

A movie poster for 'Star Commandos 12: War Prince'. The background is a dark space with a bright yellow sun in the upper center. A large, bright yellow starburst effect is on the left. In the foreground, a man's face is shown in profile, looking right. Behind him, a woman with red hair holds a futuristic gun. The text 'From the mind of P.M. Griffin' is at the top right, and 'The Immortal Space Saga Continues' is below it. The title 'STAR COMMANDOS 12 WAR PRINCE' is written in large, blue, stylized letters on the left side.

From the mind of

**P.M. Griffin**

The Immortal  
Space Saga Continues

**STAR  
COMMANDOS  
12  
WAR  
PRINCE**

# STAR COMMANDOS

## 12

# WAR PRINCE

A Novel By

**P. M. GRIFFIN**

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## **DEDICATION**

To Cherry Weiner  
for her unwavering belief in this author  
and author's works, and for all her labors  
on their behalf.

“Truly I think this is the best you’ve ever done!”

**ANDRE NORTON**  
**Letter to P. M. Griffin upon reading**  
**STAR COMMANDOS 12 WAR PRINCE**

# ONE

Federation Commando-Captain Varn Tarl Sogan, War Prince and once an Admiral in the Arcturian Navy, glanced impatiently through the door leading from the *Fairest Maid's* tiny, well-appointed galley into the crew's cabin beyond.

It was small, as were all those aboard the little fighter, but it was comfortable, a necessity since it was the place where those aboard the starship spent most of their nonworking waking hours. A wide, high-backed, padded bench stood against three of the four walls.

Cabinets set into its base contained the nanos\* and other materials used by the crew to pass the time on the sometimes long voyages between the stars. At the blind end of the room, a table was set between the benches. Two doors led from the other side, this one and the exit to the core ladder, the usual form of access between the decks of smaller starships.

The cabin was empty at the moment, and the former Arcturian Admiral scowled. Galley duty was not his favorite chore, a fact well-known by his comrades. The least they could do was show up on time.

*Patience, Admiral. You sent us all packing, literally and figuratively, while you prepared our dinner.*

His mood immediately brightened as Islaen Connor's mind touched his. He and this woman who was both his consort, or wife as they more commonly said in his adopted ultrasystem, and his commanding officer shared the ability to communicate through thought. They could link mind-with-mind, a fact both took care to conceal from all but the other members of their tightly knit unit, that and the other, differing abilities their strange talent gave them.

*I did not intend for all of you to pack yourselves away,* Colonel Connor, he replied severely.

In the next moment, she arrived in person, followed by the other members of their team.

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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."

Islaen was an extraordinarily lovely woman, he thought, as he had on many an occasion before this. She was comfortably tall, her slender body lithe and carried with the grace of one well-familiar with space. Her features were delicately chiseled, her brown eyes large and thickly lashed. Her hair, tightly confined in the braid that was the almost universal style adopted by women who ranged the starlanes, was a rich auburn color, and 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 he: tunic, close-fitting pants, and high boots capable of giving good support and purchase either on the deck of a starship or in a surplanetary wilderness. Around her narrow waist was clasped a heavy, multipouched utility belt, and its holster was not empty even here on their own ship deep in the space between the stars.

Commando-Captain Jake Karmikel immediately slid into his accustomed place at the table. A Noreenan like Islaen, he 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 his own race's and by Terran standards. His eyes were a clear, bright blue and his hair a fiery true red.

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 petite woman with attractive features of a Terran cast that proclaimed the origins of the spacer clan into which she had been born. The slate blue eyes revealed the steadiness of one willing and well-able to bear responsibility. Her hair, braided as was

Connor's, was blond.

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 as did a human's fingers.

She was appealing, aye, but she was also a great deal more. The gurry was 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 to 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 home-world.

Varn smiled as he watched them settle themselves. His universe was very small now. It contained only four stars, these three humans and the gurry.

No, there was one more. Gray Jack Dundee, the Federation's famed Chief Admiral, had made himself a place in that firmament as well. One of the real pleasures of their return to Horus was the prospect of seeing him there. The Terran had told him when they had parted on Hedon that he had to go back out to the rim again to confer with their immediate commander, Admiral Ram Sithe.

Jake gazed pointedly from his empty plate to his fellow Captain. "Well, bring it out, Admiral. What are we having tonight? Sandwiches, leftovers, or precooked frozen?"

"Just rein your curiosity until I serve our dinner, Karmikel."

"I'm starved, not curious." Jake gasped. "What in space! That sure doesn't smell like leftovers!"

The War Prince grinned. He removed a large platter from the range he had just opened and brought it to the table.

"Long crab on the shell with shallow-water tropical vegetables," he announced. "We are having a seaweed salad dressed with sharp oil to accompany it. Unfortunately, we only have plain cake left for dessert, but Bandit can have a honey triangle to go with her portion as a special treat."

*Yes! Honey good! Cake good, too!*

He stroked her gently, and his features softened. "I would not deprive you, Small One."

All three of his human companions were looking from him to the repast he had put before them and back again.

“All right, Sogan,” the redhead said at last. “Confess. You kidnapped a real chef from Hedon and have him or her stowed away in one of the holds.”

Varn brought out the salad and dressing, then their water. On-world, they would have had wine with such a meal, but intoxicants were not normally served aboard starships while they were in space.

He took pity on his friends. “Admiral Dundee showed me a few dishes that are both good and simple to prepare. This is one of them.”

“That computes. It would take the Chief Admiral of the Federation Navy to teach you how to cook a good meal or two,” Jake said.

“I can program a range,” the Arcturian informed the other in an injured tone.

“I can program one, too. This, on the other hand, is cooking. I must admit, however, that I thought it was about the only one of Jack Dundee’s interests which you would never share.”

“Of course, I share it! We make a perfect team. He likes to cook. I like to eat what he cooks.”

Jake Karmikel laughed. “All right, you win this round, Sogan. You two are a team sure as space is black. The old stork doesn’t often make a mistake, but he definitely took a wrong turn somewhere when it came time to drop you off.”

“Stork?”

“A long-legged Terran bird,” Connor explained. “When very young children press their elders about their origins, they’re commonly told that the stork delivered them.”

“Long-legged birds? We drop during a meteor shower.”

“Leave it to your lot to come up with something equally imaginative to meet that particular crisis.” Islaen tasted the crab. “This is delicious, Varn, but why the feast? It is one, you know.”

“It is the last large meal of our furlough. We shall be on Horus and back to the wars tomorrow morning.”

The Arcturian had spoken lightly, but Connor had felt the quickly concealed shadow pass over him. They had enjoyed a spectacular time on Hedon. There had been no trouble whatsoever from the moment they had set down on the pleasure planet, and every one of their ventures had turned out well. Their return visit to Elaine of Avalon and their time at home on Thorne had been equally fine. The one adventure they did have on their homeward voyage had nothing to do with their normal assignments. Life was not likely to be so easy or so pleasant on their base world.

Islaen studied this man who had once been her enemy. She had come to love him even as she had battled his forces when she had led Thorne’s Resistance, and she had mourned him deeply when she had believed him dead—executed by his own people for giving the world he had invaded her life at the War’s end.

Varn Tarl Sogan was moderately tall by the Federation’s broad standards and slight of build. The former Admiral carried himself like the soldier he was, with the balance and lightness of movement of one who had spent a large portion 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 dark brown color, a trait found only in the ranking officers of the Arcturian warrior caste, and among them only in 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 on unnumbered times before that, his life had been threatened when suspicion of his race had been aroused in the wrong place. There was no way for him to shield himself completely from that sort of attention apart from confining himself entirely to his ship, and she knew that despite the near miracle the long furlough had wrought in their bodies and spirits alike, Varn was seriously tired of the challenges he so frequently had to face.

The others were unaware of their Colonel's preoccupation.

Sogan was oblivious to it and to his other comrades. He, too, had sunk into his own thoughts. His expression darkened as they turned from his own potential troubles to those of the ultrasystem he was sworn to serve. His fingers drummed impatiently on the edge of the table.

"Problems, Admiral?" Danlo inquired.

"I am beginning to fear so." He sighed. "It is that Pirate Star technology. It is as advanced as ours, and it is

different enough that it may cause us real difficulties, especially if they strike sooner than we anticipate.”

“You blew their battleship,” Connor reminded him.

Varn Tarl Sogan had fought and won a duel with one of the renegade system’s major battlecraft while in temporary command of Dundee’s *Terra’s Charm*.

“Aye, but it was a damn close issue. Too close. I hope Jack Dundee is not slow in turning that simulator over to us. We need to start running tests and start running them now.”

“He’ll give it to us,” Islaen assured him. “Then you and Jake can lock yourselves away and play to your hearts’ content.”

“We will all be locked away, Colonel,” the Arcturian corrected. “This is not a training exercise. I shall need our full crew in there if I am to fight realistic theoretical space battles. Genuine human opponents and allies are essential to do that effectively.”

“That is for tomorrow,” Karmikel declared. “Right now, I am far more interested in what is sitting here on my plate.” He pretended to contemplate his meal. “This treat is certainly appreciated, but waterfood? You do amaze me, Sogan.”

“You are easily amazed, then,” he retorted. “I have confessed my error in that respect. I discovered during this voyage that I enjoy many varieties of it and can even eat mild fish with some pleasure. It is only strongly flavored ones that I actually detest.”

“Travel is certainly broadening.” The redhead patted his flat stomach. “In my case, it was almost too broadening. A little longer patronizing Hedon’s restaurants, and

Bethe would be restricting my calorie intake for some time to come. You, on the other hand, have not looked this sleek since we first encountered you on Thorne.”

“Aye.” Varn replied, “Then you and your blasted Resistance comrades proceeded to batter all that glowing good health and well-being into oblivion.”

The occupation had been hard on the Arcturian leader, Islaen thought, but it was his own people who had finished him. The Empire’s collapse and surrender had come fairly suddenly in the end, and the shock of it had deranged Sogan’s already overstressed former Arcturian commander, who had ordered Varn to burn off the valiant world he had invaded. Instead, Varn had surrendered Thorne of Brandine in keeping with the announced terms of the treaty between the two ultrasystems.

Anger flared in her closed thoughts. Varn Tarl Sogan had paid an almost inconceivable price for his humanity. He had been court-martialed and cashiered, stripped of the honors his valor had won, of his star systems, of his citizenship. He had been compelled to watch while his children were burned down to ensure that the pollution of his weakness and disobedience would not be perpetuated in the race. His consort and concubines had embraced their daggers, mercifully in private, to escape the shame he had brought on them all. He himself had been flogged through his fleet beginning on his own flagship, and his supposedly dead body had been set adrift in a near-derelict lifecraft to rot in space and not desecrate any Arcturian planet.

Incredibly, he had survived and had awakened to

find himself an unknown in Federation territory. Even more incredibly, he had chosen to continue surviving. Three years of misery and frequent want had followed, then he had come to the assistance of Islaen's unit on Vishnu of Brahmin. His courage then and on Thorne had won him a Federation commission, and the War Prince had begun to live again. Now, even the massive scars inside him were beginning to heal.

Varn felt her withdraw, and his mind touched hers inquisitively. *Islaen?*

The Noreenan quickly brought her thoughts back to the present. *It's nothing, my Beloved. I was just thinking.* She smiled. *But there will be time enough for that when we have to go back to work. For now, thanks to you, we have one more truly grand dinner to enjoy.*

## TWO

Sherwood Bingham hated Arcturians. He had cause in plenty for hating them. His homeworld, Morgana of Camelot, had been the first invaded and had endured almost forty years of occupation before the decades-long War had ended five years ago. For thirteen years of his life he had been under their heel. His father had died fighting them. His mother had died fighting them. So had his adored older sister, both sets of grandparents, all three uncles, two of his aunts, several of his older cousins, aye, and a couple of younger ones as well. Now,

May Smythe, proprietor of *The Lioness*, Horus' most exclusive restaurant, had the gall to inform her staff that they would probably be serving Arcturians in the not-too-distant future, chiefly officers, in company with high-ranking members of the Federation Navy or alone. She had told them that they were to behave courteously and give these 'guests' the full care and efficient service for which the restaurant was famed the planet over.

He spat out a phrase from the gutter of his own planet and continued with more of the same in that language plus the equivalent in Basic and in the accursed tongue of the invaders.

Incredibly powerful fingers tightened on his throat. "Nearly everyone here is older than you, and all of us are entitled to respect, so freeze that mouth of yours until you're ready to bring something fit for civilized ears out of it."

The speaker had the dark, almost patent-slick hair and wedge-shaped head of Sarva's race. His small, hypnotically piercing black eyes were surmounted by heat-sensing pits. There were no visible ears, and a forked air taster darted from between hair-thin lips.

His body was deceptively small and slight, which masked the titanone strength and blinding reaction time for which his kind were known and, in some quarters, feared. Only the hands were out of scale, made huge by the suction pads tipping each finger and the muscle and bone needed to support and work them. The feet were similarly formed under their concealing boots.

"Ease up, Tarkis!" Bingham gasped. "I'm sorry about the rough talk," he apologized once the other re-

leased him. “But I’m not waiting on any Redjacket son of a Schythian ape.”

“You’ll do no more serving than I will, assuming either of us are still here when and if they do show up. There’s no guarantee that they will. We’re low-grade kitchen grunts. If you don’t like what that work entails, or if you object to our customers, you’ll just have to find something else to do. If you can.”

“You’d like doing for Redjackets, I suppose?” he asked sarcastically.

The other shrugged. “A job’s a job, and they’re damn hard to come by. A down-on-his-fins space hound without a current berth can’t afford to be too fussy.” The black eyes bore into the younger man. “Neither can you unless you want to live like an ascetic on a straight diet of Sector University cafeteria food until you get your degree.”

“The War has been over for better than five years,” cut in Susan Harris. *The Lioness’* brilliant Master Chef, like Tarkis, had come in early for the meeting Smythe had called, most fortunately she decided after listening to the young man’s outburst. Their not-particularly-welcome future guests would probably bring them problems enough without having to deal with trouble from their own staff. “Those people have a right to come here, the most of them, and this lot obviously have strong reasons for considering doing so. That pride of theirs would continue to keep them away otherwise, and Federation top brass wouldn’t be playing host to them.”

“Collaborating traitors...”

Harris slammed her hand down on the chopping ta-

ble beside them. “Watch your mouth! Most of us served under one or more of those officers.” She glared at him. “Get yourself out of here and power down for a few hours. You’re on the evening shift where I can keep an eye on you from now on. If you still want your job, come back then. If you don’t show up on time, you’re gone. Now, blast off before I’m tempted to use a meat mallet on that dense head of yours!”

Helmut Tarkis watched him storm through the door. “Think he’ll be back?”

The chef just shrugged. “At this point, I really don’t care.”

•

Jake and Bethé joined their comrades on the bridge of the *Fairest Maid*.

“A smooth planeting as always,” the Noreenan man said. “We didn’t feel a thing. I believe I’ve said before that you’re a pretty acceptable pilot.”

“Thank you, Karmikel. You might actually qualify for that rating yourself.”

Varn activated the viewing screen, and their portion of the great Horusi military planeting field spread out before their eyes. All of the ships around them were small like his *Maid*, two-man and five-man fighters mainly with a smattering of ten-class ships sprinkled here and there among them. The bigger vessels, the fifty-, one hundred-, and five-hundred-class battlecraft, planeted in other areas designed to provide for their specific logistical needs, and none of those were visible

from this place even with magnification.

The major starships, those of one-thousand-class and larger, never came on-world at all but docked in near-space. For security reasons, none of those were berthed within sight of the active approach and departure lanes, but he knew Sithe's *Eastern Star* would be stationed there, and he hoped that Dundee's *Terra's Charm* had arrived by now as well.

"We are officially back," the War Prince said. "What now?"

"Shopping," his fellow Captain with the red hair declared.

Islaen's eyes danced. "Good thought. We learned of a number of establishments of whose existence we had not even been aware before our trip to Hedon," she said enthusiastically, purposely misinterpreting his meaning.

Danlo joined right in. "Probably because we could never afford to patronize them until now."

Jake scowled, "I meant shopping for things like fresh fruit and vegetables," he growled. "Not to mention bread, real eggs, and lots of yorlin chops, roasts, and steaks."

"Plus deep-dish, shepherd-style pies," added Varn. "Dessert ones, too." Horus of Isis was known throughout this part of the rim for her pastries and fruit.

Their female comrades laughed. "Oh, very well," Connor told them. "We'll put off searching for nonedible luxuries until another time."

The Arcturian looked thoughtful. "You and Bethe can replenish our larder. Jake and I should pay a visit to *Treasures of the Mine*. The Hedonite jewelers we con-

sulted recommended it as a major outlet for fancy stones, and I want to see if they will have any interest in our moonshimmers.”

“By all means, Admiral. You may look after Thorne’s financial interests, and ours, of course, if you wish.” She smiled. “You really are very good at it.”

“So are you, Colonel,” he smiled. “I like figuring out what will go well in a particular place. It is fun, actually.” His eyes danced. “As long as you do not try to send me out bargaining.” He was hopeless at that, as all of them well knew.

“That is a danger you need not fear, my Friend.” She glanced at the viewer screen. “In the meantime, we have visitors. Our maintenance staff is heading this way.”

“So soon?” Bethe asked in surprise.

“They probably want to see Bandit,” her husband speculated. The Jadite had made herself the pet of the maintenance crews, military and civilian, much to the unit’s benefit.

•

The Commandos had barely reached the entrance hatch before a service transport bearing seven individuals came to a stop at the foot of the boarding ramp.

Three people clad in the coverall working uniform of Navy mechanics disembarked from the front seat. The foremost, Maintenance Sergeant Max Lampry, was tall and thin with the flat, lipless features and large, oddly round eyes of Lemura’s offspring. The bright sunlight made an iridescent glory of the small scales covering his

head and hands, the only portions of his body open to its rays.

The two individuals with him, Steve Purvis and Doris Giles, were prototypical descendants of Terran stock. The four others scrambling out of the rear decidedly were not. Besides the Avian, a decidedly beautiful woman even in Sogan's eyes, there was a reptilian Sarvan, a Muerten whose face seemed to be comprised of a layer of skin set directly over the skull, though he was otherwise well-fleshed, and a Hermoinite who reminded anyone familiar with Terran fauna of a hedgehog with his spiky brown hair and a long, pointed nose which flowed directly to the mouth. The Commando-Colonel often thought she would love to have seen him as a small child. He would probably have been adorable.

The former Admiral did not bother to ponder the pleasure he felt at the sight of them or the fact that it should have been impossible. His race hated, despised, those peoples who had altered significantly from the basic human prototype to the point that they had exterminated every such population in their own ultra-system. The years of enforced interaction with mutants of all types, the direct observation of their capabilities and courage, compelled him, however unwillingly at the outset, to condemn the contempt in which his kind held them. Despite that intellectual acceptance, he shared in full the Arcturian revulsion for physically divergent races. No amount of willing, not even the knowledge of the anger and disgust it aroused in his consort, could dislodge that completely. It was powerful because it was both instinctive and irrational, and at times he was help-

less before it. Unexpected contact with a very extremely formed stranger could be enough to physically sicken him. On one occasion, it had.

Fortunately for him as a man, close association not only desensitized him to a great degree with individuals he knew, but also permitted him to move from respect for their abilities to personal liking and even, in several instances, to friendship.

That was the way of it here, particularly in the case of the Sergeant. He owed all of them for the care they lavished on the unit's starships, and he owed Max Lampry considerably more. Beyond that, he liked the man.

The seven came to attention and snapped a smart salute. The spacers returned it, and Col. Connor ordered them to stand at ease.

"Good morning, Sergeant, Yeomen. It's good to see you all."

"We wanted to welcome you back, Colonel." Lampry sounded a little disappointed when he observed, "You only brought the *Maid*?"

"Aye. We are working on a project and didn't want to separate for the final leg of our journey." Her eyes shadowed. "Is there some problem?"

"No, Colonel. We just have a few ideas we'd like to go over with Captain Sogan and Captain Karmikel and maybe try them out if they approve."

"We can experiment on the *Fairest Maid* if your suggestions prove practical." the former Admiral promised. "In the meantime, we have been promised full access to a simulator, so we can test them in theory first."

The gurry had listened to all this impatiently. Now,

she cut in with a sharp whistle and was rewarded by the brightening of their visitors' expressions and by Lampry's reaching into the pocket of his tunic.

"We brought some peppermint for Bandit. May we give her a piece?"

"Aye, one piece. She'll be especially pleased. We depleted our own stock of it three weeks ago." Not that their feathered friend had lacked for other treats, of course.

Islaen watched their supposed mascot devour the offering with very gratifying enthusiasm, then she smiled at the ground crew. "We have some things for you. Dress shirts from Hedon. The fabric is wonderful and should be perfect for Horus during the summer. If you don't like them or if we've guessed wrong on the sizes, the shopkeeper said she will be happy to exchange them. Shipping is no problem since we're sending freighters back and forth between there and Thorne like a regular shuttle service. A stop here wouldn't put one of them much out of the way."

The seven were pleased with their gifts and hastened to give their thanks.

Sogan hesitated a moment. "Could I speak with you privately, Max?" he asked the Sergeant.

"Of course, sir."

The two men stepped through the hatch, and Varn held out a small package. "I do not know Lemuran custom with respect to family gifts, but I feel a special interest in your little girl since I was privileged to be of service to her. If it is acceptable, would you give her this from me? I believe it should be suitable," he added. "We

brought similar items for the children of other acquaintances here and on Thorne.”

The odd eyes fixed on him for an instant. The service Sogan had given Stella was the saving of her life at the near sacrifice of his own. Both he and Pete Ospry, who had also witnessed the incident, had recommended the Commando-Captain for a heroism citation. The result was one of the three stars he had received while on Heldon.

He opened the box. It contained a tiny butterfly suspended from a delicate gold chain. It was so perfectly enameled as to appear to be the real creature from which it had been modeled. “This is very beautiful, sir. Stella and her mother will both love it. Thank you.”

“My pleasure, Max.” He glanced upward, as if his eyes could penetrate the skin of the starship and out into near-space. “Has the *Terra’s Charm* arrived yet?”

“Aye, Captain, about a week ago. There are a number of other big ships in port as well. I’m not violating military secrets telling you that since everyone in Horus City knows that they’re here.”

“Excellent.”

He meant that sincerely, but his shoulders squared as he unconsciously took upon himself his portion of the burden his unit had been given to bear.

The Arcturian hoped that he and the Federation Admiral would have some pleasurable time together, but of a certainty, Dundee and his unit would meet and meet frequently to discuss the Pirate Star material they had been assigned to study.

The War Prince sighed in his mind. He had said to

Islaen only the other day that those people were among the most unpleasant he had ever heard described. The Pirate Stars consisted of a loose confederation of twenty-five independent star systems, all populated by individuals of one race, whose sole concept of interstellar interaction and chief means of filling their rulers' coffers was buccaneering, both by planetary raiding and by picking off shipping in space. The decades-long War and difficulties of rebuilding following it had worked to their benefit. The system had become a serious threat to the more lightly populated rim planets of both major ultra-systems and had grown so daring as to have established a base in Federation space near the long-disputed border and to station a major battlecraft there. Four thriving Arcturian colonies had died as a result.

He and his comrades had destroyed that base and he, as temporary commander of the *Terra's Charm*, had blown the battlecraft it had serviced. Despite their initial success, no one had imagined that was the last problem they would have with the renegade system. Dundee had ordered the four of them to become the Federation's experts on the Pirate Stars and had supplied them with all the material Intelligence had gathered to date on them. In reading through some of the supposedly peripheral data, Varn Tarl Sogan had deduced that they were planning war with the Federation. The Chief Admiral had agreed with him. Since then, Sogan had been working with the Security Council, had been named part of it, in order to ready his adoptive ultrasystem to meet that threat. It was essential that the Federation military discover and counter the different technologies that would

be thrown against them when the conflict eventually erupted, as it surely would. In that work, he could not and dared not fail.

## THREE

The unit's first stop was to pick up a rover. The surface transports were a feature of spaceports the ultrasystem over. They held six average-sized passengers, the driver included, and a small amount of cargo and were available for hire by off-world visitors at reasonable cost for the day or for the week. Islaen engaged one for a week with the option of automatically renewing the lease, knowing the members of her party would frequently want to go off in different directions, as was the case today.

After that, they split up with Varn and Jake taking the rover. They would be venturing beyond the port area, and the two artillery-class lasers mounted on the nose of the flier could be disconcerting to civilians.

“Now that we’re alone,” Karmikel said conversationally, “would you mind telling me the real purpose of this jaunt?”

“The moonshimmers...”

“Put it on freeze, Admiral. There’s no need to attend to them the first hour after we planet.”

Varn Tarl Sogan looked uncomfortable. “Thorne’s women wear those ornate matrimonial bracelets.”

Jake nodded, “They’re an exo-Terran race. Most of those who originated on our motherplanet use rings.”

“Islaen’s is very small.”

“A narrow band of beautifully incised platinum follows the Noreenan tradition. It’s what she wanted, just like Bethe preferred a thin band of plain gold.”

“It is the custom for the future husband to purchase the wedding ring,” Varn said tightly. “Islaen had to buy her own.”

“You didn’t know our ways then.”

“I could not have bought it had I known. I was unable to buy her anything.”

“Islaen Connor got precisely what she wanted, namely one specific, living, breathing War Prince.”

“You gave Bethe a betrothal ring.”

“Bethe calls you our expert in needless guilt, and she’s dead right in this case.” Jake sighed. “Admiral, you two weren’t engaged long enough to even have one sized. Your consort-to-be said yes on one happy after-

noon, and you were facing the altar two mornings later. You would've been there even sooner, but it took that long for your Navy commission to come through and to make the arrangements with Father Con."

Sogan's expression was dark. "It was Islaen's day, Jake, and she gave up so many things she should have enjoyed."

"If this was driving you, why in space didn't you buy her a ring while we were on Hedon? Their gem market is the most famous in the ultrasystem."

"Because I was too flaming dense to know that I should!" He reined his temper. "I did not realize it until I read a tape on Federation marriage customs."

Karmikel looked at him. "That's a bit far afield from your normal interests, isn't it?"

"People spend credits at such times. I figured I might discover some good outlets for Thornen products."

"So you're thinking of finding something here?"

Sogan nodded. "For an anniversary present. If you think it would be appropriate."

"Well, my experience isn't exactly universal, but I can't imagine any woman, Islaen Connor included, who would object to a fine gemstone lovingly presented, especially with your talent for picking the best out of any lot." He chuckled. "You were so good at it that Mr. Schwartz would probably have been happy to hire you outright." Jake noted, "Here we are, Admiral. Let's see what we can do about acquiring another beautiful ornament for your even-more-beautiful wife."

"Marketing first, Captain Karmikel, then we buy. Maybe."

•

A refined-looking man was sitting behind the counter on a tall, high-backed stool reading a news-nano. He glanced up at the gentle buzz announcing the opening of the door.

“Good morning, Gentlemen. May I help you?”

“Mr. Cohn?” asked Varn.

“Simeon Cohn,” he affirmed.

“This is Commando-Captain Jake Karmikel. I am Commando-Captain Varnt Sogan,” the Arcturian said, smoothly using the pitiful excuse for an alias circumstance had compelled him to adopt when he had first arrived in the ultrasystem. He had been half-delirious and was heavily sedated when he had roused sufficiently for those who had pulled him out of space to ask his name. Luckily, he had answered in the Basic in which he was addressed. ‘Varnt’ was the name his rescuers had thought he said, and he had not dared try to change it later. He smiled. “However, we are here as representatives of Thorne of Brandine, not the military.”

“Indeed.”

“Mr. Schwartz on Hedon suggested that we come to you. Jacob Schwartz of *Harbringer & Schwartz*.”

“I know Jacob well. How can I be of service?”

“Thorne possesses a gemstone unique to the planet, moonshimmers. Moonshimmers are scarce even there, and production is tightly controlled, but there was no harvesting during the occupation when the existence of the stones was concealed from the invaders, and a small

surplus exists as a result. Thorne wants to move them into the interstellar market, primarily on Hedon but also here on the rim if you are willing to handle them. According to Mr. Schwartz, yours is the only really appropriate establishment in this part of the Sector.”

“We do not deal in semiprecious gems or at all in synthetics, Captain.”

“Moonshimmers are neither. They are a precipitate and are a renewable resource. The Thornens have managed them carefully for centuries.”

“You say they are precious. With what would you compare them in terms of potential value?”

Sogan met his eyes. “River tears.”

Cohn started visibly. Those were among the most beautiful and scarcest gems known in the ultrasystem. They invariably commanded prices at least one hundred times that of diamonds of equal size and quality. “By your own evaluation?”

“By *Harbringer & Schwartz*’. They marketed the test consignment they took from us on that level.”

“With what result, if I may ask?”

“They had sold every one of the hundred stones, and had ordered replacements by the time we lifted three weeks later. Mr. Schwartz has promised to confirm that and give you his professional opinion of them.”

Simeon hesitated. “I shall check with him, of course, but whatever his response, I am likely to disappoint you. Horus doesn’t attract nearly so affluent a clientele as Hedon does and certainly not in such numbers. It would be many years before I could hope to place one-hundred such gems or even half that number.”

The War Prince took a packet from his pocket. "That, we realize, Mr. Cohn. Please accept a dozen stones on consignment. You may return them if you are not convinced of their worth after your conversation with Mr. Schwartz, or if they do not sell, and we will simply ship them to him. *Harbringer & Schwartz* has agreed to take any moonshimmers Thorne of Brandine is willing to supply. That will never be many," he added. "We have no intention of flooding this market or of stripping out our own."

He opened the package and spread its contents for the jeweler's viewing.

Cohn's breath caught. He had handled beautiful gems, boy and man, all his life, but he had never beheld any like these. They were perfectly spherical and perfectly named. Each one had a shimmer, a glow, deep inside itself like moonlight streaming on and through clear water. Every color family was represented: blue, green, purple, yellow, red, plus shades of white, gray, and brown. No two were of exactly the same hue.

"They come from the matrix in this form," Sogan told him, "and require only polishing. Most, as you see, are between one and three carats. The larger two are quite rare."

"I will handle them, Captain, assuming Jacob confirms what you have told me. In truth, I must do so. I am in this business for love as well as income, and I have never had the privilege of working with gems this unusual and beautiful. Doing so will be a very real pleasure."

"Thank you, Mr. Cohn." He removed a folded form

from the document pouch on his belt. "We have our standard contract for this transaction, but if you decide to import more, you will probably want to talk directly with the Doge's chief gem merchant. Her call sequence is included in the contract."

Karmikel thanked the jeweler as well when the document had been signed, then turned to his friend. "Now, for our own business. Mr. Cohn has a large variety of very attractive diamond rings right here in this case, so you should have no problem in picking one."

Varn studied the display. The stones glinted in the carefully arranged light playing upon them.

He glanced up. "I would like to see some fancy diamonds if you have any on hand."

"I do, of course." He looked at the pair. "You were on Hedon recently?"

Jake smiled, "He forgot this particular gift. It's an important one, too. For his wife, not that he didn't take a few of your associate's offerings for her while we were there."

"You are interested only in diamonds?"

"Aye, for this particular circumstance," Varn said. "That is the most appropriate stone."

Simeon took a display tray from his safe. "We sell our fancy stones unset, Captain Sogan, and mount them according to the client's wishes."

The former Admiral smiled. He liked color, particularly fine shades of color, and there was a remarkable array of that on display to entice and satisfy him.

Almost instinctively, he touched a red gem near the center of the tray.

“You have a good eye, sir,” Cohn told him. “That’s the finest red diamond we’ve ever had in this store.” He removed it and held it up to catch the play of the light. Fire all but erupted from it.

Sogan seemed fascinated for a moment, but then he shook his head. “Red is not Islaen’s color.”

Jake Karmikel had observed his reaction. “No,” he said quickly, “but it is yours.” He gave his friend a devilish look that warned the Arcturian to brace himself. “Jewels are customarily worn by men as well as women on Thorne. I think you’d look positively dashing with an ear stud—”

Varn glared at him. “Karmikel, you are taking unfair advantage. We are in polite company, and you know I cannot respond appropriately to that suggestion.”

Simeon’s head lowered to conceal his smile. It was obvious that these two were close friends. “You needn’t wear the diamond, Captain Sogan. It would be exquisite displayed with light shining up through it.”

The War Prince hesitated, and Jake motioned him aside. “You’re entitled, Varn,” he said, seriously this time. “Apart from those two paintings, you didn’t get anything extravagant for yourself on Hedon. For the rest of us, aye, but not for yourself. You can cut loose with the purse strings here without feeling guilty. After all, the rest of us would enjoy looking at that diamond, too.”

Sogan smiled. “All those book and music nanos combined probably qualify as an extravagance.” He shook his head. “I shall cut loose, but for Islaen. Mr. Cohn has another stone there that I am sure she would like, and I am most certain it will not prove to be the

cheapest of the lot.”

He returned to the tray and pointed to a brilliant-cut green. “That one.”

“Your taste is excellent, Captain.”

“I want it in a ring. No other stones. The setting should be simple and allow good access to light, but it must secure the diamond well.”

“I think I have something that will please you. I have some special ones that I use to enhance these fancy stones. Do you have any idea of the size you want?”

Varn produced a piece of string. “This should provide the correct measurement. If we find it requires adjustment, we can bring it in?”

“Naturally.” He measured the string on his sizing rod. “Four. She has a small hand. But this is a standard size, and the diamond is a standard two carat. If you like one of my settings, I’ll ready the ring while you wait.”

It did not take long to make his selection and arrange payment. Half an hour later, the two men left *Treasures of the Mine* with their purchase, very well pleased with it and with their morning’s work.