotiations proceeded. Brooks, as always, proved himself right and the display of action on his part actually provided momentum to the process. Unfortunately, it was seven days later that the three sides successfully broke contact and headed for home. Both Josh and Melanie had tried to get him to look at the bright side. The mission was a success and it could have been a lot worse. Carson responded by shutting the door to his quarters in the middle of their joint comment. He was saving most of his mission commentary for Clayton Brooks as soon as they returned to the Commando Inc. headquarters. He thought that a good fire-fight would have been preferable to his mediating duties this past week. Unfortunately, if you wish hard enough ...

The Pulsar was a relatively large starship for her crew of four. She needed the extra room for mission specific cargo. Her onboard computer was actually the fifth crew member of the Pulsar. Named Ernie (short for Electronically Responsive Neuro Intelligent Entity), most ship functions could function without crew control. Carson knew that he could depend on Ernie as much as any of his biological crew when needed. Ernie had developed his own personality, but his loyalty to Carson and the other members of the crew was unquestionable. He had control over all ship functions, including navigation

and weapons control. A fact that Ank, as tactical officer made sure that he had under his control as often as he could. Ernie also monitored every existing communications channel available and would make them aware of any impending emergencies. If he had one major fault, it was his timing.

Carson turned down the light over his bunk and lay down. He relished the thought of several hours of non-negotiating headache related sleep as he closed his eyes. Unfortunately, the comm-panel had other plans. The audio beep and soft blinking lights demanded his attention. He knew that ignoring it would only make his head hurt more. Slowly, he opened his eyes, sighed softly and hit the button a little harder than he had intended.

“Carson here. This had best be important,” he said, not even bothering to hide his irritation.

“Skipper, I’m receiving a distress call on a priority channel,” Ernie said excitedly over the small cabin speaker. He had very little to do over the last eight days and saw this as an opportunity to get himself involved in something that made him feel more like one of the crew.

“Is it a ship or planetary signal?” Carson asked as he pulled his duty shirt over his lithe muscular upper body.

“Ship, skipper. Approximately point 75 light hours from our present position.”

“Alright.” Carson knew his standing orders were to investigate any distress call. “Alert the others and adjust course to intercept. Maximum speed.”

“All hands are at their posts, skipper,” Ernie responded.

“Oh, yippee. I’ll be right there.” He’d hoped that he acted sarcastically enough as he headed for the lift to the bridge.