

Chapter 1

Outer Planet Garagan – ED – 2.4.2501

Captain Rune MacDonald of the World Alliance Space Patrol (WASP) stepped off the ramp of the *Odin* and onto the orange sands of the planet Garagan. As he did so, the ramp began to telescope into itself, disappearing into the ship. A few seconds later, the entryway door closed and blended with the rest of the ship.

Patrolling space, settling disputes, and generally keeping the peace around a bunch of habitable but uninviting planets was not an easy job for a single WASP patrol ship. There were thirty-two planets in this section of the galaxy, and only six ships to patrol them.

As squadron leader, the captain was responsible for those six ships and the men and women who patrolled this quadrant of outer space. This last two-year circuit had been a particularly demanding one for both Rune, and for his squad. Personally, he was more than ready to begin his four-months of R&R on Earth. First, though, he had to get through this.

There was a look of determination on Rune's rugged face. On Earth, with his chiseled features, strong jaw, and sun-bronzed skin, some people would consider him a handsome man. On most of the outer planets, however, he could be considered anything from pretty to downright ugly.

Standing in the deep shadow cast by the shuttle, Rune took several deep breaths. The arid air of Garagan, although hot, was a refreshing change from the shipboard recycled air.

Located about fifty light years from Earth, the planet Garagan was one of five planets that circled the star Muarae. Garagan, rated as a Class-V minus planet, was the middle planet and the only one that could support life. A harsh and unforgiving place, Garagan's inhabitants were just emerging from the barbaric stage.

There were seven WASP scientists stationed here, just as there were on the other Class-V planets. Their mission was to monitor and help bring the native population slowly out of the dark ages and into the twenty-sixth century. Six WASP soldiers protected the station and the scientists.

Rune looked across the landing pad atop the mesa toward the adjacent mountains, his dark-blue eyes squinting from the brilliant orange sunlight. Reaching into a side pocket of his tactical pants, Rune removed a rectangular tube and pressed a stud on its bottom. The tube transformed into a pair of standard issue field goggles. After putting them on, Rune lightly tapped the right side of the goggles. The lenses morphed into polarized mirrors, which reflected the harsh sunlight.

Now he could clearly see the red-orange color of the buttes, eroded canyon walls, and mesas that rose into cerulean skies. Off in the distance loomed vast forests of giant cobalt-colored kyaneos trees. They were dark against the stunning blood-red and orange buttes and monoliths.

Not a hint of a breeze stirred the long, dry, grass-like orange bushes around the landing pad. *By the gods, it's hot, even hotter than Solaris, my first duty station twenty years ago*, Rune thought. He was sweating so much that his long hair was sticking to the back of his neck.

Rune removed a strip of black cloth from his uniform pocket and lifted his long, blond hair from the back of his neck. Reaching back with his long, muscular arms, he tied his hair back, the fingers of his strong, bronzed hands securing the slipknot with practiced ease. A slight breeze stirred the dust at his feet and felt good against the moisture on his powerful neck.

Moving his gaze to the front of the monitoring facility, Rune noted that the bulk of it lay hidden inside the mountain. *It will be a lot cooler inside*, he thought to himself, as he stepped out of the shadows.

As he did so, he saw a flash of light from the roof of the monitoring facility. Reflexively, Rune dove to the ground and rolled back into the shadows. A one-inch-diameter hole appeared in the ground where he had been standing just a few seconds before. Rune slapped a button on his black uniform. Like a chameleon, it immediately changed color to match his surroundings. Rune crawled backward, further under the shuttle, as a barrage of shots tore into the ground in front of him. The orange-colored dust covered him entirely now. *“Good! Now I’ll be harder to see.”*

Rune drew his DUSTER (Duel Use Space Tactical Energy Ray) and turned its power dial two clicks to the right. At this highest setting, a blast from it would disrupt the neutrons in the atomic structure of whomever he hit. They would become atoms of hydrogen and would burst and vanish. Rune pressed and turned a few more studs, and the DUSTER transformed from a handgun to a rifle. He carefully aimed where he had seen the flash.

Rune quickly double-tapped the left side of his goggles, activating the heads-up display. The target acquisition circle zoomed in on the roof of the building. Now, he could clearly see someone lying on the roof holding a sniper assault rifle. It was going to be a difficult shot, with an architectural short wall running around the roofline partially hiding the sniper.

One tap to the center of his goggles and they paired with his DUSTER, like the scope on a rifle. When the heads-up display showed Rune that he was on target, he double tapped the DUSTER's firing stud. There were two flashes, one from the wall and a second from what was hiding behind it, neither of which was there when the air cleared.

Rune looked along the roofline to assure himself that no one else was there. Satisfied that there was no further threat, he reset his goggles and returned the DUSTER to its default handheld configuration. Rune tuned the DUSTER down to its kill setting and began to crawl forward. As he did, his peripheral vision caught movement to his left.

Rune rolled to his right, as he simultaneously chanced a shot at where he had seen the movement. A shot coming from the tall bush to his right pinged off the shuttle's landing gear next to him. Whoever was shooting at him had him pinned down from both sides!

Rune brought his left arm up and pressed a stud on the titanium band attached to his forearm. Speaking sub-vocally to the ship's computer, he requested that it eliminate the threats on either side of the ship. The ship responded that the objects were too close. The lasers would hit their lowest vertical pivot point before they could acquire a target.

Thinking quickly as the shots pinged off the metal around him, the Rune gave the ship's computer another command. He told the ship's computer to wait ten seconds and then fire its side pulse cannons. It was to begin to fire fifty yards beyond the targets, stepping the shots in closer to the ship each time. The computer was to continue firing until the cannons reached their lowest vertical pivot point.

When the cannons began to fire, Rune's assailants dove for cover. Quickly turning in the opposite direction from where he had been, Rune holstered his DUSTER and crawled to the rear of the shuttle.

When he reached it, he looked quickly from side to side. Seeing no one, Rune stood and jumped as high as his long legs would allow him. He was just inches short of grabbing the bottom rung of the maintenance ladder.

Suddenly the ship stopped firing. Mustering all of the strength in his powerful legs, Rune jumped again. This time his fingers were able to wrap around the ladder's lowest rung. He pulled

himself up with brute strength, and a few seconds later was climbing to the top of the shuttle.

Now he could clearly see his assailants hiding in the tall bush below. Rune drew his DUSTER and fired at the assailant on his right. It was a direct hit, and he watched as his assailant rolled to the side, a good-sized hole in his head.

As Rune turned to fire at the second assailant, three shots pinged off the radar disk at his side. Ducking, Rune saw the second assailant running from the tall bush toward the shuttle.

Before Rune could return fire, his assailant was under the shuttle and out of sight. It was a standoff, and his assailant had the advantage. It was true that Rune had the high ground, but his assailant was in the shade. Already Rune's uniform was soaked through. The orange sun was brutally hot, and he had no water.

Rune thought about the situation for a moment and then asked the ship's computer to track his assailant. The computer told him that the assailant was at the front of the shuttle, so Rune quickly informed the computer how to proceed.

When he had finished giving the instructions to the on-board computer, Rune set his DUSTER on stun. There were a lot of questions that needed answering, and he wanted to catch this assailant alive.

Chapter 2

Rune's assailant sat quietly under the shuttle. He knew that it was only a matter of time before the peacekeeper from Earth would have to come down from the top of the shuttle. He would patently wait, and when he came down, he would kill him.

The assailant started when a piece of metal hit the ground right in front of him, followed by the peacekeeper. The assailant shot twice. Both shots went right through the peacekeeper into the ground. Behind him, the assailant heard a whistle. When he turned, he saw the peacekeeper hanging upside down from the back of the shuttle.

Rune fired his DUSTER twice, and the assailant fell to the ground. "*On a primitive world, the holographic projection is the king of distraction.*"

He bent down and removed the blaster from the stunned Garaganian's hand. Along with the sniper rifle, it was another piece of technology that the Garaganians should not have possessed. He set his DUSTER to maximum, threw the blaster to the ground, and destroyed it.

Hearing a gurgling noise, Rune turned toward the Garaganian lying on the ground just in time to see his captive begin to convulse. Rune was at his side in two strides, but he was already too late, as the Garaganian stiffened and then relaxed.

There was no time to think about how the Garaganian had died. If there were any others inside the complex, they were on alert by now, so Rune needed to get in there as quickly as possible.

When the ship's sensors assured Rune that there was no longer any danger, he walked out from beneath the shuttle. Ready for anything now, Rune looked around curiously at the flat roof of the monitoring facility, with its domed torrents and the ugly snouts of the protruding rail guns. Satisfied that there were no other threats, he strode purposefully toward the facility.

As he drew nearer, he could see that the security panel was flashing red, which meant that the monitoring facility had been breached, and someone was already inside. There were no surprises there. As soon as he came within ten feet of the security monitor, a blue beam of light surrounded him and the tower rail guns moved to cover him. He would have to undergo a three-level security check before they would move away from him.

Rune continued forward surrounded by the blue beam, until he was standing within an arm's length of the monitor's screen, and he said, "I am Captain Rune MacDonald, ID number 067 Alpha 42 Beta 777 requesting access to monitoring facility 747-811-42."

The screen stopped flashing red, and an outline of a human hand replaced the warning sign. Rune placed his hand on the membrane screen inside the outline. He felt the familiar tingling sensation as the machine checked his DNA. Rune stood unmoving as the computer did a retina scan and ran a facial recognition program as well.

After a few seconds had elapsed, he felt the probing tingle of the search beam, and he knew that the machine was checking for energy weapons. With his free hand, he lightly touched the Flyzon sword attached to his belt.

Some of the outer Class V planets guarded by WASP Patrol ships, like this one, were home to native civilizations that had not progressed beyond the sword and spear stage. Standing orders were that whenever you landed on one of them, all advanced weaponry had to be left on board the

ship. For that reason, all WASP personnel were required to carry a Flyzon sword, a synthetic material 200% harder than a diamond, linked to its owner as part of their personal armament. The rule was not in effect when responding to a monitoring station breach alarm.

Since fencing was one of his passions and he liked patrolling the Class V planets, Rune often practiced, aboard the ship, with a thirty-four inch sword he had forged himself.

The scanner chimed, interrupting Rune's thoughts, its disembodied voice addressing no one in particular, "Identity confirmed. Captain Rune MacDonald, security level Alpha 5, access granted."

The plastasteel door to his left slid silently into the wall. Rune drew his DUSTER and cautiously entered the room beyond.

As soon as he stepped through the opening, the door slid closed and blended with the wall. It was now invisible to the naked eye. Rune quickly stepped to his left, DUSTER at the ready. All his senses were on high alert as his eyes searched the shadows for movement.

He was in the control room of the monitoring station, and it was a mess. Almost every piece of monitoring equipment was, in some way, damaged or destroyed. As Rune watched, a computer screen lying in a corner flickered and went out. The station personnel, like so many lifeless ragdolls, lay wherever they had fallen.

Rune walked among the carnage, observing that there were energy burns as well as bloody slash marks on some of the bodies. It was obvious to him that the perpetrators had used energy weapons as well as edged weapons to carry out the bloody massacre.

Rune brought his left arm up and pressed a stud on the titanium band attached to his forearm. Speaking to the ship's computer, he requested a diagram of the monitoring facility. Within seconds, a holographic schematic of the room he was in appeared.

Rune studied the diagram for a few seconds and then used his index finger to circle a section. With a flick of his wrist, the rest of the schematic disappeared. Using the palm of his hand, Rune moved the remaining piece to face the opposite wall and gave it a push. The diagram moved to a section of the wall and stayed a millimeter in front of it.

Rune walked to the wall and placed his hand over the section. The computer checked his security level, and then he heard a whirr as an opening appeared in the wall revealing a keypad.

Just as he thought, the light over the keypad was red, indicating that the dampening field was off. Rune used the keypad to enter a code and watched as the light changed from red to green. He watched as the opening closed and blended with the bulkhead once more. Now that he had activated the energy-dampening field, all energy weapons within the facility would be useless.

Moving away from the wall, Rune holstered his DUSTER and drew his Flyzon sword. "*Time to go old school.*" When he pressed the stud on the ten-inch long oval shaped handle, the three-piece, razor sharp Flyzon blade telescoped out. He felt a tingle as a slight electrical charge was applied, causing the blades and the handle to merge into one solid double-edged weapon.

Rune continued his investigation of the room until he had once again reached the storage facility entrance. Satisfied that there were no survivors in the control room, he cautiously opened the storage facility door. He would check the living quarters beyond to see if anyone had escaped the bloodbath.

Rune hesitated when saw what lay before him in the storage area. There were hundreds of large crates stacked randomly as far as he could see. It would be difficult for him to navigate the maze of boxes without walking into an ambush. Silently, Rune moved forward, his muscular legs propelling him carefully across the smooth gray floor.

As he passed an open space between two lines of crates, Rune looked down the aisle and saw

daylight through a ragged hole in the metal structure. Beyond was a tunnel that probably led out of the mountain. There was only one thing that could make a hole that big through two inches of plastasteel . . . an SV42 focal mine. Anything else would either be ineffective or destroy everything in the building. Now he knew how the intruders had gained entrance to the facility. They had come in through the mine and had blown a hole in the station's wall.

It was obvious to Rune that someone was supplying advanced weapons to the locals. As he moved ahead more cautiously now, Rune reported his findings sub-vocally to his ship. The ship, in turn, would relay the report to WASP Command back on Earth.

Rune had gone only one hundred feet further, detouring around various stacks of crates, before a very faint scraping noise made him stop. The sound had come from a large stack of crates about two yards in front and to the right of where he stood.

Turning in the direction of the crates, Rune watched from the shadows as three figures stepped out from behind them. Although they were still partially in shadow, Rune could see that they were huge!

The aliens standing in front of Rune made his six-foot, eight-inch well-muscled body seem small by comparison. Using the height of the crates as a guide, Rune estimated that the one on the left was about three inches taller than he was. He guessed the one on the right to be two inches taller, with the one in the center taller still. Shaking his head, Rune thought to himself, "*They only grow them this big on Garagan.*"

Rune's antagonists were broad shouldered and wide at the middle. They all had the Neanderthal head, red eyes, dark complexion, and copper-colored hair of the Garaganian people. The biggest of the three had a scar that ran from above his left eye, across the bridge of his nose, and down his right cheek. He looked as if he weighed well over three hundred and fifty pounds.

The other two had scars as well, and one of them, the smallest, had burn scars that covered the left side of his face. The middle one had an ear missing.

Rune looked the trio over for weaknesses and decided to give each one a name. He would call the one on the left "Tiny," the one on the right "Little," and the one in the middle he would call "Small."

Rune stepped out of the shadows and into the pool of light cast by the overhead illuminations. The Garaganians, a few yards away, did the same. Now that they were all standing in the light, Rune could see them and their weapons clearly. They were all carrying outdated Glock-60 magnum plasma handguns.

Rune breathed a sigh of relief. He was glad he had taken the time to turn on the dampening field. Even without the disabled advanced weapons they carried, this was not going to be easy.

Little held a forty-two-inch broadsword-like Fulani sword in his hand, the blade resting on his shoulder. Tiny was swinging an axe from front to back at his side. Small, the biggest of the three, held a wicked looking Falchion sword that curved slightly upward at the end.

Rune's blond hair and blue eyes made him look Scandinavian, and his DNA contained Scottish as well as Viking ancestry. He felt that his warrior heritage caused him to like personal combat very much.

Rune assumed a defensive stance, his muscles flexing in readiness for combat. The adrenalin rush was starting and his combat reflexes were kicking in. Some things don't change no matter how civilized man becomes.

Moving first, Rune took a few steps forward, sword poised to strike, and he addressed them in Galactic, "I am Captain MacDonald of the World Alliance Space Patrol. Place your weapons on the floor and step away from them."

In response, all three of the Garaganians drew their energy weapons and pointed them at Rune. When they didn't fire, they tossed them to the floor and drew their swords.

All three of Rune's adversaries began to move forward in unison, until the tallest one, the one Rune called Small, put his huge arms up sideways to stop the others.

Smiling to himself, Rune waited as Small slowly moved toward him. The fact that he moved as slowly as he did gave Rune a slight advantage. As his antagonist came closer, Rune could feel his heartbeat quicken just the slightest bit. His Flyzon sword was custom made for him and felt like an extension of his arm. Made of a material 200 times harder than diamonds, Rune knew that he would break long before it did.

As they circled each other, looking for weaknesses, Rune could feel the hairs on his skin stand up slightly. Now he would be better able to sense movement around him. He was ready.

As the other two watched, Small suddenly lunged forward, simultaneously slashing upward with the curved tip of his sword. Instead of blocking his swing, Rune simply moved a step backward in anticipation of Small's next move.

As Rune expected, when Small's sword reached the top of its arc, he followed through with a backhanded downward swing. Switching his sword to his left hand, Rune stepped in, and turning slightly, he blocked Small's downward swing with his sword. Simultaneously, he kicked out at Small's knee with his right foot.

Rune's aim was a little off, so the kick didn't land solidly. Instead of breaking his kneecap, he only dislocated it. Roaring with the pain, Small staggered backward and leaned on a crate for support.

Taking a few steps back and returning to his ready stance, Rune again addressed the trio in Galactic, "This is the last time I am going to tell you; throw down your weapons and surrender and I will let you live."

The other two looked toward Small and started to move forward again, but he motioned them to stay back. Reaching down, he popped his kneecap back in place.

As he stepped forward lightly to test his leg, Small took a backhanded sideways swipe at Rune. Before his sword reached midpoint in the swing, Rune slashed downward, deflecting the blow. Flicking the tip of his sword upward, Rune cut a gash in Small's face.

Stepping back again, a look of rage contorting his features, small suddenly lunged forward, trying to cut Rune from crotch to breastbone. If he had been quicker it might have worked, but Rune's catlike reflexes carried him sideways, and the sword passed harmlessly by his left side.

With Small's arm still extended upward, Rune moved quickly. Switching his sword to his left hand, he thrust it forward, piercing Small's heart. Tumbling backwards like a felled tree, Small hit the floor with a thud, as orange blood gushed from the mortal wound.