

From the mind of

P.M. Griffin

The Immortal
Space Saga Continues



STAR COMMANDOES: PARIAH

By
P. M. GRIFFIN

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Gelinus & Wolf, Inc.
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DEDICATION

To Stan and Willie Shapiro for their
continued interest and support.

ONE

Commando-Captain Varn Tarl Sogan swore and set the nano-reader* he had been using down on the table in front of him rather too sharply, removing the sound attachment from his ear as he did so. He and his comrades were deeply absorbed in the mountain of data on the Pirate Stars which had been supplied to them by the Navy's Chief Admiral prior to the start of their long voyage. They were sitting in the crew's cabin of the Federation Starship *Fairest Maid*.

It was a small chamber, as were all those aboard the little fighter, but comfortable, a necessity since it was where those aboard the battlecraft spent all of their waking hours not devoted to navigating or working with their vessel. A high-backed, padded bench stood against three of the four walls. Cabinets set into its base contained the data nanos and other materials used by the crew to pass the time on the long voyages between the stars. At the blind end of the room, a table sat between the benches. Two doors led from

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

the other end, one to the core ladder, the second to the tiny, well-appointed galley.

The woman sitting to Sogan's right looked up from her own studies at the sound of his outburst. Commando-Colonel Islaen Connor asked in amusement, "Problems, Admiral?"

This man who was both her husband and second-in-command of her unit did not always bear frustration, nor what he regarded as failure, well. She had spoken aloud since their companions were present, even though she and the Arcturian shared the ability to communicate through thought, to link mind with mind. It was a fact both took care to conceal, with the exception of the other members of their tightly knit unit—that ability, and their other, differing abilities and talents.

Islaen studied this former enemy, whom she had come to love, even as she had battled his forces as head of Thorne's Resistance, and whom she had once believed dead—convinced he had been executed by his own people for giving life to the world he had invaded at the War's end.

Varn Tarl Sogan was tall by the Federation's broad standards, and slight of build. At the moment, he was still too thin, although she had succeeded in putting a lot of that lost weight back on him during this extended voyage. Sogan had been hard hit on several of their assignments, and one mission had followed the other too quickly to allow him to regain the pounds he had dropped, even though he was otherwise fully recovered.

Physically recovered. He, like all of them, was exhausted in mind, spirit, and body after almost a dozen viciously difficult missions they had completed in the past

few years. The unit was currently en route to Hedon of Aphrodite to begin a long medical furlough to restore them to combat fitness.

The former Admiral carried himself like the soldier he was, with the balance and lightness of movement of one who had spent most of his life in space. The air of command rested on him like a cloak, as well it should. He, a War Prince of the Arcturian Empire, had been bred to lead a fleet in time of war and to rule star systems in peace.

His hair and eyes were the same color, dark brown, a trait found only in the highest ranking officers of the Arcturian warrior caste, and only among those whose families were closely linked with that of the Emperor himself. He had the olive skin of his people and their well-formed, rather harsh features—features that could mean his death should they be recognized for what they were, given the hatreds engendered in the recent War.

The Commando-Colonel sighed in her mind. On several occasions since they had been together, and countless times before that, his life had been threatened when suspicion of his race had been aroused in the wrong place. Even on this supposed voyage of healing, they had encountered the same trouble on every one of the five planets on which they had set down since leaving Thorne of Brandine.

The Arcturian smiled at her, embarrassed to have given way to that rather childish fit of temper, particularly in front of his comrades and his consort, or wife, as was more frequently said in this ultrasystem.

Islaen Connor was an extraordinarily lovely woman, he thought, as he had on many occasions before this. She was tall, her slender body lithe, carrying the grace of one well

familiar with space. Her features were delicately chiseled, her brown eyes large and thickly lashed. Her rich auburn hair was tightly confined in a braid, the style common to most women who ranged the starlanes. Her complexion was exquisitely fair, the mark of all those born of Noreen of Tara.

She was clad in typical spacer's garb, as was Sogan: tunic, close-fitting pants, with high boots capable of giving good support and purchase either on the deck of a starship or in a surplanetary wilderness. A heavy, multipouched utility belt was clasped around her narrow waist, its holster never empty, even here on their own ship deep in space.

"I do intend to master this infernal Pirate Star language," Varn emphatically declared with considerable disgust.

Sogan had a facility for languages, and had readily acquired not only Federation Basic, but also the native tongues of both Thorne and Islaen's Noreen. This was the first time he had experienced real difficulty. The gutturals were no problem to him—the speech of his own people was full of them—but he could not bring himself to string together correctly the assorted hisses, whistles, clicks, squeaks, and chirps of what he considered an accursed excuse for a language, much less in what was to him the completely unnatural rhythm in which they were to be uttered. He felt as if he were attempting to communicate with the denizens of an interstellar zoo.

"You'll master nothing if you start smashing our nano-readers to smithereens," observed Commando-Captain Jake Karmikel.

A Noreenan like Islaen, Jake was a big man, more than a head taller than Sogan and considerably broader of shoulder,

although he was by no means muscle-bound. He was handsome by Terran and his own race's standards. His eyes were a clear, bright blue, and his hair a fiery true red.

"Why not master a few of their cuss words?" he suggested with a smile. "Get those right, and the rest will probably come easily."

"I was using them just now."

"Oh. I thought you were just sputtering..."

The redhead yelped as a small fist drove into his arm. "Bethe! I was only..."

"No, you were tormenting him. The Admiral's having trouble enough with this, and he happens to be doing a lot better with it than any of the rest of us."

Commando-Sergeant Bethe Danlo was Jake's wife and copilot on his *Jovian Moon* as well as the unit's demolitions expert. She was a small woman with the attractive features of a Terran cast that proclaimed the origins of the spacer clan into which she had been born. There was the steadiness of one willing and well able to bear responsibility in her slate blue eyes. Her hair, braided as was Connor's, was blond.

Pirate Stars sound bad! Varn tired! Snack now?

Varn Tarl Sogan laughed as he ran his finger over the head of the minute creature looking sympathetically and hopefully up at him from her perch on the table in front of him.

Bandit, a native of Jade of Kuan Yin, was decidedly the oddest member of his unit. The little feathered mammal looked to be nothing more than an exceptionally delightful mascot, barely seven ounces in weight and brown in color, apart from the black stripe circling her head and crossing the

equally dark, merry eyes like the mask of a pre-space Terran thief. Those eyes were set forward in her face, affording excellent binocular vision. Her bright yellow bill was supple, giving her round face a wide range of expression. Her legs and feet were also a vivid yellow, and the prehensile toes functioned like human fingers.

She was appealing, aye, but she was also a great deal more. The gurry was as intelligent as humans defined the term, and she could communicate in thought with those with whom she was bonded, as well as understand verbal speech in any language comprehended by them. Beyond that, she could broadcast an enormous volume of goodwill, influencing anyone not totally depraved or gripped by some overpowering, usually violent emotion, so that they would respond favorably to her and to her companions—all facts Islaen’s unit guarded as closely as they did their commanders’ equally strange abilities.

As for her love and her courage, those had been proven time and again since she had bonded with Islaen Connor and, through her, with Sogan on her homeworld.

The Commando-Colonel smiled softly as she watched Varn and Bandit. Varn never refused the little gurry his affection nor tried to dissociate himself from her, even when he became aware of what an odd and rather ridiculous companion she was for a War Prince of the Arcturian Empire. He loved her far too much to deny her.

“An accurate assessment, and an excellent idea,” Jake agreed after Sogan translated Bandit’s comments for his and Bethé’s benefit. “Since you’re on galley duty today, Captain...” The Noreenan knew the other man was not particularly fond of that aspect of small-ship life.

“All I want is coffee and a sugar triangle for my considerate little friend, here. However, I shall accommodate any of you others. What would you like?”

“I think we’ll take pity on you and just go for some jakek. You did provide us all with an excellent dinner not long ago.”

“Thank you, Karmikel. I appreciate that thoughtfulness.”

The Noreenan cleared his throat. “What would really benefit you, Admiral, would be a couple of stiff opaline doubles followed by a nap.”

High-ranking Arcturians never drank anything but fine wine, and that in utter moderation. To Varn Tarl Sogan, most of the Federation’s other favorite potions might as well be strong poison for all their appeal.

Jake’s eyes twinkled as he said, “In fact, you should polish off a flask and go for a long sleep.”

The War Prince glared at him. “That would be inappropriate behavior for an officer, embarrassing in the extreme, without purpose, and I would awaken ill from it. I cannot comprehend why anyone...”

Jake shook his head. “You’re missing the whole point. Getting there is usually pleasant. At the very least, it relaxes the nerves. You would enjoy several hours of total oblivion, and when you woke up, you’d be too busy concentrating on your immediate symptoms to worry about any other troubles, past, present, or future. Besides, inappropriate behavior is the only possible response to some situations. It can be absolutely soul satisfying under certain circumstances.”

Sogan shook his head. “Everyone in your Federation is

stark mad. I shall stick to coffee.”

The other shuddered. “And you call opaline poison?”

“Your commanding officer will appreciate it if you two don’t start what you euphemistically term a discussion,” Islaen Connor informed them. “Varn, seriously, I would like some peace. Why not put on that early Nineteenth Century Terran symphony you picked up on Horus? It’s extremely beautiful.”

“Follow it up with one of what your own kind call orchestrations,” suggested Jake. “You Arcturians really do have some pretty good music.”

“We have excellent music,” the War Prince bristled.

“I know, Friend,” the other man said quickly. Sogan was tired, and he did not want to savage any nerves. “You’ve proven to us how fine it is. I meant that request.”

“Sorry, Jake. Perhaps I do need a break.”

“So do all of us,” Islaen told him. “Choose something quiet to go with the Terran selection. I don’t really want thunder and lightning right now.”

He smiled. “A gentle zephyr then,” he promised.

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Varn Tarl Sogan lay down on the bed in his minute cabin. It was a full berth rather than the more common excruciatingly narrow bunk, the single comfort he had always insisted upon even in the days of his poverty. However, it scarcely left room for him to walk between its outer edge and the half-width dresser and desk on the opposite wall.

His eyes closed.

He supposed he was driving himself too hard with the

Pirate Star material, but he was the only one who had read all of it as yet. He had gone through it from every possible angle, and it had left him with a grim chill.

The former Admiral had been tempted to discuss his findings with the others, but he wanted to wait until they had done their own reading and had come to their own conclusions. He had no facts, just thoughts, deductions, and feelings. He could not even approach his unit's commander with so little, much less Gray Jack Dundee.

Varn sighed and drew his spider silk blanket over himself. Some sound sleep and a new day might bring much-needed fresh insights to his mind—that and some additional flexibility to his tongue.

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The War Prince came fully awake in an instant. Spacers, particularly those who flew little splinters like the *Fairest Maid*, knew their ships as if they were extensions of their own bodies.

Something was wrong.

Sogan pulled on his clothes. He could detect nothing amiss...

There!

He felt it, a very slight tremor that should not have occurred. It came again in the next instant, more pronounced and lasting a full second.

“Karmikel! To the bridge! Now!” he called into the communicator that was never absent from his left wrist.

The small, nearly indestructible devices had served Commando units well during the latter years of the War,

allowing their members to converse with one another over surprisingly long distances, as well as serving as homing instruments in a time of need. Many an injured guerrilla had been rescued from otherwise certain death as a result. Even as he spoke, he was racing up the core ladder, the usual form of access between the decks of smaller starships.

His comrades joined him on the bridge almost as soon as he reached it. By then it was obvious that the *Maid* was in trouble. The tremors were strong and constant, and the deck beneath their feet began to pitch vigorously.

Varn's eyes went to the instrument panel. The symptoms had already told him in which system the problem lay. He had to know exactly where it was occurring and how severe it was.

"The stabilizer controls," he declared. "Jake, you stay here with me. Bethe, get down to the stabilizers themselves and start checking them out. If they can run, put them on manual before we're all shaken to jelly. Islaen, ready the flier for space. Get a space protection suit and oxygen on yourself and bring a set to each of us. I doubt we shall have to evacuate fast, but it is best to be prepared if we do."

Islaen Connor was the least knowledgeable of all of them when it came to dealing with the inner workings of a starship, although she could and did assist in time of need. Right now, she would serve them best by assuring their survival if they were forced to abandon the fighter.

Sogan's mouth hardened. A Commando flier was a versatile little craft, capable of both space and atmospheric flight, but it was intended to fly only for short distances and short spans of time, serving to transport a unit undetected from the battlecraft on which they had traveled to the poten-

tially hostile surface of a target planet. It was never meant to take the place of a true lifecraft.

The little vehicle was the best help he could provide for his comrades, Varn thought bitterly. A two-man fighter was too small to carry a more appropriate lifecraft to see the crew to safety in case of disaster—a proud command indeed for a War Prince to hold. On the other hand, right now, a poor command was far preferable to finding himself suddenly bereft of any ship at all. Even as he had issued his orders, Sogan had been removing the instrument casings while Karmikel had automatically fetched the tool kits and was opening them.

“Spirit of Space!” the Arcturian muttered. “Look at this mess! Everything is blown in here!”

Jake nodded grimly. “We’ve got a job ahead of us. Okay, you take the right. I’ll work from here.”

Sogan had already begun the delicate task of drawing out the damaged material without doing harm to anything still functioning in its midst or surrounding it. He was infinitely grateful to have Jake Karmikel working beside him. The Noreenan was one of the best small-ship mechanics he had ever encountered, maybe the best, and Jake knew the *Fairest Maid* almost as well as did her own master. Together, they had a fair chance, or at least *some* chance, of preventing a potentially fatal disaster.

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The two men worked nearly in silence for four hours while their comrades took turns manually operating and adjusting the delicate stabilizers, while also performing a

variety of tests as directed, until they finally began to restore the controls to a semblance of order.

At last, Varn snapped the casings back into place. He sank onto the contoured surface of his flight chair and closed his eyes. He did not even want to think about what was inside there. Between them, he and Jake had jury-rigged a stabilization system to replace the pure chaos of what had remained of their old one—a jumble of overrides and crossovers, the sight of which would have sent any member of their maintenance staffs on either Thorne or Horus into a coronary unit. Hopefully, it would hold together until they could get someplace where they could make proper repairs.

Jake had dropped into the copilot's seat. "Never let it be said that the life of a space hound is boring. It also carries the potential of being decidedly short." He offered a weary smile. "Sogan, I would not have wanted to try that with any other man in this entire ultrasystem, or in yours, either."

"I was about to say the same thing. Thank you, Karmikel."

"We'll have to give her a full overhaul when we get to Hedon. There isn't a proper Naval base anywhere closer."

Varn, Jake save Maid! Islaen, Bethe, too!

Bandit had obeyed the combat discipline that forbade the three telepaths from communicating mentally during any crisis lest a stray thought or feeling distract one of them at the wrong moment with disastrous or fatal result. Now, she flew in great excitement from one man to the other.

The Colonel and Sergeant arrived in the next moment. Neither of them appeared very lively, merely greatly relieved.

“Aye, Small One,” the War Prince agreed, speaking aloud to Bandit, as he and Islaen made a practice of doing when they were alone or only with Jake and Bethe. “It took all of us to save her.”

“What now, Varn?” asked Connor. In space, the former Arcturian Admiral was the best of all of them, and he held unquestioned command and right of decision.

“We head for the nearest planet with any kind of real port facilities. I do not want to try to make it to Hedon the way we are at the moment. As it is, we dare travel only at half speed, which will keep us en route another full week, and if our patchwork gives way during that time, we are done.”

The Commando-Colonel went to the navputer and programmed their coordinates. She requested the nearest potential planeting site.

“Elaine of Avalon!” Islaen exclaimed a few moments later. “She’s only a day’s journey off, even with the *Maid* flying at half speed.” Her pleasure was obvious.

Tomas Dyn, a member of Islaen’s War-time unit, was a native of Elaine and lived on-world. They had planned to stop there after their time on Hedon was over to allow her and Jake to have a proper visit with him. Now, they would have that opportunity several weeks ahead of schedule.

“Well and good, Colonel,” Sogan told her. “I shall contact Adm. Dundee to inform him of our change in ETA and the reason for it. Then you can tell your friend to expect to see us in the next two or three days.”

TWO

“Elaine the fair, Elaine the lovable...” Islaen Connor quoted as she watched the planet enlarging in the near-space viewer.

Elaine of Avalon was the third of six worlds from her sunstar. She was beautiful, as seen from space, slightly more green than blue and well marbled with clouds. She had two moons, not visible at the moment, small twins perpetually swinging about one another and together providing sufficient pull to raise up a tidal force similar to Terra’s oceans’.

“She’s very pretty, according to Tomas,” Karmikel agreed. “A bit spare in terms of dry land, though.”

The only habitable area existed on a range of islands, none of them enormous, running from 41° north to 41° south and crossing the world’s equator. They would be setting down on the second of these in terms of size and the sixth in population. An island provided little hope for escape in the event of major disaster; thus, the surplanetary authorities had judged it best not to locate the spaceport on the same

island as bore their capital, nor among their chief population centers.

It was not a busy port, with only sporadic visits by civilian starcraft and regular but infrequent calls by the Stellar Patrol. The bulk of its traffic came from Navy vessels, which often stopped there on their way to and from the big base on Hedon. It provided a welcome occasion for liberty for their crews on the planet's many attractive beaches and an opportunity to pick up fresh supplies. Many of the craft were very large, docking in Elaine's near-space and ferrying their officers and crew on- and off-world by means of shuttles. Enough of them came to the port that the military contributed heavily to Elaine's general economy.

None of that concerned Varn Tarl Sogan very much at the moment. What did interest him was the fact that the pretty water world's lack of regular interstellar intercourse meant that he would find very limited resources to assist him in fixing his damaged fighter. Dundee had assured him that he would probably be able to acquire any needed replacement parts in the port's supply depot since it serviced the Navy on occasion, as well as receive the odd emergency such as themselves. Nevertheless, even though its proprietors made sure to stock all the basic necessities, Varn knew that any repairs would have to be done by Karmikel or himself. Only for the scrubbing of her tubes and skin, which he wanted done before their arrival on Hedon, would he trust the on-world maintenance people. It was just grunt work that he preferred not to have to tackle himself. He had done more than enough of such labor during those first three years he spent trying to survive on the Federation's rim.

The former Admiral called in the requisite warning that

he was planeting with a damaged starship, then waited until he was told that emergency preparations were in place before requesting and receiving permission to set down. When that transmission came, he ordered his comrades to secure themselves for what might prove to be a rough planeting.

Sogan felt a little unsteadiness in the *Maid* as she began her descent. He emptied himself of outside feelings and considerations, trying to make himself one with the fighter, to function and think as if she were part of him. Thankfully, the little ship came in straight and true, exhibiting no wobble and no hesitation. She set down precisely in her assigned location at the edge of the large planeting field, as far as possible from any buildings which might have been destroyed had she crashed outright.

After the War Prince secured her, he called the port authorities on the surplanetary transceiver and informed them that the emergency vehicles gathered around the *Fairest Maid* would not be required.

Connor held the copilot's seat beside him. Her mind touched his. *Beautifully done, Varn. No one can manage a ship like you.*

Thank you, my Islaen. He smiled. *I do prefer less eventful planetings.*

They joined their comrades in the crew's cabin.

"What now?" asked Karmikel. "It's rather late to go to work on the *Maid*."

"I'd say we should pick up a rover, drop off Varn's requisition at the supply depot, and just go on down to the beach. According to the information Tomas provided us, there's a nice little one only a few minutes drive from here."

“Good suggestion,” Sogan agreed.

He would work if he had to do it, but he was so tired at the moment that his mind felt as if it were stuffed with insulation foam. He preferred to be a great deal fresher and rested before tackling the controls of his fighter.

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It was past quitting time for the spaceport maintenance staff and cargo handlers, but the crews had been held on duty in case the *Fairest Maid* crashed and a cleanup was required. Now, the on-worlders watched curiously while the hatch opened and the boarding ramp descended.

The newcomers found themselves looking down on some three dozen people gathered to meet them, all but six of them male, and all having what they would learn was the typical Elainen appearance. Although well-muscled, most were rather too heavy in the body. Their faces bore regular, but not unpleasant features. The eyes were an amazing amber color, their hair black. Their skin was a deep honey shade.

The Colonel automatically monitored their mental transmissions. Although she could not read thoughts save for Varn’s and Bandit’s, she could detect the emotions of other members of her species, an ability that had bought life for herself and her comrades on many an occasion both during the War and since. At first, there was only a casual interest... but then she felt it—the familiar rush of surprise quickly followed by anger and, in several cases, real hate.

“Brace yourselves,” the woman muttered to her companions.

“By all the Federation’s hells!” exclaimed a tall fellow with a long nose and a large slit of a mouth. “That’s a bloody, murdering Redjacket!”

“Perfect score,” hissed Jake Karmikel. “Six planetings, and trouble on all of them. This is beginning to lose it’s novelty.”

“All right, Jake,” Islaen told him quietly.

Her eyes fixed coldly on the speaker. “We are all Federation Commandos.”

“You’re really scraping bottom, then, if you’ve got to pull in the Empire’s garbage to fill your ranks,” an individual standing beside the first speaker growled.

It was difficult, but Bethe Danlo controlled her temper. “When you’ve won your eighth heroism star, maybe you can think of criticizing Capt. Sogan, but I think I’m safe in believing that your service records fall rather short of that. *If* you served at all.”

“You are off duty, I think,” the Colonel said. “If you have a question about our presence on Elaine or our loyalty, I suggest you take the matter up with your surplanetary officials and have them contact Adm. Dundee. He will be pleased to vouch for us. He might also have something to say to those same officials about your insulting Navy personnel.”

For a few seconds, it looked as if the crowd would challenge her, but then the Elainens dispersed, muttering and glaring darkly at the off-worlders.

“I’m sorry, Varn,” his consort said softly when they were alone once more.

“As Karmikel says, it is a perfect score. Why should Elaine of Avalon be different from anywhere else that we

have visited recently?”

Sogan managed to keep the weariness that had descended on him out of his voice. He had thrown a tight shield over his inner thoughts at the first warning of confrontation, and so screened them from his consort. There was no point in disturbing her with his discontent over a situation he had encountered all too often before, one which he would just have to accept as inevitable.

“We should pick up a rover and turn in your supply requisition. Do you still want to have a look at that beach afterwards?” Islaen asked.

“Aye,” he sighed. “Hold up for a few minutes.”

The War Prince went back inside the *Maid*. Minutes later, a glory of light leaped up in a wide circle around the starship.

Sogan returned to his comrades. “I am ready now.”

Connor eyed the deadly energy picket. It was strong enough to withstand an attack by a well-equipped Navy assault unit. “People will think you’re paranoid, Admiral,” she remarked dryly.

“I am paranoid,” he told her with perfect frankness. “Your lot gave me such good training on Thorne.”

She glared at him. “You’d make a fine rogue, Varn Tarl Sogan.”

The others laughed, then they walked across the big field to collect one of the familiar surplanetary transports. Rovers were a feature of spaceports throughout the ultrasystem. They held six average-sized passengers, the driver included, and had space for a small amount of cargo. They were available for hire by off-world visitors at a reasonable cost for the day or for the week.

Islaen engaged one for a week, knowing the members of her party would occasionally want to go off in different directions. They drove quickly to the single supply depot to drop off their list before it closed for the evening. It was too late for any part of their order to be filled right then, but the clerk promised to have the whole lot ready for pickup by midmorning the following day. With their business done, the Commandos drove back across the planeting field and onto the road leading to the island's edge.

Almost immediately, they found themselves traveling between banks of lush vegetation, tall brush and shrubs chiefly with occasional stands of tall trees, nearly all the pale green color that was the characteristic shade of Elainen plant growth. The softly tinted flowers, present in great variety and profusion, filled the air with their rich perfume, particularly the spectacular seven-inch paradise flowers. In less than ten minutes, the rover came to a stop on the paved strip set beneath a plantation of trees that screened the vehicles parked there from Avalon's fierce glare. Before them lay the island's end and the start of the huge Elainen ocean.

They looked out upon a small bay embraced by long, low arms of land. Golden-white sand ran down from the edge of the trees to meet the soft ripples of the exquisite turquoise water. According to the information Dyn had sent, this particular cove was somewhat unique in that it was very deep on its right side, sufficient to allow large ships, all sail-powered, to anchor there. A long pier, T-crossed at its outer end, extended far into the water to accommodate them.

The newcomers had the place to themselves. Sogan considered going for a short swim, but the breeze which kept the temperature comfortable during most of the day

was becoming somewhat too sharp now that Avalon was drifting toward the horizon. Weariness, mixed with no small measure of discouragement, was making him more conscious than he might otherwise be of its bite, so he merely looked about for a comfortable spot to sit and admire the pleasant view. There were plenty of sites from which to choose. A tall stand of pod trees, whose huge fruits were just beginning to form, stood nearby, casting a still-welcome carpet of shade.

“How about planeting here for a while?” he suggested.

“Looks good to me,” Jake agreed. He sat down and stretched out full length. “This is grand!”

Islaen and Bethe settled down as well. The Colonel ran her fingers through the sand. It was so fine that it felt silken to the touch. “Tomas is right. Elaine is a nice world, or she is if she’s all like this.”

The Arcturian rested his head on his knees. His eyes were on the water. Oceans always drew him. He loved the power and restless motion of them, and this one was showing a peace that he found both beautiful and soothing. The salt-tinged air was like fine wine compared to the processed mixture they breathed in space.

Varn allowed his thoughts to wander back to the time when he commanded the invaders on Thorne of Brandine. Suddenly, he frowned as a question rose up in his mind. “Elaine’s people look nothing like Thorne’s,” he remarked to Islaen. “How did Dyn function there for four or more years without our detecting him? Whatever our other deficiencies in dealing with your plaguey Resistance, we were not stone blind.”

Islaen smiled. “You’ve seen healthy, if tubby, Elainens

who spend all their nonworking lives on the water, in the water, on the beach, or otherwise outside under Avalon's light. Their base complexion is actually a yellowish ivory. It's not the Thornen ideal, but, then, a lot of Thorne's offspring don't come up to that, either. We just kept Tomas smeared with silicates and out of sight as much as possible. Covered up in on-world garb, he passed just fine. Except for the time or two when you folks gave us a scare."

"The many times you gave us a scare," corrected Karmikel. "Actually, you were nearly always scaring us in one way or another."

Connor smiled, but then she sighed. "I'm glad all that's behind us."

"As am I," her husband averred. He only wished it could be over for everyone.

Her fingers brushed the back of his hand, and he smiled. He linked his mind with hers to share the peace of the moment with her. It was good to be together like this, quiet, in a beautiful situation, in company with the best friends anyone could have...

A twittering in the fronds high above caused him to look up. The day birds were in their last flurry of feeding activity before settling down for the night. He could see them flitting about, small, delicately colored creatures with bright voices and quick movements.

He reached out his mind to them. His Colonel could both read and interpret human feeling and emotion. He could not receive any of that save from her and Bandit, but he did have the ability to contact a great many nonhuman creatures and interact with and influence them with varying degrees of success.

The response was immediate and friendly. To his surprise, even without his calling them, several fluttered down to examine the off-worlders. They had no fear of his species. Elainens did not harm their wildlife, and the only danger these little creatures faced from them was that of being overfed and spoiled by offerings presented to them from the perpetual stream of picnickers utilizing this beach and the many others like it.

There were several species, all of them quite small. Their colors were very pretty: soft blues and greens predominated, but he saw several little pink songsters and one who was a beautiful rose. There were also three individuals who were covered in scales rather than feathers, but these were even more lovely, for they shimmered in a rainbow of shades as the light reflected off of them.

Birds pretty! Bandit declared. It was not often that she had the opportunity to study wildlife that was little larger than herself, and she seized the opportunity now.

“They are indeed, Small One,” Sogan agreed. “I think we have other visitors, too.”

The man searched lower down, on or just above ground level. More touches, different in nature, answered his. A little green snake streaked out onto the sand to look at him. Four pearl gray-and-salmon lizards followed.

His comrades watched, transfixed, hardly daring to breathe lest they disrupt the spell their companion was weaving. They had seen the War Prince do this before, but the magic of it never failed to astonish and delight all of them.

Karmikel shifted slightly to better see one of the lizards.

“Freeze, Jake!” Varn whispered. “You’ll hurt him.”

The redhead obeyed. “What’s there?”

In answer, Sogan put his hand on the ground near the other’s elbow. When he lifted it again, there was a minute animal resting upon it. The little creature was a member of the widespread frog clan. He was pale green save for a tangerine-colored triangle on his head and two bright, black eyes. In size, he would not have spanned the Arcturian’s thumb nail.

“He’s so perfect,” Jake marveled. “Look at those hands!” The fingers crowning them were no larger than hairs. “Even Bandit looks huge next to him!”

Varn gently touched the creature with the tip of his finger, then set him down well in the vegetation so he was in no danger from them. As he did so, their other visitors departed as well.

“Sogan,” breathed Karmikel as he watched the last of the birds ascend to the trees above them, “I’ll say what I’ve told you before, that I would cheerfully give the best ten years of my life to be able to do that.”

The War Prince settled back, resting against the trunk behind him. He was happy, and for once, completely at peace with himself. This talent of his had alarmed him when it had first awakened under the pressures of their fight to survive on Vishnu of Brahmin. He had soon come to appreciate it and then to enjoy it both for the pleasure and richness of experience it afforded him and for the pleasure it allowed him to bring to his comrades. It was one thing he could do for them that was absolutely unique, one thing that had absolutely nothing to do with war or even with practical purpose—simply a sharing of life and trust, a gift and a joy he was proud to be able to offer.

THREE

The War Prince smiled as he finished off his breakfast coffee. There was plenty of talk going on around him. Tomas Dyn was to call for the Commandos at 10:00 to take them off to his home and place of business, which had Islaen and Jake full of anticipation. It had been more than two years now since they had last seen this man who had been their comrade and companion for better than a decade. Already, they were recalling and repeating some of their old adventures, that and wondering how time and civilian life had treated him. Both of them were speculating if they would find him as well-padded as so many of his fellow citizens.

Sogan could certainly understand their excitement. For a moment, his eyes shadowed, and he carefully raised shields over his inner thoughts. He would give a great deal to have a week, to have even a few hours, with Loron Zlin Trassik, to be able to talk about all those years they had shared together, everything that had happened since their

first, seemingly disastrous meeting. If his former Great Sergeant would so much as deign to speak to him now...

The Arcturian quickly put his thoughts and feelings in order. This was his comrades' holiday, Islaen's and Jake's. He would be a scant man indeed if he permitted some ridiculous longing of his own to put any blight on it for them.

Varn knew he would have to figure out a way to make himself scarce in a courteous manner, probably using the work on the *Maid* as an excuse. The others must have time in plenty in which to talk and reminisce, and they must feel no constraints on themselves, as might well prove the case if he were present. A great many of their most stirring tales would have to center around their efforts to forcibly evict him and his fleet from Thorne of Brandine.

The former Admiral stroked Bandit thoughtfully. All the rest, even Bethe, were looking forward to this meeting. He hoped everything would go well, but he felt a certain uneasiness about it, unsure of his own reception. He wanted very much to get on well with this old comrade of his friends, but he was somewhat doubtful that this would prove to be the case.

He had seen Tomas Dyn only twice, once when he had carried a warning of their imminent danger to the Commando unit on Vishnu, and again when Connor and Karmikel had returned to Horus with both him and their prisoners in tow. Tomas had offered thanks for the services the War Prince had given the unit, but he had demobilized and left the planet immediately afterwards, providing his testimony by deposition. The other team member, a woman, had remained until after the trial and had served as Islaen's personal witness, or maid-of-honor as it was called,

at their wedding, even as Jake had stood up for him, before she had taken her leave of Navy life and returned to her homeworld and family.

Had there been some earned hostility in the man towards him, or had it merely been an eagerness to finally be away from the work of war and about his own business that had caused the Elainen to depart so abruptly? If it was hostility, had it faded as the Arcturian continued to render service to the Federation and its people, or did it continue? Should that last prove the case, it could ruin everything. No, Sogan determined within himself, that he would not allow. His friends would have their time together, and he would become no cloud to darken their pleasure in it.

•

Promptly at 10:00, Tomas Dyn requested and received permission to board the *Fairest Maid*. Islaen smiled to herself, trying to imagine his reaction to the combat-strength energy picket arrayed outside, but she quickly forgot about it as her former comrade appeared in the crew's cabin door.

Dyn was as he had always been, save that his skin was now the healthy, sun-given honey color of his fellows, and he wore the soft-tinted natural-fabric shirt and light, loose-fitting pants favored by them. He was still slender and as fit-looking as any spacer, and he sported a familiar bright smile on his handsome face. He spotted her in the same instant and hurried forward to enfold her in his arms. He could not quite equal Jake's famous—or infamous—bear hug, but he came close in his pleasure at seeing her again.

Dyn and Karmikel pumped one another's hands and

pounded each other's shoulders until it appeared to the on-lookers that they must be doing serious damage.

Finally, the redhead introduced a smiling Bethe Danlo.

The Elainen shook her hand warmly. "Welcome to Elaine, Sergeant. I must say, that for the first and probably only time in his life, Karmikel displayed not only superb taste, but also excellent common sense when he married you."

"Thank you, Mr. Dyn," she replied, laughing.

"Tomas," he insisted. "Who or what is this?" he asked, looking at the Jadite, who had reclaimed her perch on Connor's shoulder once the Colonel had received her guest's enthusiastic greeting.

"Bandit, our mascot," Islaen explained. "She's a gurry from Jade of Kuan Yin."

"She's cute as a baby starfish. May I pet her?"

"Of course."

Dyn used his fingers to stroke the little mammal's head and back and was rewarded by a chorus of whistles and rumbling purrs that set him smiling broadly.

The pleasure and good humor left his expression when he turned to the former Admiral.

He nodded curtly. "Sogan."

Varn drew himself erect and inwardly sighed. This reaction was hardly a surprise, but his disappointment was keener than he had expected. He had sincerely wanted the goodwill of this man who had served so long with his friends. That had been an unrealistic hope, he supposed. It had taken even Jake Karmikel some time to get used to the idea of having their old enemy around and part of their company. Fortunately, there had been the press of some

very difficult missions to speed the process along.

“Welcome to the *Fairest Maid*, Dyn,” he said with formal courtesy.

The other responded only by inclining his head in acknowledgment.

The War Prince could see his comrades begin to stiffen. “Right now, the *Maid* is an ailing ship. I must ask to be excused from your company until I have her set to rights once more.”

“Wait a moment, Sogan,” the on-worlder said. “You’re a Commando and a member of my friends’ unit. I’d die myself to protect you, and I’d die before I’d betray you, but there are a few home truths you’d better understand if you’re to remain any length of time on Elaine of Avalon.

“It’s quite apparent what you are, and on this planet, Arcturians are viewed as bloody-handed butchers. Period. We have good reason for that. In the final decade of the War, Elaine outfitted and completely manned a fleet, all but a few of the highest-ranking officers, which was no small feat for a low-population planet like this one...”

“You what?” the Arcturian demanded. “How could such stupidity—”

“It was our right and our privilege,” Tomas cut him off, “you arrogant Redjacket son—”

“Enough!” Islaen snapped, her thoughts reaching out and touching her husband’s. *Aye, it was stupid, but it was and remains their right.* She turned to Dyn. “He doesn’t understand, Tomas. He meant no insult.”

“No, Colonel,” Varn interjected. “He is correct. I was discourteous, though it was a lack of understanding rather than arrogance or contempt that caused me to speak as I did.

I apologize for that, Dyn.”

The Elainen gripped his temper. “You weren’t raised under Terra’s code. You can’t be blamed for not comprehending what moves us. I’m sorry as well. I spoke that slur out of habit.”

“Go on with your story,” Varn prompted. “We have had difficulty here already. We might as well know how much more we can expect.”

Tomas nodded and continued, “Ours wasn’t a large fleet, nothing like most of the huge armadas out there, but we had a five-thousand-class flagship, the *Seafoam*, a couple of one-thousands, four five-hundreds, six one-hundreds, and a proportionate number of smaller battlecraft. We learned right away that some of the off-world officers were hopeless, chiefly the Admiral and the Captains of the *Seafoam*, and one of the one-thousands, plus the First Officer of the latter—and nothing we could do could get them shifted. Despite that handicap, everything went pretty well for a few years. We didn’t rack up any spectacular record, but we did all right.

“All that changed when we ran into a major enemy force where no Arcturian presence at all should have existed. It was a true armada, far too powerful for us to tackle, and the only appropriate course for us to have taken was to turn tail and carry a warning to Strategic Command that it was there. Instead, our flaming fool of an Admiral engaged, and then he fought our fleet badly.

“The result was predictable. We lost the *Seafoam*, one of the one-thousands, all but one of the five-hundreds, four of the one-hundreds, and more than three-quarters of the rest. It was only after the flagship went that our man in the

remaining one-thousand was able to take over and get the survivors disengaged and away. No family on all Elaine escaped without losing several members. I was with the Commandos at the time and so was safe out of the fray, but both my brothers perished, as did the young woman I was to have married.” His eyes burned like lava in a volcano’s crater. “I learned later that the enemy flagship leading and fighting that accursed armada was the *Pride of Arcturus* under the command of the War Prince Admiral Varn Tarl Sogan.”

Dyn took hold of himself with difficulty. “As I said, I won’t betray you, but your own person will. My advice to you is to stay behind that energy picket, out of sight, until it’s time for you all to lift, because nothing, including that fine record of yours, will save you from many very unpleasant encounters if you make the mistake of showing anything of yourself. You and your kind killed far too many of us for Elainens to simply forget the War ever happened and welcome anything that looks like a Redjacket with happy smiles and open arms.”

“Thank you for the warning, Dyn,” Sogan replied with all the cold pride of his rank and caste. “I shall take it under consideration. Now, if you will excuse me, I must attend to the repair of my starship.” With that, he turned on his heel and left the cabin.

•

Islaen’s mind reached out and found her consort’s. *Varn, I’m sorry. It’s just his way. Tomas has always been blunt, and sometimes his emotions, and his tongue with them, run*

faster than his thinking. He's sorry already for blasting out like that. I can feel his shame.

The War Prince forced his own temper under control. I did not lie when I said I had my ship to repair. I could not have gone off and left the Maid in this condition in any event. Patch it up with him and have a good time.

I'm going to pitch him off the ship.

No! Dyn is your friend, faults and all. I want you, all of you, to go with him as you had planned and enjoy yourselves. I mean that, Islaen. I do have the right to ask, I think, since I was the one he insulted.

She sighed. Very well, Varn. I'll have a go at it, but I won't pretend his behavior was acceptable in any sense.

I have every confidence in your diplomatic abilities, Col. Connor.

•

Jake Karmikel faced the former Commando with barely controlled fury. "Varn Tarl Sogan is the finest man I have ever known and the best friend I have ever had. If you ever, ever, say or do anything like that to him again, I shall break every bone in that worthless body of yours!" With that he whirled about, stalked out of the crew's cabin, and started up the core ladder after his comrade.

The demolitions expert did not turn her head to watch him go. Her eyes were fixed on their suddenly unwelcome guest. "Don't worry, Dyn. He won't do it. I'll have your throat ripped out before he ever has a chance to get started."

"All right, Bethe," the Commando-Colonel admonished her. She, too, fixed her eyes on the Elainen. "Tomas, I have

known you to engage in some pretty unacceptable behavior, but this unquestionably tops the list. This fighter happens to be Varn Tarl Sogan's ship. He is a citizen of the Federation and a Commando officer. His record proves his dedication to the ultrasystem and its people. He is second-in-command in my unit. If none of that is sufficient to move you to show him at least basic courtesy, the fact that he is my husband should have done so."

The man reddened. "I... I'm sorry, Islaen. I truly am. I did mean the warning, but I guess my feelings got away from me. I hadn't intended to insult him like that. I hadn't imagined he meant anything much to any of you," he added in genuine and complete puzzlement.

"What!"

"Enough, Bethe." Islaen turned back to their guest, "You aren't making things better, Tomas. Please explain that remark before I order you off this ship."

"Well, I'd thought he was just assigned to your unit because he's such a good Commando and that the rest of you had to accept the fact and make the best of it."

"I married the man," she reminded him coldly.

"Sure, but you've always wanted to take in every stray and hurt thing you came across. I knew what his kind had done to him..."

Danlo stared at him. "I'm real glad Jake isn't here at the moment. You actually thought Islaen Connor would marry someone out of pity?"

He nodded glumly. "I couldn't imagine how she could bring herself to do so otherwise." He looked at the Colonel. "Please, Islaen. I know I made a galactic hash out of this, but I really did—*do*—want to see you all, to have time with

you. Will you please give me another chance? You always did before, and I never let you down when anything important was going on. Being with you and Jake, and Bethe, too, after all this time is important to me.”

The Noreenan sighed. “We’ll see what Jake has to say when he comes down, *if* he does. He may decide to stay here and help Varn. I certainly won’t try to dissuade him if he does.”

•

The Arcturian sat on the foot of his flight chair. He had picked up his tool kit, but just set it down behind him. He looked bleakly at the instrument panel.

“Sogan, can I come up?”

His head turned slightly. “Aye, Jake. If you want.”

Karmikel sat beside his friend. “Sorry, Sogan. Dyn can be a hard-finned son. That mouth of his sometimes flames without ever contacting his navputer at all.”

“I have just been through that with Islaen,” he said dully. “I do not envy the two of you spending all those years in his charming company.”

“He was real good in action, and our Colonel kept a tight rein on him at other times. He knew she wouldn’t put up with any of his nonsense. Islaen’s an excellent CO, and she’s a tough one when she has to be.”

The War Prince smiled faintly. “I shall give you no arguments on that, Capt. Karmikel.” The dark eyes fell. “I am sorry I blurted out that remark about the composition of the Elainen fleet. It was a callous thing to say.”

“The timing was bad, but you were right. Filling a large

ship, much less a fleet, all from one place is surely courting disaster.”

“Your Navy allows it?”

“Aye. It’s a very old tradition, Varn. It goes all the way back to prespace Terra, to premech Terra. You’ve done enough reading to know something about it. Kinfolk and neighbors standing shoulder to shoulder against the common foe.”

“Aye, but there was usually no other option back then, and some, at least, could be expected to live through even the worst disasters.” His voice was bleak. “No one survives when a battlecraft loses a duel and blows in space. There is just one great ball of incandescently glowing dust, and everything is gone, ship, contents... and crew.”

Jake nodded.

Sogan looked up. “I remember that engagement. It was a massacre, not a battle. The individual ships fought well, bravely, but they were so poorly deployed and managed that they did not stand a chance. They should not have been sent against us at all. There were so few of them.” He shook his head in dismay. “I kept waiting for them to break off and run for it. It was my business to fight them. I had no choice if my own craft were not to die, but I would have let them flee, as I did with the survivors in the end, even the few remaining big ships. I would not have dared do anything else.”

“Why?” Karmikel asked.

Varn explained, “I was afraid they had been sent as a sacrifice to lure me into some trap. They had been handled that badly. There was no concealing my presence in the Sector at that point anyway, whether I let them go or not. I

had seen some of the splinters take off at the start and knew they would carry word of my coming.” He glanced up. “If that was done against orders, I hope the perpetrators got a commendation. Dundee came charging after me and handed me quite a hammering, though I did give him as good as I got, and a bit better.”

“I don’t see how you or your lot can be blamed. It was your business to fight. Our own Admiral killed that fleet, not you.”

“It is not so difficult to understand. The Elainens are still hurting. It is easier to fault Arcturians than themselves.”

Karmikel looked at him strangely. “I can’t believe you’re just taking this.”

“I did not take it so well below. Had I remained longer, I would have flamed, and there would have been a proper miniature war down there. As for the rest...” He just shrugged.

“It’s the rest that I’m questioning. I know *you* wouldn’t slaughter our friend, much as he deserved it.”

“I understand what these people are feeling, in some measure, at least,” he explained slowly. “I watched my father’s flagship lose a duel with Ram Sithe’s. I saw he was in trouble and tried to get to him. I commanded a one-thousand at the time and could not have withstood Sithe’s five-thousand for long, but I could have shielded the High Admiral long enough for him to get his screens back in order or to withdraw and then pulled out myself. That was my intention.

“The distance was too great, and I had to blast my way past two five-hundreds to reach him. Just as I was coming

into position, our flagship blew.” He fixed his eyes on the instrument panel. “I got a citation and an Admiral’s rank out of it, but I felt very little sense of triumph. I honored and respected my father, but I also loved him, and I knew every officer aboard his flagship, junior as well as senior. Many of them were friends. Arcturians of the warrior caste have been bred to war, and only that for all our long history. Perhaps that makes us more accepting of its consequences. I do not have their hate. Rather, I have grieved many times, and I understand your peoples’ grief.”

“I’m sorry, Varn,” the redhead said softly.

Sogan forced a smile. “It is of no matter now. I indeed have a starship in need of major repairs, and I would still have had to attend to those even had I parted from your former comrade under the best of terms.”

“We’ll soon have them done,” Jake assured him. “Let’s make a start now and finish up when we pick up the replacement parts at the depot.”

“I shall do the fixing. You are going off with the others.”

“When space turns white, I will!”

“I asked Islaen to patch things up with Dyn and to go with him.”

“Fine. She’s more forgiving than I am.”

“He is your friend,” the Arcturian reminded him.

“So are you, and you’re the one he insulted, and the one with all the work to do.”

Varn Tarl Sogan studied him somberly. “Did Tomas Dyn save your life, Karmikel?”

“Aye. Lots of times.”

“Islaen’s?”

“Aye.”

“Then I owe him for that. He preserved the two things I value most in all this universe. Go with him, Jake.”

The Noreenan glared at him. “You do have a way of phrasing things, don’t you?” he muttered. He glanced at the instrument console. “You’re sure...”

“I am sure.” Varn’s smile emerged. “Enjoy yourself, Karmikel. If I cannot manage this, you will be spending tomorrow up here on the bridge with me.”

“If you can’t manage it, I’m a gurry,” Jake retorted. He hesitated once more, feeling guilty about leaving the other under these circumstances. “Hey, don’t completely kill yourself, Admiral,” he said in the end. “We’re leaving the rover. If you finish up early, go for a drive for yourself or for a swim.”

“I might just do that.” Sogan picked up his tool kit. “Get going, Captain. The others are waiting for you.”