

From the mind of

# P.M. Griffin

## STAR COMMANDOS

*THE ADVENTURE BEGINS...*

01



**STAR COMMANDOS**  
**01**

BY

**P. M. GRIFFIN**

# STAR COMMANDOS 01

A Novel By

**P. M. GRIFFIN**

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# **DEDICATION**

To Andre Norton, for her belief in this book and her support.

I appreciate very much having had the chance to read Pauline Griffin's STAR COMMANDOS. This is excellent s-f adventure, but it also contains depth in its characters and awakens in the reader a constant desire to know more of them and a concern for them. I consider this one of the best stories of its type that I have read for some time. And I hope to meet the two protagonists again in some future story.

This is s-f adventure at its brightest and best.

**Andre Norton**

# **STAR COMMANDOS**

## **01**

*The adventure begins anew...*



**ArcheBooks Publishing**

# ONE

Commando-Colonel Islaen Connor moved briskly along the busy street. She jerked the collar of her jacket still higher in a futile effort to break the bite of the wind.

*Damn and bother this never-ending dust!*

It got into her eyes with painful regularity, each time momentarily eliminating her visual contact with her surroundings. A guerrilla could die in less than half that time.

Her eyes slitted as the grit-laden breeze intensified. She knew she had better take care here. Vishnu's sole spaceport might be safe enough for others hurrying or ambling along its unfinished streets, but if anyone should begin to think she was something other than a planet-hopping exobiologist...

Once more, the air cleared, and she fixed her atten-

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tion on the world around her. There seemed to be little unique about it. The port was typical of any such installation servicing a first-ship colony. The planeting field and complex of associated buildings formed the core from which its few streets radiated. No paving had been done on any of them yet, and would not be done for a long time to come, but the structures lining them, squat and unlovely though they might be, were sturdy and serviceable. They were chiefly warehouses interspersed with a few shops and light technical or craft industries. Two taverns were located near the core to draw the spacers, and a single hotel, her present goal, farther out. The only significant-looking building apart from those servicing the spaceport itself was the combined headquarters and residence of the planet's developers.

Her expression hardened at the mental reminder of those vermin, but she willed her thoughts to turn to Vishnu of Brahmin.

The big planet lacked anything yet to be discovered in the way of natural beauty, or even much of fauna, but that dearth of native life forms made her all the more attractive to potential colonists such as this group from Amon presently claiming her. They wanted to work with their adopted world, not dominate her, and they wished to create as low an ecological impact on her as possible. The absence of large numbers of Vishnite animals would make their task the easier.

The Commando sighed. They were too fine a people to have been served thus.

Amon was a very old planet, colonized centuries before the advent of the Settlement Board. She was small

and poor in resources, and her populace had quickly passed the maximum number she could safely support. A strong, disciplined race, they had not permitted the metastasis to continue. Balance had been achieved and their culture saved, but at inevitable cost to personal challenge and individual fulfillment.

Dissatisfaction with those conditions had reached a point where more and more of her people sought what their ancient home could no longer provide. A colony was the answer. Everyone knew that, but new worlds acceptable for settlement were never common, not even in prewar times before the Federation had been compelled to throw all its resources into the decades-long struggle against the might of the Arcturian Empire. Amonites had no fondness for massive bureaucracy of any sort. Their patience had finally worn thin with the slow progress of the Board controlling all colonization activity, and they deeply resented that off-worlders should have so much power over their lives and their choices. When this other group had offered them a planet ready for immediate occupation, they had leapt to make their claim.

Two years had passed since their ships had planeted. They had built homes, planted crops to sustain themselves and their livestock, and had begun real work at last among the trees that were the focus of their hope and labor. Life was hard as yet, with little ease and constant body-wracking toil, but conditions were perceptibly improving and would improve even more rapidly once they could begin exporting some of that fine dark wood and marvelously sweet fruit. With luck, they believed,

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that should be early the following year.

Islaen's mouth tightened. So much hope, so much work, and all of it for nothing.

The colony was an illegal one. Her unit had been sent to investigate it, and had secured evidence in plenty that the documents shown to the settlers were false. Vishnu had been privately discovered and had never been properly explored or evaluated. Developers had merely moved in, taking advantage of the postwar troubles gripping the Federation, and had falsified the necessary papers and begun transporting the colonists here. The Amonites were completely unaware of their duplicity. This, too, she had confirmed, but it would make little difference to them apart from keeping them out of Federation court. Their settlement's fate would be sealed the moment she filed her report, a fate rendered all the more bitter by their very innocence.

Islaen Connor hated her part in all this. By the Spirit Ruling Space, how she hated it! Her own Noreen was an agrarian world, a planet of farmers, and she identified intensely with the aspirations of these people. She identified with their sweat and their sacrifices. She wanted to the core of her being to help them, yet she could not merely lift from here and forget what she had learned. There was too much peril in that.

Sudden fire, deadly as a blaster's bolt, flashed in her eyes. Men, so-called humans, had done this to them. She would have those subbiotics for that. She would crush them, these bloated leeches sucking dry their victims' dreams.

The guerrilla officer gripped herself, stemming her

temper. Raw anger could be useful under some circumstances, but allowing it rein now would serve no good purpose, and might lead her to betray herself.

What had happened here was not a common crime, but neither was it unknown. It would carry a heavy penalty if detected, for an unsuitable planet could bring death to anyone trying to make a life upon her, but it also carried the promise of huge profits to those successful in concealing what they had done.

The men directing this effort had believed they would not be assuming any very great risk, not in the few months, little more than a couple of years, that they needed to remain associated with it. Once the preliminary work was done and the last of the contracted settlers had paid out their resettlement fees, they would be able to withdraw, leaving their bastard colony to rise or fall as it would.

The brown of her eyes darkened, and once more, she had to quell a powerful surge of anger. It was a familiar pattern, and so, too, were the consequences. All too many such settlements crumbled, for abandonment usually stripped them of interstellar support. The Patrol did not know to check on their progress, and if some disaster did threaten, no ships would be there to offer aid or take the imperiled colonists off-world. These people were fortunate in the extreme. Sector authorities had grown suspicious of the activity around Vishnu and had moved to investigate.

The settlers would see little cause for rejoicing in that luck. At the very least, they would probably be forced to abandon the colony and see all their work set to naught

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when the Federation conducted the proper tests. Few planets were suitable for settlement, only those rare ones lacking a native human-level populace and able to support new intelligent life in synergy with their own.

Islaen scanned those near her on the busy street. She was uneasy this morning, and her hand strayed frequently of its own accord to the blaster resting at her side. There were none of the Amonites present in the crowd, hardly surprising since there was very little to draw farmers into an area designed for the use of star-ship crews. She would have much preferred it if there had been. They were a hard and just folk, and she would be far less concerned about meeting with sudden violence had a few of them been in the vicinity.

The Commando-Colonel knew she had ample reason to keep on her guard in this gathering. She had no illusions as to her fate if it came to be known that she had been sent to reconnoiter Vishnu at the request of the Sector's Governor. Developers engaged in a project of this nature could not readily draw upon legitimate spacers, but they paid well and found little difficulty in filling their needs from other sources. Many of the men and women around her were almost certainly wanted by the Navy or Patrol, by surplanetary authorities, or by all three. Few of them, hunted or not, would feel much fondness for Federation officials or their agents. They could be expected to react quickly to any of that breed they discovered amongst them.

Suddenly, her eyes widened, and only her iron will and war-honed reflexes prevented her from faltering in her step.

*That man... No, it could not be!*

Islaen kept on moving, but his image burned in her mind. For four long years, Varn Tarl Sogan had been the focus of her every thought and effort. She could not be mistaken.

There were differences. That was to be expected, the inevitable result of time and drastically altered circumstances.

Such changes were irrelevant. The body had thinned, but its strength and grace of movement remained, as had the straight carriage of one bred to the life of a soldier. New lines might mar the strong features, but they remained recognizable. Even the loss of the beard which had once framed his chin could not disguise his features.

The Commando knew his racial characteristics all too well, his height, the olive skin, the eyes which were almost the same dark brown as the hair, a trait not common outside the central planets of the Arcturian Empire and then only in families closely linked with that of the Emperor himself.

Those eyes, intelligent, cold although even now not utterly lacking in compassion, proud still despite the lash of brutal fortune, they above all else betrayed him to her.

The colonel's head raised. She had seen on him just now what few others in either ultrasystem would have been able to detect, much less to name: the dull shadow of accepted despair. A swift pang of grief and pity twisted in her own heart in response to it only to be swallowed in a fierce surge of triumph that his spirit still held unbroken under it. She, who had suffered little, was showing less courage than this old enemy. She must

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mend that failing now, or she would be unworthy of facing him again if they were to be pitted against each other once more.



The woman was beautiful, and so Varn Tarl Sogan's attention was on her when her eyes swept over him. An icy fist seemed to close around his heart as he saw her pupils widen. Was he betrayed?

The fugitive used the excuse her loveliness provided to prolong his study of her for a few moments. He was not the only man around them who was giving her more than a passing glance.

Sogan did not know her. Of that he was certain, but ignorance on his part meant nothing. Pale skin and the red gene apparent in the rich auburn hair were common on Thorne of Brandine, particularly in conjunction with refinement and delicacy of feature such as she displayed. There was probably no one native to the planet he had invaded who had not cursed his name with each new day. Few, particularly among those dwelling anywhere near his headquarters, did not know his features as well as their own. Better. Hate sharpened awareness.

He fought to calm himself. It did not seem possible that she should have recognized him in these radically different conditions. Even had she been born of Thorne and been present there during the critical period, he should be secure. Her perception of him was the key.

There was a vast distance between the man he had been and what he now was. Varn Tarl Sogan had

wielded absolute power with all the authority granted him by birth, rank, and the crushing force of the Empire he had represented. Defeat had not dispelled that air of command, and his inbred discipline had upheld him during the withdrawal. He had revealed neither his grief at the fall of the cause he had served, nor his crushing certainty of the fate awaiting him to his closest aides, much less to the masses cheering his fleet's departure.

The spacer Varnt Sogan was another being. If he bore features characteristic of the Arcturian race, then as much could be said of countless others, whole planetary populations, and many of the mongrels bred in the starlanes, men who might carry the blood of a dozen or more systems in their veins. His clothing was that worn by the latter group, no longer the scarlet uniform with its insignia of rank and courage. The short beard that had once framed his jaw was gone, eradicated so that its shadow might never betray him. Hardship, pain, and this purposeless, furtive existence he was doomed to endure had lain their more subtle brand upon his face and body.

How could one who had known him in that old life name him now? Besides, it was hardly reasonable to imagine that anyone could recover so quickly and completely from such a meeting. Will and art did not work so far.

The dark eyes glittered cold and hard as they looked back into the past. No, that most assuredly was not true. Thorne had taught him something of what the combination of control and wile could accomplish.

The surplanetary Resistance had been strong even

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before the Federation Navy had sent in Commandos to aid its fight. After their arrival, a frighteningly efficient army had emerged. Its warriors had harried the invaders frequently and hard, sometimes with crippling success. Their losses had been heavy, but nearly all had occurred during the active course of their missions or in their immediate aftermath. They had never given themselves away by any show of sudden fear or furtive air, although they must have come into unwanted contact with the Empire's soldiers numerous times during the course of the occupation.

Treason had never played any great part on Thorne. Security among the on-worlders had been extremely tight from the start, and the Resistance had dealt swiftly with the few who had attempted betrayal. Prisoners had surrendered some information, but each individual's knowledge had been limited, and most had succeeded in slaying themselves, many by ingenious means, before they broke in the early years before the Commandos had brought the treatment that gave death as soon as the mind or will were shattered.

His mouth hardened into a grim line. With such a people, anything was conceivable. If this woman was one of them and if she had fought actively in their cause, she could indeed be expected to have command over herself.

His own course was clear enough. It disgusted him, but he ignored that. He had little love for the excuse of a life he now led, but the Empire's cruel gods had decreed that he must continue in it. So be it. Live, he would and live in freedom. This was a savage universe into which

he had been thrown, and he must act savagely now to preserve himself and his liberty in it.



Commando-Captain Jake Karmikel parted the green dust drapes. The heavy curtains did their work well, and already, a thick layer of fine gray sand had accumulated behind them although he had occupied the room for less than a week. The spacers using this hotel were of a kind who resented any intrusion into their quarters, even that of cleaning services, so provision had to be made to keep the fine sand from invading the chamber itself while it was occupied. The usual chill wind was blowing, and he wondered absently why the damp of it did not do a better job of keeping the grit down.

The captain's attention switched suddenly away from his surroundings as the one for whom he had been watching turned the corner onto the street.

He studied his commander closely, frowning slightly. The indefinable steeling that always came on her at times of crisis in a mission was with her now. He hoped it was no sign that complications had arisen to trouble their current assignment. Everything had gone smoothly thus far, and the unit fully expected to be off-world again within another week.

Jake wanted to be off Vishnu of Brahmin very badly. This was his last Commando mission. Once the team's reports had been logged, their depositions filed against the developers, and they had undergone the final debriefing, he would be free to pursue at last the lifeway he had

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wanted in his premilitary youth, that of a trader and explorer ranging the wild planets of the rim, perhaps discovering new worlds.

Would Islaen Connor be with him? She had promised to give him her answer when they returned to base, and for this reason, too, he was anxious to get back. He had waited for her so long.

It was an ill sign that she had not accepted him at once, but he was not really overly concerned. She had little choice if she were to have what she herself desired.

The stars had gripped the brown-eyed colonel, too, the stars and the Navy. With him, she could retain her rank and Commando affiliation, work as a troubleshooter while also engaging in full exploration activities. Alone, she could expect no more than sporadic missions such as that on which they were currently engaged, and even those would grow rarer as time went on and Federation law once more tightened its grip on the rim. The Commandos were little different from the Regular service in keeping higher-ranking officers bound to base.

Connor could not achieve her ends by demobilizing as he could. He was a trained pilot with several years' experience behind him, well able to bring a ship through the dangers inherent in interstellar voyaging. Islaen was not, and civilians willing to lead the life she desired, to assume the responsibilities it entailed, and to deal with her as she would have were not readily found. He himself had agreed to maintain a tie with the Commandos only as an inducement to draw and hold her.

His blue eyes lowered to the sill as the woman disappeared into the building. Once, he would have scorned

the thought of marrying a woman who accepted him as a matter of convenience, but time had a way of altering a boy's pride, of teaching compromise where total victory was not possible. Islaen cared deeply for him. He knew her well enough to be certain she would make a success of the relationship, whatever her motives for entering into it. They had already proven they could live and work well together. All that was more than sufficient to induce him to take her on less exalted terms than he might have wished in order to gain her.

## TWO

It took but a few minutes for the Commando-Colonel to reach the third floor level, the topmost in the squat building where their quarters were located.

She knew Jake would be awaiting her report and went directly to his room, knocking on the door and simultaneously giving a signal upon her communicator.

The red-haired man admitted her without delay. His eyes searched her face. "Something's happened?"

"Perhaps." She found herself reluctant to discuss her glimpse of their former enemy. "It'll require some study before I can be sure." *That must suffice for now*, Islaen thought. She had no desire to bring further misery upon Sogan, not unless he had come to merit it.

Karmikel gave an inward sigh of relief. All appeared to be going smoothly. At least, whatever had touched her interest seemed not to be connected with their mis-

sion on Vishnu.

The large brown eyes fixed on him. They were as soft as he had ever seen them. "You deserve better from me than I've given you, Jake."

The man's heart went dead within him, but he responded lightly. "How so, Colonel?"

"You've honored me with the offer of your hand. I should never have held silent so long before saying I can't accept it."

"We're good together, you and I," he said slowly, "and we want the same things more or less. It's not even that you'd lose stature. I'm well enough aware of your abilities that I'd let you retain command, except in running my starship. What can possibly hold you?"

"Comments like that last, for one thing!" The woman got a grip on herself. It was the difficulty of the interview and not his words that nettled her. She knew she needed to maintain control now and not permit this to generate into an argument.

"I love you as a comrade and a friend, Jake. I like you, I respect you and your abilities, but I don't feel toward you as I should, as I must, toward the man I would take for my husband."

"That might come with the living. We of Noreen aren't given to sudden rushes of passion."

"We're trained to know ourselves and to accept what is in us as well." Connor sighed. "I can't use you, Jake. I won't degrade you by taking all you are offering me merely to accomplish my own ends."

Karmikel turned away from her. "Is there any man still living who can touch your heart, meet the standards

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it has set?" he asked after a moment, his voice thick with bitterness.

"Maybe. Maybe not. I only know I grieve because my coldness has brought you pain. It's my own failing and none of yours, and you shouldn't have had to suffer because of it."

He made no answer to that, and she left him after a few seconds of awkward silence.



Islaen went slowly to her own room. Both her spirit and her thoughts were heavy, and she gave the small room only a cursory glance before slipping her jacket from her shoulders and hanging it on the peg by the door.

If most of her mind was fixed upon her own concerns, she had not abandoned the care that had kept her alive so long in her perilous work, and the talent she took care to conceal from all but the members of her own unit did not fail her. She possessed the ability to detect strong emotion radiating from others of her species, and therefore felt her visitor's determination and distaste even as the heavy curtains began to move.

The Noreenan waited until she heard their rustle and the soft step of a booted foot before speaking.

"Varn Tarl Sogan does not crawl to the assault from out of the shadows," she said without attempting to face the intruder.

Her voice was calm, as if she had expected him. In a sense, she had. Connor knew she had betrayed herself

during their brief encounter, and had read his fear when he had spotted her reaction to him. The former admiral had always been a man of action. That he would act to defend himself now was hardly cause for surprise.

“Turn,” a cold, well-remembered voice commanded. “Move slowly.”

The woman obeyed. She stood very still with her hands near her sides, slightly away from her body.

He held her eyes. They met his quite steadily. “You do recognize me, then. I was right about that. You are a Thornen?”

“No, although my likeness to her people was in a great part responsible for my coming to know you there. It was necessary that we should all be able to blend in well with the populace.”

Sogan started visibly at that. “A Commando?” he asked in amazement. He knew fully half the personnel serving in the Federation Navy and a quarter of the Commandos were female, but he found it difficult to imagine this slender woman as one of the tough guerrilla fighters with whom his forces had contended.

“Commando-Colonel Islaen Connor. I led the penetration team on Thorne of Brandine for the better part of four years.”

“And the Resistance with it?”

“Aye.”

For the first time, her attention went visibly to the blaster in his hand. It was set to kill. “Have I firmed your resolve to use that?”

“You fought well for your cause. I should not have spared you then, but I bore and bear no hatred against

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you.” The weapon did not waver. “I have less liking now for murder than I did when I came here,” he told her gravely. “If I were to let you live, what would be your course of action?”

“None with respect to you most probably. You’re free to make your life where you will in the Federation.”

The Arcturian laughed coldly. “You seem to forget—”

“I forget nothing! Your name’s not on the list of those forbidden to enter this ultrasystem. It certainly doesn’t stand amongst those monsters who would be incarcerated or executed if they were found within our borders. As for your own people, I should hardly be inclined to inform them that they failed to butcher you.”

“I have found no great welcome from a number of your Federation’s citizens.”

“There are always the bitter, the intolerant,” she admitted. “The War caused too much suffering for it to be otherwise. I wouldn’t broadcast your race or the part you played in its cause, and advise you not to do so. But beyond that, you have nothing to fear from us as long as you keep reasonably within our laws.” The Noreenan studied him speculatively. “You wouldn’t have been eager to draw the interest of any authority down on yourself. I think I’m not far wrong in believing you’ve been very circumspect these last few years, Admiral.”

“I no longer bear that rank.”

“No. I’m sorry for my stupidity in laying it on you.” Her eyes looked into the black past. “That was one of the greatest triumphs of injustice in all the War and all its aftermath.”

Sogan stared at her. The ice in her tone was that of interstellar space to one suddenly bereft of ship and suit, implacable and all the more terrible for its utter lack of passion.

Slowly, the former Arcturian officer lowered his blaster. "I choose to believe what you have said."

Islaen drew a deep breath and released it again. "Praise the Spirit of Space for that. I had no desire to kill you." She moved her right hand slightly to reveal a glimmer of metal at the wrist.

Varn nodded almost imperceptibly, as if to himself. "A knife?"

"Spring sheathed. You saw work done by its like on Thorne."

"All too often." He was silent only a moment. "It appears I was the one under threat, not you."

The woman shook her head grimly. "No. You would have died, aye, but I should have perished as well. There was little hope I could have avoided your bolt. I was determined to wait until you were actually firing before I struck."

He inclined his head toward her in the manner of a lord of his race before one royally bred. "You have my gratitude, Col. Connor. You were a worthy foe in war and are even more worthy in yourself."

Connor smiled a little bleakly. "What of you, Sogan? Will my name and rank become known here?"

"No!" The reply came swiftly and emphatically. His dark eyes swept instinctively to the screened window. "Varn't Sogan has no comrade on Vishnu who would be betrayed by my silence."

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He found her gaze fixed intently upon him when he looked at her once more.

The man frowned. "Do you doubt me?"

"No." She hesitated, then spoke swiftly. "I don't know what your connection is with these people, but even if you hold an extended charter with them, I'd advise you to conclude your part in it as quickly as possible. When those in charge here finally bolt, as they're likely to do very shortly, you could be swept up in the turmoil that will inevitably result. Whether the Patrol comes early or not, there will be severe trouble on Vishnu. I don't want to see you trapped in it."

"I shall not be. I only flew in a single cargo, and have been paid for that. Had nothing happened, I should have left in a couple of days, sooner if my ship could be re-supplied before that. Now, I shall heed your advice and lift as soon as I can ready her for space." A shadow passed over his features. "There can be little rest and less peace for me here now that I know another on Vishnu of Brahmin is aware of the place I once held." He paused in thought for a moment. "I wish you well, Col. Connor."

"And I you, Varn Tarl Sogan."

The Arcturian gave her formal salute and stepped behind the curtain from which he had emerged and through the open window it concealed.



Islaen Connor slowly walked to her bed and sat down. She was shaking, not visibly, but within herself.

She willed herself to put a stop to that. The past had hardly returned, but if it had, more was to be expected of her than this.

She forced herself to review dispassionately the two ultrasystems whose fates had been so tragically intertwined, as if she were scanning the highlights of a history nano\*. She hoped the cold, hard facts would make Sogan's betrayal and breaking seem necessary, for the man certainly had not merited his fate.

Both ultrasystems had developed simultaneously, ever growing in knowledge and power, expanding from star system to star system, colonizing wherever they found planets to sustain them. Their methods of accomplishing that spread were very different, the philosophies guiding them as distant as the space separating their mother planets.

The peoples of the Federation, both the seed of Terra and those they found among the stars, had been cursed so long by the need to battle would-be conquerors and those who played the tyrant that they had developed a deep love of personal freedom and, at long last, the wisdom to see the strength inherent in diversity. Terrans and their offshoots, exo-Terran humans, mutants of both sources, and races rising from entirely separate roots all found places and welcome in the Senate and the system it governed.

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\* Nano-Reader/Nanos: A biotechnical data storage and display device utilizing nanoparticle cybernetic management of microbiotic medium. Removable microbiotic medium wafers are commonly known as "nanos."

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Planets joining with them did so voluntarily. Those unwilling to do so were left to themselves. In all cases, surplanetary affairs were handled by local rulers, ultra-system personnel intervening only when off-worlders or interstellar law was involved. The system was not perfect, but those few attempting to move against any planet, Federation member or nonmember, were quickly crushed and severely punished.

The Empire had followed a drastically different course. The people of what was to become its mother world were warlike to a degree never found even on prespace Terra. Eventually one group succeeded in dominating the rest. Having subjugated their homeworld, they might have fallen to the more subtle force of luxury, but fate was kind to them. Science progressed more rapidly among them than had been the case on most Federation planets, and by the time their mother planet had been broken to their will and rule, the challenges of space and the stars were opening before them.

Connor shook her head, no longer able to completely hold onto her assumed detachment. So many facts streamed through her mind, and to turn real thought upon them was to expose an infinity of horror.

The Arcturians were valiant, disciplined, and utterly dedicated to their cause, but they carried their old ways with them to the stars—including hatred for intelligence cased in any form not closely resembling their own. Ever victorious, they carved out a vast empire at the heavy expense of those they found on the planets they claimed. They ruled sternly, though, by their own lights, justly. All power lay with the fighters, the members of the

mighty hereditary warrior caste, and all others existed only to do them service.

The two ultrasystems had come into contact, as was inevitable with such vital cultures ranging and spreading throughout a single galaxy. Their relationship had been uncomfortable from the beginning. Philosophies so violently opposed could not but clash, but both strove to avoid open conflict, knowing any war between them would have to be long and come at an awesome cost.

The leaders' efforts were in vain. Federation people could not watch other populations exterminated or reduced to servitude. Whatever their governments might desire, some groups moved to save threatened neighboring planets. Finally, one such rescue led to the destruction of an Arcturian battleship.

It all happened years before her birth, but it began the War, the conflict which had clouded her youth, the conflict which had touched even peaceful Noreen and had turned farmers—and one farmer's daughter—into soldiers.

Both ultrasystems had their militants, those who had clamored for battle, for the destruction of their opponents in the place of seemingly endless and useless talk. That faction was strong in the Empire and held their ruler's heart if not, at first, his will. They had used the news of the attack on, and the annihilation of, their vessel very effectively, and soon, they had gained their aim. The Federation and the Arcturian Empire became belligerents in the direst struggle ever to rend the galaxy that had nurtured them both.

Islaen did not try to suppress the shudder that

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coursed through her. The millions left dead, the countless billions of lives shattered and disrupted, that was beyond any one person's comprehension, but the dying and the suffering she had witnessed were more than sufficient to permit her to appreciate the nightmare of the whole.

The colonel compelled herself to continue with her self-imposed review.

While both ultrasystems had been serious in their efforts to avoid war, neither had been so naive as not to prepare to meet it. Each had believed itself ready, well-able for offense and defense, but the Empire had proven far more capable when the time of testing arrived. Arcurian armadas swept through Sector after Sector as if unopposed, seizing those planets they desired either for their strategic value or for the resources they possessed. It had taken bitter years of struggle, costly years, before the battered Federation Navy had been able to stem that advance and begin the infinitely slow process of driving the invaders back.

The woman's eyes glowed.

Yes, her system's forces had indeed stemmed the invasion, broken and bleeding though they had been in those dark early hours. But it was at that point, when the first glimmering of hope brushed the embattled Federation, that Tactical Command had devised the plan which was used to such good effect in the surplanetary phase of the War.

The great conflict would be settled in space between the mighty armadas, but if invasion troops could be destroyed on the worlds they had thought to use as bases

or pinned there, if supplies and essential service installations could be wrecked, and if intelligence could be gathered, much help could be given toward inclining the balance in the Federation's favor. To this end, the decision was made to make use of the special skills of the already effective but small force of Commandos on a more massive scale, and to revive throughout the embattled ultrasystem the ancient form of Terran warfare that was their specialty.

The pick of all the Navy, the soldiers accepted for this service were trained to operate in small units either to conduct laser-quick, devastating raids and then flee back into space, or to penetrate a fallen planet and there establish themselves to harass the invaders either independently or in conjunction with existing surplanetary Resistance forces. Their success had been phenomenal, for their form of fighting was utterly alien and unsettling to the invaders, and they functioned under such conditions and in such constant peril that they became the most famous and feared combat organization in either Navy.

The guerrillas usually found on-world help. Federation peoples and those of their sister planets who had remained independent of the ultrasystem were alike both in their love of their home worlds and in their pride in the lives they were winning for themselves. They were not the stuff of which docile servants are made, and when their planets' official defenses crumbled, they quickly united in underground organizations to continue the battle against their foes.

Many were remarkably successful, and with Com-

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mando aid became even more so. Invasion fleets were actually driven off a very few worlds, and on a great many were reduced to near impotence, at least with respect to the help they were able to divert to their increasingly more heavily pressed comrades in space.

A grim shadow passed through Islaen's spirit.

Some planets had paid a terrible price for that success. Few Arcturians had much respect for the civilians they were finding so inexplicably difficult to dominate, and invasion commanders often dealt harshly with restive populations. A handful, despairing of ever gaining complete control over their charges, had burned off rebellious worlds. That had not happened often, for it gave the victory, albeit a most dark one, to the Federation. The Empire did not invade planets for which it had no immediate need, and the cinder left behind after burning was of no more use to them than to the life it had once supported.

The Commando-Colonel's head raised.

Not all Arcturian leaders had been of that ilk, and not all fighters against them had been forced into such ultimate sacrifice. Thorne of Brandine had been among the more fortunate of the Empire's victims. Though part of the Federation, her prespace populace had requested noninterference so that their culture would be able to develop naturally, but they had permitted the establishment of a small spaceport. They were humane enough and were willing to bend so far to accommodate emergencies arising in their well-traveled but planet-poor Sector. Thus, they had been aware of the War from its outset and had heard something of the fate of worlds

and peoples swallowed by the Empire's forces.

Thornens lived in strongly built towns populated by kinship groups. They neither liked nor completely trusted anyone outside of their own clans and those with which they intermarried, but they were a race of traders and merchants and appreciated the need for cooperation and interaction when circumstances demanded. Intrigue, in a commercial sense, was also as much bred into them as was the need to breathe oxygen. Thus, the War had scarcely begun before they had started organizing themselves under the leadership of their Doge and merchant princes against the eventuality of an invasion. They had gone so far as to import weapons to equip themselves to meet foes from the stars. When the Arcturians finally did come, easily blasting away the spaceport's few heroic defenders, a full-blown, fairly well-armed Resistance was ready to oppose them.

So good was that movement and so successful that her unit had been forced to prove itself several times over before being permitted to join forces with it when they had secretly planeted a couple of years after the occupation had commenced.

The Thornens had no cause to regret that union, Islaen thought. They had worked well together, and there had been no negative vote when she had been named commander over the whole war effort scarcely six months after Commandos and the local Resistance had entered into partnership.

By rights, they should have driven the Arcturians clean off-world. They would have done so had they been pitted against any other officer, but Varn Tarl Sogan was

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not a man to be forced from his post.

Adm. Sogan was one of the most brilliant commanders the Empire had possessed throughout the long conflict. He was a War Prince of a family directly connected with the Emperor's own. He was not an officer to whom occupation duty would normally have been assigned, but Thorne of Brandine had initially been an important target. Hers was a key Sector, and she was the only inhabitable planet in that part of it. Control of her, of the base she would provide, was essential for any Arcturian fleet hoping to operate there for any prolonged period of time.

Sogan had been a deadly foe. He was smart, determined, and he did not share the inability of so many of his brother officers to think unconventionally, as a partisan, when the occasion demanded. It was all the Commando-led Resistance could do to keep his forces occupied and protecting their precious supplies, as opposed to taking part in the increasingly more bitter struggle in the starlanes—even to the limited extent his own orders permitted. However, they could not neutralize the invaders.

The woman shook her head.

Had the War not suddenly turned so decisively against the Arcturians, keeping reinforcements and materiel from reaching him with any regularity, her Thornens might have failed altogether. Sogan was that good.

The War Prince had fought with all his people's singleness of purpose and cold calculation. Anyone connected with the opposition could expect little mercy

if taken by his forces. But he had never descended to atrocity, nor had he permitted any excess in those serving under him. Unlike most of his kind, he did not despise his opponents, but rather considered them to be soldiers in fact, whatever their birth. He had almost instantly judged that brutal measures would serve more to stiffen their resolve than weaken it, a conclusion he had welcomed. Butcher work went sharply against both his nature and his sense of honor. Because of this restraint and the unquestioned moral character that inspired it, although the people of Thorne hated him, they respected him as well.

That hatred had vanished in the end. The Empire's last, mighty thrust was broken at Cornith, and with its failure, the Arcturian cause was lost. Three months later, the Emperor had surrendered.

Defeat shattered the mind of Sogan's commander, though no one recognized his madness at the time. He directed his subordinate to move swiftly, before any treacherous order to lay down arms could reach him. Thorne of Brandine was not to be surrendered to serve the victor's cause and fire Federation pride. She was to be burned off.

The Resistance leaders and their Commando comrades, who had full access to the admiral's headquarters, had been stricken numb with horror.

There could be no thwarting that sentence. Help could never reach them in time, and there was nothing they could do in their own cause. The huge, space-moored battleships would carry out the order, and those ships, they could not reach. They would be able to

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avenge themselves on some of the Arcturian personnel while they remained on-world, but Thorne and every living thing upon her was doomed.

They had accepted the inevitable when the impossible had occurred. Varn Tarl Sogan instead incinerated the order he had received, then closed himself in his quarters after informing his aides of the capitulation and stating that he was not to be disturbed for any cause save an imperial communiqué. There, he had waited, alone with his despair, until the official command for a quiet and honorable surrender was delivered to him.

Islaen's heart still trembled at the enormity of the thing he had dared to do, that stark violation of Arcturian law and the warrior code he revered. She and all those standing with her in the cramped spy chamber knew what the decision had cost him, and also knew also the price he would be forced to pay if any of his own should learn of it. They thought they knew.

Her eyes closed.

In due time Sogan had surrendered the planet and his fleet to his Federation counterpart, and the rest, well, that was history, grim, bloody, and, to her mind, utterly evil.

## THREE

Col. Connor said nothing about her meeting with the former admiral when her comrades assembled some hours later to discuss the progress they had made.

There was an air of satisfaction on all of them. The unit was settled comfortably in the commander's room, Islaen and the two men claiming the chairs, Babaye Llyne lounging casually on the bed. A case of navigational charts lay near her hand where she could reach them quickly should anyone enter the room.

Connor had deemed it best to divide her team into two parts during their stay on the planet. She and Jake had assumed the roles of exobiologists who had stumbled upon Vishnu while on a study tour of this section of the rim. Babaye and Tomas Dyn took the part of the crew carrying them, living aboard the *Meteor* as was the

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common practice among spacers even on the most luxurious of the inner-system worlds. Although the four lived and worked as two isolated pairs, they could meet easily for private speech. It was not strange for a crew to come to their passengers' more roomy quarters to discuss scheduling and future course.

In actuality, they did touch upon those topics this time. Their work on Vishnu was nearly complete, and all of them were eager to set the time for their departure. There was some disagreement among them about when that should be. Islaen maintained that they had more than sufficient evidence and wanted to lift immediately, while Llyne, always the most cautious and methodical of the four, pressed her to wait a few days longer.

Sound arguments supported both positions, too many for the Commando-Colonel merely to wield her rank as a means of deciding the matter. All were deeply involved in discussion when a sharp knock fixed their attention on the door.

None of them had been in line with either it or the window. They moved still farther back as their leader signaled Tomas to admit their visitor.

Islaen Connor felt herself tensing. Even before she saw the heavily cloaked figure, she knew who the intruder was.

Varn allowed the cowl to slip back from his face as the door closed behind him.

“Sogan!”

He did not know from which of the two men that hissed whisper had come. The expressions of all three strangers were ludicrous with surprise, or would have

been had their grip on their weapons been less sure and determined.

The auburn-haired woman gave her comrades an amused glance. "You might as well hear what he has to say before you burn him."

The Arcturian's eyes swept the walls in a significant manner before fixing on her. He said nothing.

She smiled in appreciation. "Speak freely. We made sure there would be no eavesdropping before beginning our own discussion. Why have you come to us?"

"To bring you warning. Your mission is known or at least partly guessed, although you are believed to be Patrol Agents, not Navy personnel." His head raised a trifle. "It was not through me that they learned."

"No, that would not be your way," the commander said. "You wouldn't have any reason to come here if it were the case, in any event. The others would take care of us without need of your making contact with us again."

"They will act, Colonel, and soon."

"What do the developers intend to do?" Jake demanded.

"A tramp spacer, and one not even in their service, would hardly be admitted to their councils. I cannot even say whether they share their employees' knowledge, though doubtless they do. The news is all over the spaceport."

"Their wisest course would be to pretend ignorance and just allow the spacers to take care of the matter," Babaye Llyne reasoned slowly. "There are those here well-able for such work."

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The former admiral nodded. "That is what I believe they will do. Some of this rabble can poorly afford to come under serious Patrol scrutiny. They have been talking and want you eliminated quickly. There is no contact to speak of between life in the port and that of the colonists, and so the disappearance of a small, unconnected party like this one could easily be arranged with no one ever becoming the wiser."

Jake's blue eyes narrowed. "All that's true enough, and we're grateful for the warning, but why should you risk yourself by giving it?"

"Perhaps I do not want the debris out there accomplishing what all my command could not. Perhaps I feel more akin to you than to those others. My motives are quite irrelevant. What is important is that you depart from Vishnu at once."

"I'm rather curious to know how we gave ourselves away if not through you," Tomas said coldly.

"One of the crewmen aboard that freighter which planeted yesterday morning recognized your fire-haired comrade, Commando. He said he had seen him on Beta Gary a couple of years ago."

Jake's lips pursed. "Aye, that's more than possible. We pulled a raid on some black marketeers there who had made a grab for a shipment of Navy weapons. It was a quick sweep, and I was the only one to actually planet." His eyes clouded. "I seem to have betrayed us all."

"Not entirely. Only you and Col. Connor are actually suspect, she because no true biologist could be unaware that you are but playing a role after all this

time. The others are seen as no more than common spacers, props for your mask, although they are to be terminated as well as a precaution.”

“Don’t forget yourself. You’re likely to be judged guilty by association for coming to us, whatever reason you give for it.”

“I was not seen.”

The other man raised a brow. “You’ve kept your self-confidence, Admiral.”

Sogan did not bridle at the use of his former title this time. “I have learned to move unobtrusively since we last encountered one another.” He turned to Islaen. “Is this not so, Colonel?”

She laughed softly. “It is. At least, no one appears to have detected your previous visit to me.”

Karmikel’s head snapped up. “What—”

For the first time, the trace of a grin softened the line of Varn’s lips. “I came here this morning to kill her. Obviously, I altered my plans before fulfilling them.”

“Never mind about that,” Islaen broke in hastily. “We all owe you our thanks. May the Spirit of Space go with you.”

“Fortune be with you as well. I fear if she is not, you will never lift from Vishnu of Brahmin, forewarned or not.”



Karmikel checked the hall outside, then carefully resealed the door again before turning to his commander.

He did not attempt to conceal or rein his fury. “Why

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didn't you tell us he'd been here?"

"Because it had no relevance to our mission," she replied calmly.

"No relevance!"

"I did say there was something which would require study, but I realized that would be unnecessary once I had spoken with Sogan."

"His coming to kill you was a great testament to his character," Jake told her sarcastically.

"I failed to screen my recognition of him quickly enough, and he panicked." She shrugged. "It was easy to talk him out of it. There's no evil in him."

Fire suddenly flashed in her dark eyes. "Why do you challenge me? Have I ever misread anyone, ever failed to name a traitor or clear an innocent person of that shadow, ever failed to know our enemies in war or in our more recent work?"

"Easy, Islaen," Babaye drawled. "We'll all die fast enough if we start taking things too much for granted. What about Sogan's part in what's happening here?"

"There's no guilt on him. He claims he's not so much as contracted to the developers, and I tend to believe him. He most assuredly has no part in any of their plots. I should have detected some hint of that either the first time or, even more strongly, now."

"You didn't pick up any of the hostility this morning?" Dyn asked.

The colonel shook her head. "I was uneasy and felt the need to keep my blaster within quick reach of my hand, but that's all." She flushed slightly, feeling her failure. "I was preoccupied, so might have missed some-

thing, but I believe there was little to detect at that point. News such as this spreads fast, and faster still the decision to do something about it. I am certain Varn Tarl Sogan knew nothing of it when I spoke with him earlier.”

“I don’t know,” he replied doubtfully. “That ship he mentioned has been on Vishnu since yesterday morning.”

“A fact that makes me think the developers do know and have permitted the news to leak into the ranks so that events might be started on their rather predictable course.”

“It wouldn’t be easy to prove that,” Tomas stated.

“Do you imagine after all this time that we’re dealing with fools? It could also be that the spacer didn’t see Jake or fully place him until a few hours ago. Memory can tease before fulfilling its purpose.”

“My credits go with your first suggestion,” Babaye told her. “Whatever he says, Adm. Sogan did risk himself in coming to us. It would be a pity if we failed to capitalize on his warning.”

“We’ll do what we can to profit by it,” her commander promised grimly. “The outcome lies with fortune, as it usually does.”

“You and Tomas, return to the *Meteor*. Look a bit disgruntled, as if we vetoed your will. You are not suspected, or were not, and should be allowed to pass untroubled until we’ve been eliminated. Even if that has changed, you might be allowed to get farther if we seem not to be too friendly.”

“Wait one hour, then lift whether we’re there or not.”

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Get off-world at once if you detect any trouble in the port or if preparations seem to be underway to board you. Report to Horus as soon as you've won free, then head for home. Jake and I will go to ground here and wait for the Navy."

...to be continued.

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