

From the mind of  
**P. M. Griffin**



# DEATH PLANET

STAR COMMANDOS 04

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BY

**P. M. GRIFFIN**



**ArcheBooks Publishing**

# STAR COMMANDOS 04 DEATH PLANET

A Novel By  
**P. M. GRIFFIN**

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# DEDICATION

To my brother, Neil Griffin, who has read many a book of Federation/Empire history.



**STAR COMMANDOS 04  
DEATH PLANET**



# ONE

Federation Navy Capt. Varn Tarl Sogan, War Prince and once an admiral of the Arcturian Empire, watched as the approaching starship took definite form on his near-space viewer. Soon, he would know if they faced a far-ranging merchantman or some of those vermin they had been ordered to hunt down.

His *Fairest Maid* and Jake Karmikel's *Jovian Moon* had been assigned to sweep this part of the Sector in search of a wolf pack rumored to have moved into the area. It was an ideal region for pirate activity, near to major starlanes, rich in rubble large enough to provide temporary and permanent bases, and very isolated by reason of its poverty in inhabited or inhabitable planets. If any of that space scum had indeed ventured here, the Navy wanted them cleared out fast, before they could

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establish themselves and draw still others to them to form a fleet that could be a serious threat to all shipping along this part of the rim.

It was really Stellar Patrol work, and not a core task for the special Commando unit to which he belonged, but their commander, Admiral Sithe, had wanted the new equipment and other innovations recently installed in the two starships tested under actual field conditions, and had therefore set them to it.

None of them had anticipated much in the way of trouble when they lifted from Horus, although all four of them—himself, Commando-Colonel Islaen Connor, who was both his consort and commanding officer of the unit, Commando-Captain Jake Karmikel, and his copilot, Sgt. Bethé Danlo—had jested among themselves, saying that they should be surprised if this new assignment proved as easy a slide as their orders made it seem. Thus far, every mission on which they had served together had turned out very much the opposite.

Sogan had laughed then, and had thought no more about it during the two days since the Federation ships separated to better cover the vast distances through which they were ordered to search; but now, he began to wonder as the newcomer loomed ever larger on his viewer. It was nearly twenty minutes since the *Maid's* instruments had picked up what proved to be another ship, coming fast and under full battle screens.

His mouth hardened as he glanced at the beautiful woman waiting tensely at the weapons controls at his side. They could see the strange vessel clearly now, and they knew her for what she was. The hull was sound but

dark and dull, skin that had not known on-world servicing in many a year, the inevitable mark of a pirate. This was not a mere raider, either—one of the small, fast two- or five-man fighters that comprised most wolf packs. She was big, very big, no less than a brig, a fifty-class, and her presence in this region sent a chill through both of them. The operation building here was apparently far larger and far more deadly than anyone at the naval base on Horus suspected.

The *Fairest Maid* looked to be no more than a small freighter of the kind which commonly serviced the planets, most of them colonies, on the rim of the great Federation ultrasystem, and although such a merchantman might be expected to be carrying cargo, the pirate captain made no effort to hail or take her, no more than he had attempted to mask his approach for as long as possible after the usual custom of his kind. He did not even seem to mind that his victim's screens were up and that she was presumably girding herself for battle.

*Bad*, the Commando-Colonel whispered, using that form of speech which only she and Sogan shared, the direct linking of their thoughts.

He nodded his agreement. Freighter captains, particularly those in these outer Sectors, had been pretty much on their own during the decades-long War and during the last turbulent years following its close. They outfitted their ships as veritable battlecraft and, in need, handled them as battlecraft. Those preying on them preferred to use stealth and vastly superior numbers to gain their ends, and the fact that the brig came in openly, ignoring precautions so common as to be almost

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unwritten law, was not a good sign, even with her vastly superior size to explain the breach.

The Arcturian fixed his dark eyes on the observation panel. The other vessel was so near now that he needed no mechanical aids to see her. *Soon. Very soon.* That one out there would not hold off his attack much longer.

He did not.

The enemy captain waited only until the distance between them closed enough to bring the *Maid* within range of his weapons, then he opened fire.

Sogan gasped, as did the woman beside him, horrified and amazed both. That eerie energy had come from no laser.

The *Maid* reeled.

Had she been a civilian vessel, in truth, her screens would have been swept away almost in the moment of impact, for only those specifically designed to withstand pletzar fire could do so for more than a few brief seconds.

Her defenses were Navy-standard, and so they had held this time, but she was not proof against danger. She was too small for such an opponent, her power base too weak. If the raider followed fast with a second such strike, her guards might well shatter. Certainly, they would go down at a third.

To Varn's amazement, the pirate withheld the blow, but he was too old a hand at waging war in space to let surprise paralyze him. He moved quickly to seize the opportunity so unexpectedly given him. Either their enemy was temporarily frozen by disappointment that his supposed deathblow had failed, or else his crew was not

yet able to manage the difficult pletzar banks rapidly enough to activate them again immediately after discharging.

It was probably the latter, he decided. They were notoriously hard to reset, particularly if jury-rigged into a weapons system not designed specifically to take them, as would surely have to be the case here.

The cause was not important now. What did matter was that their foes had given the *Fairest Maid* time to react. There was a way to take that pirate out quickly, dangerous in the extreme, but at least possible.

The War Prince would not use his own pletzars. Even if they would be effective in the brief span he would be able to operate them, the *Maid* was too small a ship for them. Firing the bank drained her power completely, leaving her temporarily dead in space—or permanently dead if use continued too long—bereft of all guards, an easy victim if the strike failed to conquer, as it might in the limited time the *Maid* could sustain such an assault. One broadside taken when she was thus crippled, with no defenses whatsoever of her own, and she and those aboard her were so much space dust.

Sogan had no desire to cast their lives away needlessly at any time, but in this case, it was necessary that they survive, at least long enough to report the pirate's possession of those pletzars. A deadly cold filled him, and only the shields which he had been quick to raise around his mind kept it from flowing into his companion as well. He had to survive if there was anything in the horror newly born within him.

Their lasers would have to do it, and they would be

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effective against a foe of this class only if they could be sent into her ports at the moment of her own discharging. That was a common target, the most common in any space battle. Only there, at the moment of firing, did a starship's screens separate, rendering her momentarily vulnerable to an enemy's weapons. With a Navy ship, that move would have been closed to him, for pletzars, unlike lasers, operated through their own defenses. Luckily, this ship still had her old screens, or else her master did not realize he could leave his new ones closed. In any event, he had opened them that first time, and presumably he would do so again.

Islaen Connor nodded her understanding of the course the former admiral proposed, although the tightness of her own shields gave testimony to the strength of the fear—or doubt—they must be concealing. Her small, pale hands closed firmly on the controls of her most powerful laser.

*All right, Varn. Bring her in close and hold her steady.*

*If they give us time, Colonel.*

He prayed to the Empire's harsh gods that they would have those few seconds. The *Maid* was small, and if they got in near enough, they might possibly slip under, or to the side of, the brig's bolt before it began to expand, thereby missing the worst of its inevitable effects.

They were not quite in place when the port from which the pletzar fire would issue began to slide open.

*Now, Islaen!*

The Commando had already fired, directing a blazing stream of laser light, not into the port, the usual

target, but rather at the still-withdrawing plate.

Her aim was true. The cover shuddered, deformed as the solar steel glowed under the lash of the energy striking it, and jammed even as the pletzar bolt flowed up behind it.

Only a third of the port was open to space, not nearly enough to permit passage of that which sought exit from it. Some of the deceptively gentle-looking energy did escape, but the rest was held back, held to spend itself against the ship that had generated it and sent it forth.

For an instant, nothing seemed to be amiss with the brig, then all space around them turned bright as the great starship erupted into a ball, not of fire, but of light itself.

Varn and Islaen instinctively turned their eyes away, although the stellar crystal in the observation panels automatically darkened against the excess brilliance.

The War Prince wasted no time. No sooner had his comrade fired than he threw the *Fairest Maid* into reverse, dropping her to six o'clock as he did so. The pletzar energy that had escaped from the doomed pirate would still be perilous for the smaller vessel if it should catch her full force at this close range.

The maneuver succeeded, insofar that they avoided the main core of the beam, but pletzar fire spread out rapidly from the point of discharge, and the edges of it wrenched at the *Maid's* screens.

It was but a fraction of the weapon's true strength and ordinarily would have posed no threat, but the Federation ship was unable to put forth a solid defense to

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counter it. As quickly as the *Maid's* defenses closed again after her laser had done its work, they were still not fully in place when this challenge came. There was no open passage to give doom entry, but her defenses were weak over the port. They crackled threateningly and bent inward under the pressure of the eager energy, and for one dire moment, it seemed that they would be torn open.

In the next instant, there was peace. The pletzar bolt had passed.

Neither officer relaxed. The little needle-nose lived, but she had not come out of her ordeal unscathed. Varn's lips tightened as the perimeter defense indicators flashed red, showing a break in his screens. It was minute, microscopic, but it could well bring their deaths.

He strove to turn her, to face her tubes to the remains of the exploded ship.

There was no time.

Another wave of energy swept over them. This was not pletzar fire but a bastard residue of the forces generated in the destruction itself, bound and strengthened by a minuscule remnant of that which had wrought the brig's end. In itself, such a force was nothing. Any sound vessel, even a fairly severely damaged one with more distance to shield her, would scarcely have noticed it at all.

For the greater part, the *Fairest Maid* did not, either. She did not so much as tremble as the surge reached her. The angry energy fingered her screens, tested them, and it found the one breach flawing her defenses. It rushed the gap with seemingly sentient delight, and that fraction

of it born in the dead pirate's pletzar banks flowed through the tough titanone plate shielding the laser port as if it did not even exist.

Into the *Maid* it shot, tearing back along the laser to the weapons control panel. From there, it surged forth, wild and terrible, into the bridge of the Federation starship. Light and heat exploded seemingly out of the very air and in its explosion transformed into a whip of charring flame.

# TWO

Sogan moaned. The pain in his right shoulder and upper arm was intense, although there was little discomfort closer to the hand. He deduced from the unwavering agony searing him that he had been burned completely through the breadth of his body.

His eyes opened. The *Fairest Maid* had survived and appeared to have taken relatively minor damage. The bridge's walls were blackened, but the lights were still on, and obviously the life support systems were functioning.

Aye, that would be true, the former admiral thought wearily. Only a minute amount of energy had actually been involved, and its violence could have lasted no more than the barest instant of time. The well-shielded systems of his ship had been able to withstand the on-

slaught, although in the brief moment it had lasted, the inferno of the great demons had become incarnate in the mortal universe. It was the merely human flesh of the crew which had not been able to endure.

He had survived. The surge had been a narrow one, bursting from the weapons control panel and just catching him in the arm.

His companion...

Sogan did not use his mind to try to contact her. Not all of his courage could make him reach out to encounter the deadly emptiness he knew he must find. The man turned his head, and an inarticulate cry of grief and despair broke from him.

The sound of his own voice shocked him into action. His will gripped him hard, temporarily freezing all feeling, walling him off from his anguish and from the searing pain rending his body. A War Prince of the Arcturian Empire was bred to recognize duty and to place it before any personal need. There were things yet to be done before he could give way, and it was imperative that he act now, before shock impaired his ability to think, to function, more than it already had.

First the ship.

Varn started to sit up to better see the instruments. As he did so, his eyes fell to the arm of his flight chair. He slumped back again, swallowing several times in quick succession to combat the nausea rising violently within him. That explained the lack of pain near his hand. No nerves could be left alive in the mass of carbon lying there.

Once more, the Arcturian caught hold of himself.

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This time, he completed his examination of his vessel's instruments.

To his relief, nearly all the readings were normal. The *Maid* had indeed come through amazingly well. Her main laser was gone, of course, but all her other systems were intact save for the already existing breach in the screens.

Trouble could rise at any time out of some as-yet-undetected, more subtle damage. He must still act fast to give warning of the peril he had encountered here.

Silently praising the *Maid's* tight security beam and the ease with which it could be activated, he reached for the interstellar transceiver. In his present condition, he could never have dealt with any complicated series of settings or adjustments.

Working clumsily with his left hand, he at last succeeded in raising both Ram Sithe himself on Horus and Jake Karmikel. Tersely, he detailed what had happened and outlined the course he planned to follow, then broke contact rather more quickly than he had intended. He had reached the point where he must see to his injuries or have his body fail him entirely, and that he could not allow, not if what he feared, the horror he saw looming before him, was a concrete threat.

He must also see to the dead.

Sogan lurched to his feet. The deck swayed under him, but he got his balance and stood erect. Some carbon remained on the arm of the flight chair. He scarcely noticed it. There was little pain from it in comparison with that in his shoulder, and the renewer would soon restore the limb. If only it could heal wounds that really

mattered...

He looked down, and grief welled up in him.

Bandit.

He had forgotten her, had not even thought of her, during the whole course of the battle and the tense moments before it.

The Jadite mammal lay limp on the deck near his feet, a tiny, pathetic bundle of singed brown feathers save for the black streak circling her head and eyes like a robber's mask. The bright yellow legs were extended and motionless. The once-supple yellow bill was partly agape.

He could not endure the thought of her lying there, that small creature who had so loved attention and comfort, maybe to be stepped upon and further mutilated, and he stooped to pick her up.

Varn's breath caught. The little body was warm, and the heart beat steadily if somewhat slowly. She must have gotten under or over all but the very outermost edge of the bolt.

If the gurry had survived...

He forced that hope to die and made himself look at what lay in the copilot's seat, at the ruined face, the stubbed remnants of arms, the blackened chest. Everything above the waist had taken the full force of the thrice-accursed bolt. Such a body as now remained could not sustain life.

Despite his full acceptance of that reality, Varn Tarl Sogan compelled his mind to reach outward, seeking some faint aftershadow of all he had once known.

His breath and the very beat of his heart seemed to

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stop. The life spark remained. It was impossibly faint, its hold tenuous nearly beyond existence—but Islaen Connor still lived.

Very gently, he lay the unconscious Bandit on what was left of the woman's chest and hastened at as near a run as he could force from his own battered body to the *Maid's* medical locker. Cursing his inefficiency, he fumbled with the latch. If he could aim and fire a blaster left-handed, why could he do no better than this now?

The locker opened. Eagerly, he seized what he sought, a device similar to a large and very clumsy antique blaster.

The Arcturian made himself stop and turn the renewer on himself. If he was to be of any help to the Commando-Colonel or to the work to which she was sworn and for which she may well have given her life, he would have to have at least the partial use of his hand.

The renewer ray was one of medicine's greatest discoveries, providing almost instantaneous complete regeneration of recently damaged or destroyed skin, muscles, blood and blood vessels, even nerves and bone. Only the organs of the chest and abdominal cavities could not be so repaired. Those required treatment with the much newer and far more complex regrowth equipment.

At the War's beginning, only a few of the greatest experimental hospitals could support the then-massive renewer systems, but development had progressed quickly until they became standard equipment on every major battleship, and then on the medium-class and

many of the smaller-class vessels as well. Federation scientists had recently produced a renewer model portable enough to be carried by individuals or small, mobile parties such as their unit, which was one of the first teams chosen to benefit from and test it in the field.

Within minutes, the ray, which was still regarded as a miracle, despite the decades that had gone by since its discovery, began to take effect. Dead flesh and bone sloughed off, replaced by new growth. Damaged tissue healed. Even as he watched, the black, clawed horror became once more a human hand and arm. The healing was not yet complete, not by any means complete, but enough had taken place to allow him to function, and he dared give no more time to himself.

He returned to his wife's side and turned the ray on her, moving it over her body in slow, steady sweeps so that every part of her would be brought under its power.

Bandit, too, was exposed to the renewer. The gurry's injuries had been slight, and she was more stunned than actually hurt. She stirred almost at its first touch, and her eyes opened.

Memory returned where it had broken off. The bright, black eyes seemed to start from her head, and she shrieked in pure terror.

"Gently, Small One," he cautioned quickly. "Your claws are sharp, and you will hurt her worse. You are safe now. Just let the renewer finish its work with you. When you are ready, you can watch me from the back of my flight chair."

The Jadite managed to calm herself somewhat, although her fear still remained strong. *Islaen, Varn hurt!*

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*Bad?*

“I am not, thanks to this ray,” he replied, using verbal speech, as both he and the Commando usually did when alone with her, although Bandit could receive their thoughts as readily as she transmitted her own to them. “Islaen is very bad, enough so that I fear whatever we do for her will be useless.”

The gurry gave a whistle that was part dread, part grief. She hastily took wing and settled herself on the pilot’s seat as he had suggested.

*Varn, she ventured. Islaen’s pretty again!*

That was true enough. The renewer had completed that part of its work. The delicate, exquisitely wrought features were restored, and with them the smoldering auburn hair, the long, thick lashes and winged brows highlighting the nearly too large eyes. The fine, extraordinary fair skin was smooth and whole once more. That improvement made little difference, he thought numbly. Those eyes remained closed, and there was a deadly whiteness about her marvelous skin in place of the soft life hues normal to it.

Sogan sighed. “She is burned inside, Small One. She has to be. A renewer cannot repair damaged lungs or any of the lower organs. At best, it can only delay the deterioration a short while. We must hope it will be for long enough, until we can get her under regrowth treatment.”

Bandit was quiet a moment. *Islaen wake up soon?*

“No, or I doubt she will. It would be best if she did not until we reach some place of help. The pain would be severe, and I dare not give her any sedatives with her

system already so stressed.”

He did not know how much of that the little creature understood fully, although he believed she probably comprehended most of it. In any event, the talking helped clarify his own course for him and even gave him ease of a sort, and the gurry appeared satisfied with his answer. At least, she fell silent, watching him intently, but not interrupting again for several minutes.

*Varn?* she asked at the end of that time. *Bandit kept quiet! Not bother Islaen, Varn—*

The Arcturian glanced over his shoulder at her. “You did well, Little Bandit. That is probably what saved your life.” He looked away. “I should have shown more care for your safety.”

*Varn did right!* she declared indignantly *Saved everyone!*

“Maybe,” he whispered.

*Varn?*

“Aye?” he asked, surprised at the hesitation in her.

*Let Bandit help!*

Sogan eyed her speculatively for a moment. There was work to be done, and he realized he would indeed need her aid if he was to bring them through. “You will have to help, Small One. I shall not be able to do it all myself.”

He took a length of fine wire from the nearest of the emergency repair kits he kept on the bridge and used it to fasten and position the renewer on the armrest of Islaen’s chair.

“Here. The trigger is thin and has a very light touch. See if you can manage it. The mechanism is delicate,

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and I would rather not risk damaging it by fastening it back.”

The gurry flitted to the instrument. It dwarfed her, but her supple toes fitted easily around the slender firing mechanism and activated it readily. *This easy!*

“Good,” he told her. “Just keep playing the ray on her. I fixed it so you will be able to move it sufficiently to do that. I have other work to do now, but when I return, I shall relieve you for a while and set you watching the instruments for me.”

They would need monitoring, he thought grimly. He would soon be demanding more speed from the *Fairest Maid* than any starship of her class before her had ever been required to give. Even if he found no damage in the close inspection he would first give her, the strain on her systems would be enormous, and if anything failed in the long hours ahead, trouble would come fast. Unless discovered and checked almost immediately, they would all be space dust within minutes of its developing.

The former admiral went first to the transceiver. He looked at it bleakly for a moment, then steeled himself and made what was for him one of the most difficult transmissions of his life.

“Federation Starship *Fairest Maid* to Thorne of Brandine. Navy Capt. Sogan speaking.” His eyes closed, but he had to go on. The operator had probably already recognized his voice. “I was known to you as Varn Tarl Sogan—”

•

The War Prince severed the contact as quickly as possible. He had received permission to planet, and medical help would be waiting to receive Islaen Connor. Whether his other request would be granted or whether he would be permitted to live at all once he had given the on-worlders access to the injured Commando, that remained to be seen.

He could not control what those who might still be his enemies would do, but there was a duty laid on him, and he must fulfill it now, before he delivered himself into the Thornens' power. The intelligence he currently possessed, incomplete as it was, had to be transmitted at once.

Sogan called and raised both Horus and the *Jovian Moon* once more. This time, he gave a full account of all that had occurred, answering most of the Federation admiral's and his comrades' questions before they were put to him. He detailed his plans as far as he had thus far made, or could envision them, well beyond the mere destination he had given them before, and for the first time, he ventured the guess he had made regarding the probable source of the pirate's pletzars.

Mirelle of Eri. It was difficult to keep the chill that name roused in him out of his voice. It would mean nothing to Jake or Bethe Danlo, he knew, but Admiral Sithe would recognize its significance, if not immediately, then when he checked the Federation's records on her. Ram Sithe would realize full well what lay at stake, and he would pray fervently for their unit's success, even as he ordered out a fleet to blockade the dread world's near-space in the hope it would not arrive too late.

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Last of all, the Arcturian asked Karmikel to join him as quickly as possible and requested formal confirmation of his command over the team until such a time as the Commando-Colonel was once more able to resume her duties. That arrangement had been understood among the members of his unit from the time of its formation. He anticipated no trouble from the redheaded man, although both of them bore the rank of Captain, but he could risk no question of his authority when he reached his destination.

Sogan closed the transceiver at last and began his examination of the starship. Only when he was satisfied that her systems were in perfect order did he return to the controls.

For one instant, he hesitated. What he was about to do could destroy the *Fairest Maid*, so overtax her tubes that they might fuse in the cooling and never take to space again.

Varn Tarl Sogan cursed himself viciously as he drove the vessel to her maximum speed. What kind of subhuman was he? He could get another starship readily enough from the Navy. Islaen Connor's loss could not be similarly remedied. He watched the gauges anxiously, but relaxed somewhat as they continued to give normal readings. The *Maid* had adjusted well to the pressure being put on her.

That eased, but did not lift, her master's fears. If she got through the next twenty minutes, she could be expected to function without difficulty for the following several hours. The time for real worry was after that. The modifications which allowed the fighter to attain

the seemingly impossible speed at which she was now tearing through space were intended not for long-term cruising, but to help her meet relatively short-lived emergencies. By forcing them to function in this capacity, he was risking either an immediate emergency or more insidious, eventually irreparable damage. That last was inevitable if he had had erred at all in planning the innovations he had devised, or if the technicians translating those plans into actual alterations and additions had failed either in their understanding of them or in their physical work.

*Varn! Islaen's waking up!*

His head snapped toward her. "Bandit, watch these instruments!"

*But—*

"I cannot leave them untended, particularly not at this stage."

The gurry meekly flew to the control panel. *Bandit help!*

He stroked her head with his finger. "Thank you, Small One."

Sogan went to his consort's flight chair and knelt beside it. Her body seemed perfect once more, but her breathing was visibly labored and her pallor was severely abnormal. His mind reached out, seeking hers. He found her readily enough, although unconsciousness blocked communication.

He realized at once that Bandit was right. Oblivion's grip was not as heavy as it had been earlier. Awareness was stirring in the Commando-Colonel, whether it would be able to win through or not. So, too, was her

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pain. He gasped as wave after searing wave of it tore into him. Sogan made no attempt to withdraw from her. It was not Islaen's fault. She did not even know she was transmitting like this, much less be able to control it.

Full consciousness abruptly returned to the Com-mando. It took a moment to orient herself, but then she became aware of him and aware of what she was doing to him.

*Varn—I'm sorry—*

She strove without success to block the transmission of her pain until his hands closed over hers.

*No!* he commanded almost fiercely. *This is nothing to me. Hold your strength for more important work.*

The woman knew he was lying—she had received similar readings from him when Vishnu's ravagers had done him such terrible injury—and ordinarily, she would only have redoubled her efforts, breaking the contact entirely if necessary and reverting to audible speech in order to spare him, but her courage failed her now. She was not capable of verbal communication, and she desperately wanted to retain contact with this man while she could. It would last for only a very short time longer.

More than her own need was upon her. Even with death's shadow already hovering overhead, the burden of responsibility laid on them by the ill-starred encounter remained with her.

*Victory?* she asked weakly.

*Aye,* he replied, forcing himself to speak casually. *Your aim was perfect as always, Colonel.*

*But my firing time was a mite slow,* she said with a mental grimace. The woman fell silent for a moment as she

gathered herself to continue. *Jake must be warned, and Admiral Sithe—*

*Already done, Colonel,* he informed her. His voice gentled. *Rest now, my Islaen. You need only wait until I can bring you to help.*

She managed an almost imperceptible shake of her head. *It's-no use, Varn. My talent lets me check my own body's injuries as readily as anyone else's. I...won't make it back to Horus.*

*There are other planets in your ultrasystem.*

*They're few and far between in this Sector.*

*Thorne is nearest. We are en route there.*

*Thorne!*

He felt her fear, her refusal, and all his carefully constructed control came within an atom's breadth of shattering. Now, even in this moment of suffering and approaching dissolution, her thought and care were still for him.

He forced himself to face her with head raised, as if in stung pride, while his mind shields concealed the infinite depth of his grief. *A War Prince of the Arcturian Empire does not tamely surrender while any hope at all remains in battle. I intend to fight for your life, Islaen Connor, if I have to sear the tubes out of the Maid to win it for you.*

His tone softened. *I need you beside me in that fray, as you have been my comrade and my strength in every challenge we have met together. Fight along with me. Fight to live. Give me that much of your trust, and while the power to strive remains mine, I vow upon my innermost soul that I shall not fail you.*

She smiled up at him, a faint, ghostly smile, but a

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real one for all that. *Have no fear on that account, Varn Tarl Sogan. Commandos are far too stubborn to die simply because reason says we must.*

Her eyes closed after that, and moments later, the mist curled in around her once more.

Varn looked down upon her. He kissed her gently, then came to his feet with a weary sigh and returned to his instruments, telling the gurry to resume her work with the renewer.

It was a watch against death that they were keeping, their own and the woman's whose life they were striving to preserve, a watch and a race that would continue for hour upon dark hour and whose ending only the great Spirit ruling Space could know.

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