

A vertical poster for a video game. The background is a dimly lit cave with orange and brown tones. A person is rappelling down a rope in the center. To the left is a large, textured rock formation. To the right, numerous stalactites hang from the ceiling. At the bottom, a person stands on a rock formation. The text is overlaid on the scene.

From the mind of
P. M. Griffin

**MISSION
UNDERGROUND
STAR COMMANDOS 03**

STAR COMMANDOS
03
MISSION UNDERGROUND

STAR COMMANDOS
03
MISSION UNDERGROUND

A Novel By

P. M. GRIFFIN

Original Copyright © 1988 by P. M. Griffin.
Revised Hardcover Edition © 2006 by P. M. Griffin

ISBN: 1-59507-127-X
eBook Edition

Published by
ArcheBooks Publishing
www.archebooks.com

9101 W. Sahara Ave.
Suite 105-112
Las Vegas, NV 89117

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever. For information about this book, please contact ArcheBooks at publisher@ArcheBooks.com.

This book is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents depicted herein are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.



ArcheBooks Publishing

Dedication

To my father, Timothy Griffin,
ever a companion and adviser in adventure.

**OTHER BOOKS BY
P. M. GRIFFIN**

NOVELS

STAR COMMANDOS 01
STAR COMMANDOS 02 COLONY IN PERIL
STAR COMMANDOS 04 DEATH PLANET
STAR COMMANDOS 05 MIND SLAVER
STAR COMMANDOS 06 RETURN TO WAR
STAR COMMANDOS 07 FIRE PLANET
STAR COMMANDOS 08 JUNGLE ASSAULT
STAR COMMANDOS 09 CALL TO ARMS
STAR COMMANDOS 10 WATCHDOGS OF SPACE
STAR COMMANDOS 11 PARIAH
STAR COMMANDOS 12 WAR PRINCE

NOVELS IN ANDRE NORTON'S UNIVERSES

(Used by Permission from Andre Norton)

SEAKEEP (in STORMS OF VICTORY)
SEAKEEP Polish edition
FALCON HOPE (in FLIGHT OF VENGEANCE)
FALCON HOPE Polish edition
REDLINE THE STARS
FIREHAND

STAR COMMANDOS

03

MISSION UNDERGROUND

By

P. M. GRIFFIN

ONE

Federation Navy Admiral Ram Sithe looked up from his desk as Commando-Colonel Islaen Connor came into the office and snapped into a precise salute.

He studied her without making his examination obvious.

The guerilla leader 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. A beautiful woman, he thought, as well as a capable one.

STAR COMMANDOS 03 MISSION UNDERGROUND

Extraordinarily capable. Connor was clad in the high-necked black dress uniform of her branch of service. Very few people in the ultrasystem had ever so much as seen the coveted bright star of a heroism citation, first class. The colonel wore three of them. Even more incredibly, the other member of her two-man unit, Navy Captain Varn Tarl Sogan, or Varnt Sogan to those who did not share the secret of his past, had another three, all six of them earned in the short span of time since the pair had encountered one another so dramatically on Vishnu of Brahmin. For his own part, Sithe would have given his rank and the salary that went with it for the right to bear one like it.

He returned her salute and then waved her into the chair before him. "Sit, Colonel. I have a job for you."

The Noreenan merely nodded slightly as she took her seat. She had guessed as much when she had received this summons. Admiral Sithe would know full well that the latest round of work on the *Fairest Maid* was nearly completed and the starship could be readied for space in short order.

"Aye, sir?"

"It's not really your kind of work, and normally I wouldn't consider sending you at all, but there is some need for speed on us, and your *Maid's* fast."

"So, whatever the problem is, you'd feel better for having a Commando handle it?"

"I would," the admiral replied. "What do you know about Hades of Persephone?"

She thought for a few moments. "Nothing."

"That's hardly surprising. She's never played a very

significant role, just another backwater world, like so many others.

“Her military history has been unfortunate. The Arcurians took her during the second year of the War, but their plans to use her as a jump-off for deeper penetration altered almost as soon as they secured her. The main conflict turned suddenly and had moved out of her part of space entirely within a few months. The invasion fleet garrisoning her never made the sweep for which it was originally intended, nor was it withdrawn, since there was reason to fear the possibility of a Federation counterattack through that region—an assault that never came.”

“So they just stagnated there for all those years?” Islaen asked grimly. She could imagine what nearly four decades of occupation had meant for the local populace.

“Precisely. The fleet involved was a relatively small one, but still, the Empire was rarely guilty of being so wasteful in the deployment of its manpower. It was a surprising lapse, especially in the face of the pressure we were putting on them near the end.

“Anyway, Hades had supported a small Navy base and a major arsenal before the invasion. Fortunately, word of the coming attack did reach the military. It was the first intelligence coup we had, and the only one for some time. The planet could not be defended with the forces at hand, and there was no hope of summoning aid, not with our ships fleeing before the Emperor’s armadas on every side, so the commander chose to evacuate his people to preserve them as a fighting force. He recognized the responsibility the arsenal put on him

STAR COMMANDOS 03 MISSION UNDERGROUND

as well and brought away all the classified materiel and as much of the other major weapons as he could. The remainder—and it was a vast store—was turned over to the planetary leaders for use by the already forming Resistance.

“Each cell, as they called their units, got a share, which was promptly hidden in the caverns honeycombing all Hades’ crust, in locations known only to the members of each individual group. With these stores, they were able to wreak terrible havoc on their invaders.”

The admiral’s normally impassive face tightened visibly. “The Hadesim are a harsh, violent folk capable of conceiving fierce hatreds and strong enough to carry them to their consummation, regardless of the consequences to themselves. They fought constantly and bitterly, and because they went into the War so well-armed against an enemy virtually marooned and forgotten themselves, they succeeded to an astonishing degree. By the War’s end they had destroyed most of the Arcurian ships berthed on-world and had set their badly decimated oppressors completely on the defensive. So far did they gain their ends that it took the arrival of our fleet to enforce the cease-fire. The Hadesim themselves wanted no ending of the hostilities while a single Arcurian soldier remained alive.”

“That kind of hate is usually merited,” the Commando said quietly.

“It was. They had suffered horribly. Hades wasn’t another Thorne. Orlan Fran Uskorn and his son, who assumed command upon his retirement, which was

forced by failing health, were both proper savages. They utterly lacked Varn Tarl Sogan's ability to think unconventionally, like a guerrilla, and they felt nothing but contempt for the menials-turned-warriors who were their opponents. The population had shrunk to less than a fifth of its preinvasion level by the time of the surrender."

The woman's eyes closed. Thorne of Brandine had indeed been fortunate. "It's a wonder one or the other of them didn't order a burn-off," she said.

"They both realized it would be an admission of total defeat, I suppose—the open declaration before the Empire, and the Federation as well, that they were incapable of securing their command. That's the chief official reason, apart from basic humanity, why relatively few commanders issued that order despite heavy Resistance pressure. It's probably the only thing that saved Hades. Both Uskorns were more than capable of slaughtering a planet."

"How does all this involve us now?" Islaen Connor asked.

"Most of the remaining weapons were returned to the Navy at the War's close, all save those in one cache. The location of that one wasn't known, since all who were in the cell controlling it were believed dead, victims of an accidental detonation of their own explosives in the final days of active warfare.

"Two weeks ago, a survivor surfaced and came to Patrol headquarters on Hades. He volunteered to take us to it."

"Why now?"

STAR COMMANDOS 03 MISSION UNDERGROUND

“Because he had just discovered that another comrade also remains alive and may possibly be dealing with pirates.” His eyes locked with hers. “There’s a planet-buster in that cache, Colonel. The Hadesim don’t want to be even indirectly responsible for what it could do if it falls into the hands of that space scum, and neither do we. We have to get it back.”

She nodded, but frowned as well. “Why send me, sir? It seems like straight diplomat’s work.”

“Technically it is, but as I told you, the weapons were stored underground. The rest of them have been returned already, but no one will touch that missile. You see, it can’t come out as it is. It must be dismantled first, and if it goes off in that confined space, it will most assuredly live up to its name as far as Karst, the planet’s capital, is concerned. The city’s sitting smack on top of it.”

She stared at him. “Commandos know a good bit about explosives, sir, but I can’t handle that thing.”

“I don’t expect you to handle it,” the admiral told her impatiently. “Fortune is with us in one respect. The best damn demolitions expert we had in all the Navy at the War’s close is now working aboard a freighter servicing Jade of Kuan Yin. We’ve contacted her, and your friend Jake Karmikel is flying her to Hades as fast as his *Jovian Moon* can bring her. If you lift now, you would both reach there at about the same time.”

“What exactly is to be my role?”

“To officiate, to represent the Federation. It’s because pirates may be involved, and because it will be necessary to function in strange and maybe very rugged

terrain, that I want a Commando in charge.” He frowned. “Unfortunately, there could be difficulties apart from the outside possibility of treachery. The locals bear no love for the Federation military since we gave them no help during their long ordeal.”

Sithe paused and seemed to study her closely for a few moments, until she began to feel uncomfortable under his gaze. “They also hate anything that resembles an Arcturian, to the point that they’ve ordered off-world everyone of their kind significantly taller than the norm for their race and anyone bearing dark hair or eyes, even some of their very young children.”

“The invaders’ get?”

He shook his head. “Those were slain at birth, and their mothers with them if there was so much as the shadow of a suspicion that there might have been any degree of consent.” Sithe sighed. “As I said before, this is a hard people.”

His black eyes caught and held hers once more. “Capt. Sogan will do well to planet with you and lift again without being seen. If he’s had trouble on a cosmopolitan world like Horus, he is certain to find it on that wretched hole.”

“Are you suggesting that I would do well to find some other transport to Hades?” she asked evenly.

“No. You need the *Maid’s* speed, and even if you didn’t, I don’t presume to tell my Commando officers how to run their missions once they have an assignment. I’m just warning you of a potential complication.”

The woman lowered her head but raised it again a moment later. “A warning I appreciate and shall heed,

STAR COMMANDOS 03 MISSION UNDERGROUND

sir. Thank you.” Her eyes narrowed. “Whatever a team’s care, accidents can happen, especially when pirates or the subbiotics who deal with them are involved. What if we wind up disarming that weapon only to have it taken from us?”

Ram Sithe smiled coldly. “You have three weeks. If we hear nothing from you in that time, the Navy goes in. No wolf pack’s picking up a tool with which to terrorize half the Sector. In the meantime, Hades of Persephone is completely blockaded. Nothing but the *Fairest Maid* and the *Jovian Moon* is getting on or off her. If you meet with pirates, it’s because they are already on-world.”

He rose to his feet. “I guess that’s about it, Colonel. How soon do you think you can lift?”

“Probably by this afternoon, sir. Maybe in a couple of hours if Varn has finished checking the *Fairest Maid* out. Once he’s done with that, we need only fuel her up and bring in our supplies.”

“Good enough. Let me hear from you once the planetbuster has been secured.” He sighed. “You *should* be able to get to it and bring it off-world without any trouble. I hope it works out that way.”

TWO

Islaen Connor secured her flier beside the beautifully proportioned needle-nose which was now her home as well as her transport through the far-flung reaches of the mighty Federation ultrasystem. She darted up the boarding ramp and disengaged the seals on the hatch. Only the ship locks were set. That meant Varn was on board. Had he left the *Maid* for any reason, he would have secured the others as well.

The woman's eyes shadowed for a moment. Such preoccupation with security was not the norm among spacers, but then, her husband—or consort, as he commonly said—had reason to be cautious. The memories and hatreds of the recent War were still sharp, and the scars it had left were deep. No Arcturian would dare to

STAR COMMANDOS 03 MISSION UNDERGROUND

move openly on any Federation planet, much less here on the rim where discovery in many areas would mean a quick but brutal death.

Anger flashed through her. That was to her kind's disgrace. The Federation had known many heroes since the exploration of the stars had begun, but few of them had acted more valiantly or more humanely at such cost than Varn Tarl Sogan, and he had done so not once, but several times over.

Islaen compelled herself to relax as she passed through the hatch lest he pick up her mood. She did not want him to realize she worried as much as she did about him.

Once inside, her mind sought his. She and this former enemy whom she had loved, even as she had led the fight against his forces, shared the ability to communicate through thought. They could link mind-with-mind, a fact both took care to conceal from all except Jake Karmikel, that and the other, differing abilities their strange talent gave them. Her former comrade had known about her gifts, of course, having served beside her for so many years, and he had learned about Sogan's on Vishnu.

A moment later, the Commando smiled as her thoughts touched Varn's and she received his greeting. There was no mistaking the pleasure in his welcome, and the happiness in it lightened her own mood.

She was hardly surprised to find that the former admiral was still in the drive room. Their highly capable and creative maintenance crew had just finished installing the latest series of innovations Sogan and they had

devised on *Fairest Maid* that morning, and he would want to study their work, trace and retrace what they had done until it all but became part of his own mind.

That intimacy with his ship was no quirk, no crutch adopted by a lonely and memory-haunted man, but a necessity for anyone who would captain a ship along the starlanes and beyond. Those who failed to achieve it usually did not travel far before dying, and many of them died very cruelly.

Her chin raised. No fear of that with the War Prince. Space was Sogan's element, and few, if any, could equal him there. All too many Federation officers had learned that to their dismay before his fleet had been removed from the kind of combat which had won him his fame and assigned to invade and hold Thorne of Brandine during the final years of the War.

She drew her thoughts back from the events of the past. Now was not the time to be wandering there, not with present and future work to be done.

Varn, she asked, how long before we can lift? We have a mission.

So soon? he responded in mild surprise.

Aye. It's nothing much. I'll tell you about it later, but Admiral Sithe would like us to get a move on.

Give me a couple of hours. We can go sooner, but there are a few of these circuits that I do not entirely trust.

Take all the time you need. We won't accomplish anything if we blow ourselves to space dust. I'll change now, and then go to the crew's cabin. Join me when you get a minute. You can probably use a break, and we can go over our latest job there.

Will do, Colonel.

STAR COMMANDOS 03 MISSION UNDERGROUND

Varn severed the contact and Islaen chuckled. He was probably glad to get back to his precious maze of wires and chips.

She caught hold of the core ladder, which ran the length of the *Maid*, giving access to every part of her, as was usual on most small starships. Scaling it with the ease of long custom, she soon swung herself off on the deck supporting Sogan's quarters and her own.

She entered her cabin, unfastened the snaps closing her high, tight collar, and made a wry face at herself. Varn seemed to find no discomfort in a dress uniform, but then, he had almost literally been bred to wear the things. She had never even thought to adopt one of any sort until the War and the pressure it had put on her family had moved her to enlist. After that, well, guerrillas, by the very nature of their work, more often fought in disguise than in strict military garb.

Islaen pulled off the stark black tunic but paused a moment before reaching for a more comfortable one to replace it. As always when her eyes fell on it, she was held by the utter beauty of the gem gleaming against her white skin.

It was big, slightly better than thirty karats in weight, and of a marvelous clarity and brilliance. In color, it was a vivid blue-green, and it was formed like a drop of water frozen by some incomprehensible magic as it fell. Within this, as its very heart, was another, tiny drop, equally perfect and of a deeper shade of the same fine color.

A river tear. Only three planets in all the ultrasystem were known to have produced them, two old sources

and, now, Jade of Kuan Yin, and her possession of them was to remain a secret. Only her own settlers and a handful of others, all sworn to silence, were aware of the deposits. Some day, they would be the planet's wealth, but for now they needed to be kept hidden until the new colony was well enough established to exploit and guard them. Otherwise, they would be no benefit, but a grave danger.

Her large brown eyes glittered coldly. That had been made all too clear by the betrayal of the settlers by their own Settlement Agent, a betrayal that would have annihilated the colony had she and Sogan not accidentally discovered the plot and thwarted it.

That was the second time they had saved those people, and for that reason—and because of the trust and the real love the Amonites felt for the two off-worlders—the Amonites had given them the jewel, knowing their trust was soundly placed.

Her expression softened. The colonists had learned from their gurrries, those tiny, mind-reading marvels native to Jade, how very deeply the former admiral longed to have one of the stones, and they had so adroitly pressed this one on him that he had not been able to refuse.

Sogan, in turn, had given it to her, as he had been aching to do since he had first seen Jade's treasure. His inability to do so had been both a shame and a torment to him. Realizing that, she had been unable to refuse it, to refuse him.

Islaen pulled on the pale green tunic she had selected and carefully settled the river tear so it rode easily on her

breast. She often wore it openly when they were alone.

A whistling call sounding simultaneously in her ears and in her mind broke into her thoughts. She hastily opened the door and raised her left hand, palm up, fingers slightly curled to receive the tiny winged creature that streaked into the cabin.

The gurry was brown, with a black stripe circling the head and eyes like a mask. Those eyes were black as well, bright and incredibly merry. The bill beneath them was flexible and readily displayed an amazing variety of expressions. It was a cheerful yellow, as were the feet and the supple toes, each crowned with a sharp claw, now properly sheathed. Although feathered and airborne, the newcomer was a mammal, not a member of the vast avian class.

“Hello, Love,” the woman said as her fingers curled around the Jadite.

She and Varn nearly always used verbal speech with the gurry when they were alone, although Bandit could receive their thoughts as readily as she transmitted her own. It was no conscious choice on their part, and Islaen Connor was not even really aware that she had reverted to it as she spoke her greeting. When they were with anyone besides Jake or, now that they had gurries of their own, Jade’s settlers, she automatically used mind touch, for the fact that the little creatures could communicate with humans in this fashion—and influence their feelings—was a greater secret even than the presence of the river tears. It was a precaution needed to protect Jade’s denizens, human and nonhuman alike, from the invasion of scientists and other officials who

would descend on the planet if news of this relationship were ever to reach them, and no one appreciated that fact more than the two off-worlders who had initially become aware of it on the morning when Bandit had adopted Islaen Connor.

That event had marked the beginning of a new and more exciting life plan for the settlers who had come to Jade Kuan Yin thinking only to manage stock, and it had added a great deal of joy and pleasure to her life and to Varn Tarl Sogan's.

She caressed the Jadite even more tenderly. "Well, did you get tired of watching Varn play with his drive systems?"

Bandit not like tubes! Dirty! The gurry's oddly supple bill wrinkled as she broadcast that thought. *Varn forgets Bandit there!*

"What a tragic fate for a gurry!" The Commando chuckled. She stroked the upturned head and neck with her forefinger. "Never mind, Love. I have something here that I think will please you."

An ear-splitting whistle of pure delight answered her as she drew a packet from one of the pouches on her belt and opened it. The gurry liked native Horus sweetnuts almost as much as the considerably more costly Terran chocolate.

The woman gave her a piece. "I've laid in a store of all sorts of good things so you won't feel deprived when we lift again." She laughed, "Go easy, will you? There are limits as to how big a gurry should grow!"

Bandit's careful! she replied after hurriedly pecking up the final crumb.

STAR COMMANDOS 03 MISSION UNDERGROUND

“I wonder.”

Islaen careful! Not give too much! she answered serenely.

The colonel smiled. “That’s pure trickery, my feathered friend. You’re trying to manage me, and as usual, it works, coming from you.” She straightened. “Let’s go. I told Varn that I’d see him in the crew’s cabin. We do have a mission, such as it is, and I don’t want to keep him waiting.”



The cabin designed for use by the *Maid’s* crew and by any rare passengers when no duties occupied them was small, as were all the starship’s compartments, but it was pleasantly and efficiently appointed.

The color scheme was a restful blue and gray, easy on the eyes and the nerves alike. The furniture was simple and multifunctional, all of it securely fastened to prevent damage or injury during an emergency. It followed the usual pattern and consisted chiefly of padded, high-backed benches set along the walls, with a table between them at the blind end where three of the walls met. That could be raised and stowed against the ceiling when not in use, though it customarily remained in its normal place. Two doors led from the cabin, one to the core ladder, the other to the minute galley branching off from it.

Stored in the drawers and cabinets beneath the

benches were the nanos¹ and other materials and equipment that made off-duty hours between planetfalls full and profitable.

The master of the *Fairest Maid* had not yet arrived, and Islaen used the time given her by his absence to store some of the supplies she had brought back with her, including several new nanos.

She sighed as she slid the last one into its place. Only two had been bought purely for their delight. She had requisitioned the rest, which contained information that might prove useful to them on Hades of Persephone. Even on a straightforward run like this, she could not forget her war-honed instinct to anticipate the worst and try to provide against it.

Ah well, she thought, she had never worked beneath a planet's crust before. It could do her no harm to learn a bit about the world's history and people, about what she might expect to encounter there and how she might have to function in that strange, perpetually dark realm.

Her mood lightened again as she felt her husband approaching. She looked up as Varn Tarl Sogan came into the cabin.

He was a moderately tall, slender man with the dark brown hair and eyes and the olive skin of his race, as well as the strong, hard features marking the position into which he had been born within it. Those features

¹ Nano / Nano-Reader: A biotechnical data storage and display device utilizing nanoparticle cybernetic management of microbiotic medium. Removable microbiotic medium wafers are commonly known as "nanos."

STAR COMMANDOS 03 MISSION UNDERGROUND

could mean his death were the significance of them to be recognized in the wrong company.

There was nothing whatsoever remarkable about his clothing. That was merely the garb typical of any spacer, much stained now, after his many hours of exploring the drive systems and tubes. His stance, too, did not set him terribly apart. It was that of a soldier, which was hardly remarkable after the general demobilization of the Navy following the close of the War. The ultrasystem was full of former warriors.

It was apparent to anyone at all capable of reading men that he had once held rank of some importance. The custom of command rested on him like a cloak, that and the quiet assurance of one long used to having the fate of others ride upon his decisions. There was also an aloofness about him that kept most people at a distance, that and a cold strength of will which those who worked the outer rim recognized as a signal of potential danger.

Sogan knew full well the effect he had upon others of his species and either shrugged it off or actively played upon it, depending on the situation. He wanted no contact with most of the Federation's citizens and had good reason to fear it in a great many instances.

Islaen Connor did not blame him for that. Why should he trust or want to trust half a galaxy of strangers, of enemies? His own race had used him brutally, broken him in rank and in body in one of the greatest miscarriages of justice born of the bitterness engendered by the War. He had spared Thorne of Brandine in defiance of his commander's order to burn the valiant planet off, and he had paid for his disobedience, his humanity,

with the loss of everything he had valued in life and very nearly with his life. Strong minds had shattered under far less than he had endured. It was a miracle that his had not, and it was a powerful testament to the man he was that he had not turned entirely to bitterness and hate himself.

All this swept through her mind in that first instant of sighting him and vanished again as her whole being brightened under the surge of happiness with which he always welcomed her, a joy and open warmth in total contrast to the reserve that was his mask and marked his dealings with the rest of their species. She gloried in the splendor of it even as she wondered how she had come to mean so much to him.

The former admiral's greeting was casual, as befitted their brief separation, merely a smile and a slight lifting of his hand.

He seated himself on the edge of the table and reached over to rub Bandit. "So there you are, Small One. Did you get tired of being ignored and come in search of more congenial company?"

The Jadite, who was in her favorite perch on Islaen's shoulder, raised her head to receive his caress. *Yes!*

The woman smiled and linked her mind with his. *Never give a gurry an opening like that, friend. It can be hard on the ego.*

So I observe. His eyes went to the jewel glinting on her breast. "It looks good," he said after the briefest of pauses.

His use of audible speech surprised her. They rarely resorted to it when alone. A gentle probe revealed that

STAR COMMANDOS 03 MISSION UNDERGROUND

his shields were up as well. That meant something was bothering him again. Islaen, accustomed to responding to his moods, only nodded. She answered him in kind. "That it does. I'm glad I was able to get it set without arousing any suspicions."

"Everyone on Horus knows we have credits to spend with three heroism citations each."

He fell silent again, as if groping for words. "I have been thinking about those credits. Your Navy is doing all the work on the *Maid*, and even after setting a good sum aside for emergencies, we still have a respectable amount left over."

"You have some way in mind for disposing of a bit of it?" she asked curiously, thoroughly surprised by the drift of the conversation.

He looked away from her. "We are still entitled to a furlough since our stay on Jade turned out to be anything but that. You have mentioned how much how beautiful Hedon is reputed to be. Why not take our leave when we finish with this latest mission we have been assigned and go there for a while?"

The woman stared at him. "Hedon?"

"Aye."

"Travel time aside, you're uncomfortable here on Horus where you know you've got the support of the whole military command, and you're not even entirely happy on Jade. What in all space is moving you to suggest planeting on a mobbed inner-system world, especially that one?"

"She is reputed to have much to offer," he replied defensively. "I cannot allow a measure of reasonable

caution to grow into paranoia. Besides, a pleasure planet boasts luxury goods, and Hedon's jewel merchants can be expected to have some of the finest stocks in the Federation. We could pick you up one or two companions for your river tear if we looked carefully."

Islaen's mood darkened as she realized suddenly what was driving him. The War Prince had no desire for any such holiday himself. He was afraid that his dread of exposure was imprisoning her here on the rim, depriving her of access to the richness and wonder of her ultrasystem, and he was willing to sacrifice his own need for isolation, and the security it brought, to amend that fancied wrong. Why hadn't he told her this was gnawing at him? She could have put it to rest fast enough.

Islaen willed her temper to cool. That was Varn. She had accepted it when she had accepted the man. Suddenly, all the love she had for him welled up within her. On this occasion, as on every other she had thus far encountered, it had been his concern and consideration for her that had moved him, never any worry or thought of his own. Her mind reached out to him, gently calling at his shields for admittance, and he opened himself to receive her.

Sogan had not expected the rush of warmth that she brought with her, and Islaen Connor laughed softly at his astonishment. *Can't a woman show that she loves her husband?*

Her thoughts grew more serious. The Arcturian would be most uncomfortable if he realized she had read him this closely. Part of his argument had, in fact, been sound reasoning, and she decided to use that to support

his mask.

You're right about the stone. A couple of others of the right kind would draw some attention away from it, and Hedon would be the place to go for rarities that would still fit our purse. That'll have to wait for a bit, though. As you point out, we have a job to do first.

Aye. Your Admiral Sithe did not give us much time to recover from our battles on and over Jade.

This sort of just came up. It's hardly anything to excite us after our last few adventures, merely a matter of witnessing the return of some surplus Navy armaments.

She glanced in the direction of the galley. Since you're more or less on your feet, how about getting us some jakek? We might as well relax while going over the details.

THREE

Sogan swallowed a mouthful of the hot liquid, savoring its rich, smooth flavor, before setting his cup down and turning to his companion.

Now, Colonel, what about our mission? Where are we going?

To Hades of Persephone.

He frowned. *That hole?*

Islaen's brows arched. *You know her? That's more than I could claim when Admiral Sithe mentioned her to me.*

Sogan nodded. *Aye, or of her, rather. She was one of the first planets we seized at the War's beginning. At that time, her role was to have been an important one, no less than the jump-off for a two-prong assault designed to divide the Federation into three parts. Circumstances dictated a change in our plans, and she became and remained an unpleasant eddy on the war*

STAR COMMANDOS 03 MISSION UNDERGROUND

maps.

The War Prince scowled. *I argued against keeping a fleet penned there almost from the time I made admiral. It was serving no useful purpose on Hades, and the threat of an invasion or attack from that Sector was not sufficient, in my judgment, to warrant holding those ships inactive when they could have been put to excellent use elsewhere.*

His tone grew bleak. *Unfortunately, the surplanetary Resistance was very active, and our Tactical Command would not permit a withdrawal lest it be imagined that we had been driven off. He grimaced. That folly at a time when we were starting to be forced off planets, important ones, for a fact!*

Sogan shrugged. *Six years before the War's end, I was assigned to take and hold Thorne in preparation for a massive push against the Sectors of that region, and I had too many troubles of my own after that to worry about Hades. Or much else for that matter... But that is all past. What about now?*

Islaen responded by describing her interview with Ram Sithe, fleshing out what he had told her with some of the information she had gleaned from the nano she had reviewed during her drive back to the starship.

You're right about an active Resistance, she concluded. *Lack of interstellar importance in no way lessened the fury of the on-world fighting.*

What have you learned about Hades herself? Of that, he had no knowledge. His people rarely made a study of the places they invaded. A lot of good soldiers had died as a result.

Hades of Persephone is a harsh planet. Her citizens live chiefly by mining and exporting the heavy minerals she contains in reasonable abundance. They must delve for water as

well, since only a comparatively small portion of her considerable supply exists on the surface. She has bred a hard race, and they fought the invaders with everything their cruel world, and fortune's one kind stroke in arming them well, gave them. The Hadesim conducted their movement so successfully that even with occasional resupplying, the fleet could be maintained at no better than half strength in the War's later years.

He looked sharply at her. *Half an invasion fleet, more than that numerically, died on Hades? I had not known we suffered such casualties there.*

Your Tactical Command would scarcely have broadcast the fact, would they? she countered.

No, not even when eventual victory seemed certain. At the end, not at all.

Your losses were avenged. The local population count is now less than a fifth of its former total.

Varn was silent for several seconds. Thorne had fought viciously and with a terrible singleness of purpose to regain her freedom, but her battle had not called down destruction of this magnitude, not on her own people or on the soldiers of his fleet. What had happened on Hades of Persephone could only be termed a disaster for the Empire and the Federation alike, all the more tragic because there had been so little real purpose in the invaders' presence there.

He drew his mind away from that grim, all-too-recent past. *Now, we are to pick up materiel from one of the Resistance's ammunition dumps?*

Just one weapon. The rest have already been restored, but the planetbuster...

The former admiral stiffened. *What were guerrillas do-*

STAR COMMANDOS 03 MISSION UNDERGROUND

ing with a major weapon like that?

They were fighting a major war! Islaen glared at him as much in surprise as in annoyance. Sogan had never spoken disparagingly of Resistance forces before. With his history on Thorne, he was hardly in a position to do so.

Neither had he on this occasion. The War Prince quickly raised his hands, palms out, in the old gesture for peace.

Sorry, Colonel. I had not realized they were equipped to utilize such a thing.

No, I jumped you too fast. I'm in the wrong. They weren't equipped to handle it, either, not as it was designed to be used, but as Admiral Sithe said, they're a harsh, somewhat violent, utterly unrelenting people, and they made the missile their ultimate weapon. Had their Resistance been broken completely, rather than accept the defeat and the slavery that would then come, they were prepared to detonate the planetbuster. Karst, their capital city, and all the surrounding countryside would've been totally annihilated, but the slaughter would have included most of their enemies, certainly all the ranking officers, and the better part of their equipment.

Islaen's fingers automatically soothed Bandit, whose feathers had ruffled in response to the chill that had rippled through both humans and radiated from them at her words. *Karst was lucky, and they weren't forced to use it.*

So it still sits beneath the city, still armed and still deadly?

She nodded. *Navy technicians originally dismantled it so it could be brought through the narrow underground ways, and a Navy expert went with it—blindfolded so he wouldn't be able to reveal the depot's location should he fail to make his escape and be taken and questioned—in order to reassemble and arm*

it for them. Now, none of the surplanetary leaders want to risk tampering with it, and they've demanded that the Navy do the work if we want the thing back.

Varn eyed her carefully. *We do not have that kind of skill, not either of us.*

The Commando smiled, recalling her own initial reaction. *That's what I told Admiral Sithe, rather less calmly. We're not expected to tackle that particular part of the job, just witness that it's done and take the planetbuster away with us once its fangs have been pulled.*

Praise the Spirit of Space for that! he muttered. *Who, then?*

Jake's flying in—

His brows raised. *Karmikel?*

Aye. To our good fortune, one of the Federation's best demolitions people took a working berth on a freighter currently servicing Jade. The Navy traced her, and she's agreed to take this on. Jake's bringing her here on the Jovian Moon.

What if your informant, this Larnse Greggs, is lying? he asked. *He claims that humanitarian reasons drove him to contact the authorities, but what is the basis of his suspicions? Why would he turn on a former comrade in favor of those who gave no help in his world's war effort?*

Because of what a pirate raid entails, she replied. *Greggs only suspects the possibility of such contact, apparently, but he claims his associate was always an unscrupulous individual and is now a very bitter one, quite capable, at least in theory, of such intercourse. It's not a threat either his own planet's leaders or we can ignore.*

Hardly, as he well knows. Suppose Larnse Greggs is the unscrupulous one, the bitter one? His lips tightened. *Experi-*

STAR COMMANDOS 03 MISSION UNDERGROUND

ences such as Hades endured could drive a man mad. He might merely wish to draw officials or officers of the Navy which did so little for his homeworld underground to some dark place where he could hope to work his will on them, even if there were no prospect of monetary gain at all.

We'll have to accept that risk and depend on my skill to warn us against it. I've rarely failed to pick up dark or violent feelings in any human, particularly when they're directed against me or mine. Indeed, Islaen Connor's unique talent allowed her to detect strong emotions in others, although she could not share or read thought with anyone except the Arcturian and Bandit. It was an ability that had served her and her comrades well during the long years of combat and in those sometimes scarcely less violent episodes following the War's close.

Sogan nodded, satisfied.

He felt her eyes on him and met them. They seemed troubled. *Aye, Colonel?*

Those people hate Arcturians, Varn.

No one in the Federation loves us, Col. Connor.

Islaen started to speak again, but a low hissing sound caused both humans to glance at the gurry.

She had been following their conversation closely, and now the little Jadite's feathers were partially extended and her claws worked nervously, although without force, on the woman's shoulder.

"What is it, Love?"

The gurry's bright eyes darted anxiously from one to the other of them. *More trouble for Islaen, Varn, Bandit?*

"I don't know," the Commando replied. She reached up to curl her fingers closely around Bandit, as if to

shield her. “I hope with all I am that we don’t have any, not with 300,000 people to pay for any mistakes we make.”

FOUR

Varn Tarl Sogan smiled as he scanned the instrument panel on his bridge. The *Fairest Maid* was driving on at a speed he would once not have believed possible in a ship of any class, let alone one of this size, yet she moved without tremor, without any sign whatsoever of stress. The innovations he and his maintenance crew had devised and implemented were testing out beyond even his expectations.

He settled back in his flight chair with a sigh of contentment and fixed his dark eyes on the universe beyond the narrow, transparent visual observation panels. The splendor of that vast blackness held him as it had always held him, the impossible glory of literally countless stars burning like fiery jewels in their ebony setting, seemingly

minute sparks exquisite in their beauty and almost painful in their perfection. The sight of them sent a fierce surge of longing and also a deep sense of peace flooding through him, and his eyes lowered for a moment.

Not very long ago, there had been no peace in him. He remembered the three nightmare years following his exile, years without hope or purpose when these same distant sparks had shone forth as beacons calling him to the only ease or escape he could ever again expect to find in this mortal realm. So powerful had been the pull that several times he had been forced to use all the strength of his will to keep from setting course for one of the far galaxies glittering amongst them, thereby severing himself from everything human for the remainder of eternity.

The former admiral shuddered as the urgency of that inner demand returned for a moment. Was it compliance with the harsh will of the Empire's gods that had kept him from obeying it, or a subtle form of defiance? Maybe something entirely different had held him back, a purely human stubbornness that refused to surrender completely despite fate's crushing, irreparable blows.

Varn forcibly drew his thoughts back from the course they were following. It was still not a safe one, not even yet, though he had true life now rather than hated existence and the stars beyond were once more symbols of that life.

His reverie broke off abruptly. His consort was coming up, and there was some trouble on her. When she reached the bridge, the Commando's expression confirmed his reading of her. She greeted him but did not

STAR COMMANDOS 03 MISSION UNDERGROUND

say anything more for a moment, as if she were seeking a way to begin.

His eyes darkened, and he rose to meet her. *What has happened, Islaen?*

Nothing, she hastened to assure him, but I've been going over the nanos on Hades that I brought with us. Varn, Admiral Sithe was right. When we planet, I want you to remain with the ship. I'll take care of whatever's to be done on-world.

He looked at her sharply. *Is this some sort of jest?* he demanded.

Unfortunately not. The Hadesim don't just hate your race. They hate anything that even vaguely resembles an Arcturian. Her eyes fixed his. You won't have to be identified. Your appearance is enough to condemn you.

Do you imagine I can let you go amongst such a people alone?

I'm very obviously no daughter of the Empire, she reminded him. Besides, I won't be alone. Jake will be with me.

He is just delivering—

Supposedly. Jake Karmikel isn't likely to sit back or quietly depart when there's Commando-style work to be done. I can count on his help.

Varn scowled. "That is small comfort to me," he snapped, switching suddenly to verbal speech as he threw his mind shields into place.

"It'll have to suffice," Islaen replied. Her answer was sharp. She had expected some protest from him, but this abrupt exclusion from his thoughts both surprised her and annoyed her considerably.

He shook his head. "I think not. I refuse to cower be-

fore dirt-clawing menials of this sort. I am an officer of the Federation Navy on Federation assignment. Let them swallow that.”

Her eyes flashed. “I dislike your arrogance, Admiral! You might do well to remember that no fleets fly at your command now. You wear only a captain’s insignia here, and it’s my order that carries the weight.”

Varn Tarl Sogan stiffened as if he had taken the lash of a whip in the face. “If this is your direct command, I shall, of course, obey it. Colonel.”

Islaen gripped herself. The War Prince would comply. He was too much a soldier to do otherwise, but he was furious.

What had she just done? This was a difficulty they both had recognized might some day arise, although neither of them had ever spoken of it. They had always worked as a team, as equals, despite the disparity in their ranks, and the present situation did not justify her summarily bludgeoning his will. A frayed temper, not judgment, had driven her to speak as she had.

Well, she was still angry. Sogan had to realize she was right. She had never before known him to be unreasonable and guessed that something must be tearing at him, but as long as he refused to trust her, he would have to fight it out by himself. She could not help him if he would not let her.

Connor glared at him. “Very well. I don’t particularly want to see you slaughtered for no reason, or get killed myself trying to shield you, but as long as it’s only your own life that you’re risking and not our mission, I won’t give any orders. Do whatever you want.”

STAR COMMANDOS 03 MISSION UNDERGROUND

With that, she turned smartly on her heel and quit the bridge without looking at him or speaking to him again.



No sooner had the woman gone than Bandit rose to her full height on her perch on the copilot's seat, extending her feathers until she seemed to double in size. She faced Varn with an outraged hiss, but then the anger melted from her and she whimpered miserably.

Her patent distress cooled his temper, and he hastened over to her. Poor little thing! She was not accustomed to ill feeling between them, and she was both bewildered and terrified by their exchange.

"Do not fear, Small One," he told her, stroking her gently. "It would take more than this to sever us." His hand dropped to his side. "Go to Islaen now. She is upset and has need of you."

Varn better! Varn go!

He shook his head. "Our tempers are still too hot for us to be together. Do as I ask. I want to be by myself for a while."

This time, the gurry obeyed, although she flew slowly and looked back at him several times before finally moving out of his line of sight.

The Arcturian gave a sigh of relief when he found himself alone and pressed his hands to his eyes, a gesture he had unconsciously taken from his consort. He felt weary, beaten. He had managed all this very poorly. Islaen had been entirely correct, and in his insistence

upon having his own will, he had all but provoked that scene between them.

Sogan stopped himself. No. He was not so innocent. He had deliberately provoked it. He had known how she would respond to that remark about menials, to his whole manner, but the alternative had been even more unacceptable, more threatening. His stand would not have held up against logical assault. Since he was unwilling to abandon it and would never reveal the base fears firing it, he had chosen to drive this wedge between them.

His face tightened. He had in fact lied to her, in deed if not actually in word, and he chilled at the thought of the price such duplicity might eventually exact from him.

The former admiral caught hold of himself. Panic would no more serve him now than in the midst of any other crisis. It had already drawn him to turn what should have been a minor difficulty into a very nasty situation.

Very well. He had discovered depths within himself that he did not like. It was his to come to terms with them, to do battle with them as he had battled every other challenge life had set before him.

His shoulders squared. This problem was his, and it was his to face and settle. His weakness, his failure to do so, had already caused enough pain. Now, before that injury could form into a crippling scar, he must do what he could to heal it.



STAR COMMANDOS 03 MISSION UNDERGROUND

Varn found the colonel bent over a nano reader she had set up on the table in the crew's cabin. Bandit was sitting beside her, a forlorn-looking little figure too unhappy even to call for the attention she normally craved, much less try to alter the human's mood.

He sighed. He had signaled his coming and knew Islaen had been aware of him before he had stepped from the ladder, but she did not lift her head or otherwise acknowledge his presence, not even by so much as raising shields against him.

Islaen?

She looked up at last. *Aye?*

I was navigating right off the charts. I shall stay with the Maid when we planet, as you suggest.

Her head lowered. *Is that what you want?*

What I want is irrelevant.

The Commando looked at him. He meant precisely that.

No, that's never true. We've both had to sacrifice our own desires often enough, but it's not a law of the universe that we must do that on every occasion, and I don't think it's necessary this time. Hadesim know very well that the populations of a great many planets could pass for their oppressors. You couldn't stay long without trouble maybe, but for a single, short-term visit, your uniform and official purpose should be more than sufficient to protect you if you still wish to go. Besides, our assignment won't be much affected, even if you do get into a fight and are forced to withdraw.

I wish to go, he replied slowly. That has not changed. He seemed to look past her, through her, for an instant. My reasons are not sufficient to excuse insubordination.

Stop it, Varn! I made just as much of an ass of myself as you did. Her eyes closed, as if with great weariness. *Please hold me, will you?*

Sogan slid into the seat beside her and folded her into his arms. *Islaen—*

I shouldn't have pulled rank on you. I was only playing the coward. I'd seen you come close, too close, to death so many times, and I couldn't bear the thought of possibly losing you for no true reason.

Varn's arms tightened around her and his lips brushed the smoldering fire of her auburn hair. He poured his love into her, reassuring and thanking her both.

His carefully shielded thoughts were dismal. Even in her failings, this woman was sublime, while he... She had not even questioned him as to why he wanted to go to Hades of Persephone so badly. For one instant, he thought to tell her so that she would at least realize that he did have a reason, however warped, for setting himself against her.

That impulse died as it was born. Such a confession was impossible, inconceivable. He had endured much in his life, enough to break the mind and soul of many a man, but he could not bear Islaen Connor's contempt and dared not risk drawing that down upon himself. His courage was not sufficient for that.

If you enjoyed this sample, it can also be purchased in hardcover or the full eBook. Please visit www.archebooks.com for more information.

