



From the mind of

P. M Griffin

**MIND
SLAVER**

STAR COMMANDOS 05

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BY

P. M. GRIFFIN



ArcheBooks Publishing

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A Novel By

P. M. GRIFFIN

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DEDICATION

To my aunt, Mollie Griffin Monahan, whose courage, spirit, and imagination inspire both the author and the books.

ONE

Varn Tarl Sogan switched off the nano¹ reader and sat back in his chair. He closed his eyes. They were burning, and he knew he had spent far too many hours in front of that screen.

Even at that, his efforts seemed useless, foredoomed. There was so much to be learned, and for an instant, he felt overwhelmed by the enormity of the task he had set himself. He had not known nearly so much about the planets of the Arcturian Empire, not even those of the star systems he himself had ruled, planets geophysically stable, populated only by his own race, warrior caste and the menials who existed to serve them, and by the very few other creatures his kind had permitted to continue sharing those worlds with them.

The planets constituting the Federation ultrasystem or allied with it were totally different, well-nigh infinitely varied both in themselves and in the life forms they supported, in the races occupying them. No one could hope to learn a fraction of what there was to know about them all.

Recognizing that fact was small comfort to the former admiral. He had to acquire a great deal of

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.”

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knowledge and acquire it quickly, particularly about the planets in these rim Sectors, if he was to effectively stand their defense as he was sworn to do as part of Ram Sithe's elite troubleshooting unit.

There were only four of them in the company: Commando-Colonel Islaen Connor, their field CO; Commando-Captain Jake Karmikel; Navy Sergeant Bethe Danlo, their demolitions expert and Jake's copilot on the *Jovian Moon*; and himself, now a captain in the Federation Navy. Sogan had accepted that he could not as yet match either of the two guerrillas in the surplanetary work for which they had been trained, but it behooved him, as second-in-command to Islaen, to at least not prove an impediment to them.

He got to his feet. He was tired, and with no emergency driving him, he saw no reason to push himself, mentally or physically, to the point of exhaustion. He was supposed to be on furlough, after all.

Varn's expression tightened but relaxed again almost in the same moment, partly because he willed it to do so.

Both he and Islaen did need this rest after the almost constant action they had seen since their fateful meeting on Vishnu. He had insisted that they take it on Thorne of Brandine because of the many friendships the colonel formed here while commanding the surplanetary Resistance during the last years of the War.

The usual harsh cast of his features softened. That had been a good move despite the sometimes intense discomfort he felt when he was forced to deal with the local populace, particularly in number. His consort's

delight, which was her pleasure in the beautiful planet herself and in the society of her friends and former comrades, was open for the reading. That was satisfaction enough for him.

It had to be, he thought with an inner sigh. He could expect nothing better. He might compel himself to come here or to other worlds within the great ultra-system, but he could never expect to find ease or real peace on any of them. Even without the fear of exposure, he doubted he would ever feel really at home, ever see himself as more than an alien, on any Federation world, or anywhere at all now that the Empire was irrevocably closed to him.

The man put that regret out of his mind as he always did when the longing for his own place and kind came over him. He had made his choice freely. He had been aware of that heavy consequences awaited him as a result of his decision when he had made it, although he had not anticipated the severity of them. They could not be altered, and the code of an officer of the Arcturian warrior caste demanded that he accept the decrees of fate and the fruit of his own work without shaming himself with useless protest or whining over that which could not be undone.

Because he could not quite banish the gloom which had settled on his spirit, he left the chamber where he had been working, passing through white lattice doors onto the broad terrace outside. Part of its fine garden swept around the house and lay below him. Just beyond, within easy sight, tossed Thorne's vast, incredibly wild ocean, eternally beating against the high

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cliff on which the building stood. His dark eyes went to it, stayed with it.

He loved water, fresh or salt, perhaps as much as he did the starlanes themselves, and this great sea most of all. Its beauty and mystery, its restless grace, touched deep chords within him, and so, too, did its power and the threat that was ever part of it. That mighty force out there could be a comrade to one who knew and respected it, but, like space, it would tolerate neither ignorance nor stupidity for long. Contempt, it would not endure at all.

Varn, Bandit's cold!

Sogan started as a small, brown-feathered creature fluttered to the railing on which his hands were resting.

The gurru's head raised so that her bright, black eyes looked up at him from out of the dark streak that circled her head like a robber's mask. She whistled sharply to emphasize her words, which had issued, not from the supple' yellow bill, but directly into his mind.

He cupped his hands around her, cuddling and warming her. "Sorry, Small One. I should have shut the door behind me. Thorne is a cool world for you."

Yes!

He brought her inside and discovered he was glad to be out of the breeze himself. Normally, he found the chill more bracing than uncomfortable, but a spacer's tunic alone was not sufficient covering to withstand its bite this close to the water.

The Arcturian opened the top drawer of his desk

and removed a small, amber-colored cube from a shallow box partly filled with more of its like. He offered it to his small companion. "Here. This should make up for my freezing you."

The little mammal's delighted purr and the speed with which she moved to accept the prize brought a smile to his lips. Bandit had a liking for anything sweet, and honey crystals ranked high among her favorites.

His attention lifted from her as another's thought brushed against his. *Islaen, welcome!* he responded in the form of speech they shared with no other human.

The Commando-Colonel entered the room, smiling as she caught sight of him. *We're about ready to go,* she told him. *How do I look?*

She did not really have to pose that question. Varn Tarl Sogan had made no effort to conceal either his admiration or the pleasure he always took in seeing her in Thornen costume.

Most fair, my Islaen. There will be no other to equal you.

She hesitated. *You're sure you won't come?*

Varn shook his head, smiling. *I should be in the way, Colonel. You have not yet seen some of those who will be present. They are all old comrades of yours, and I know full well that you will want to relive the battles you fought together. My presence would inhibit any such exchange.*

The woman was forced to agree with that. Thorne's people were a courteous race, too courteous to discuss their long war with the invaders who had held their planet for six hard years, the war she had led as head of the Federation penetration team sent in to aid their efforts, in front of the commander of those invaders. Varn Tarl

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Sogan had been a hated if respected enemy once, but that hatred changed fast when he cast away all he had valued in life and very nearly life itself to save Thorne of Brandine and every living thing upon her from the burn-off ordered by his deranged commander at the time of the Empire's surrender.

Even as that passed through her mind, another thought rose up to trouble her. *Such affairs are easily arranged. Would you rather that I didn't go to this one? We might take off on a sail instead—*

Varn looked at her with mock severity. *I am not without resources, Col. Connor. I think I can manage to amuse myself while you are gone.*

She laughed. *Sorry, Varn. I have been away from you a lot, though.*

Your pleasure is mine. Besides, he added, nodding at the nano reader, *I have been putting the time to good use.*

Islaen's brown eyes shadowed. *Too much, maybe. I don't want you killing yourself, Admiral. You needed this break as badly as I did.*

I shall do no more for a while, he promised. *Go on now, or you shall be late. It would be a poor payment for all the Doge's hospitality if you were to keep him waiting.* A smile flickered on his lips and in his eyes. *It would also be highly unpolitic.*

Sogan frowned as the gurry flew from the desk to the Commando's shoulder. *Leave Bandit,* he said quickly, then hesitated. *Unless she would miss too many handouts by staying.*

The woman's eyes sparkled. *No fear of that! I've seen*

how you keep that desk stocked.

He colored slightly but merely raised his hand in farewell. They both catered to the Jadite creature, but then, she had more than earned their consideration since she had adopted them on her homeworld and elected to accompany them into space. He gently stroked the gurry as the door closed behind his consort, or wife as was more commonly said in this ultrasystem.

Varn ran the tip of his finger over the sensitive area between her bill and eyes until he had her purring in ecstasy.

“Thank you, Small One,” Sogan said softly.

He knew that Bandit heartily enjoyed the attention she received at any gathering and realized that she was remaining behind only for his sake.

Varn did not deny that he derived a certain measure of security from her presence and made as great as possible use of her special talents whenever they found themselves on-world. Everyone liked guries, and all but the most warped or those gripped by powerful, violent emotion quickly fell under the spell of the enormous volume of goodwill the tiny Jadite mammals had the power to transmit, softening those around them not only in their favor but toward their companions as well.

That was a tightly guarded secret known only to the members of his team and to the settlers of Jade of Kuan Yin, as was the fact that guries could communicate mind-to-mind with those humans they adopted for their own. To the universe at large, they were merely extraordinarily engaging little animals, rarities whose export from Jade was absolutely forbidden save in this one

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case, an exception made because of the colonists' gratitude to their saviors and Bandit's attachment to the pair.

His finger dropped suddenly to tickle her with somewhat greater force. Varn smiled at her surprised, pleased squawk and parried the return thrust of her beak, hardly realizing what he was doing. He played with her readily now when they were alone like this, although he still would not do so even before Islaen.

A chill touched him, and his eyes quickly ran along the intricately carved walls of the room. Were they, in fact, alone? This was a Thornen house, and unseen watchers might well be present.

Only after his meeting with Islaen Connor had he learned that nearly every Thornen structure of any significance was riddled with concealed passages and chambers, and that his headquarters, his private quarters, had been under constant surveillance during most of the occupation. That knowledge had set a heavy load of guilt on him for the damage his own words must have wrought upon his troops. He struggled with it now and with a helpless fear and frustration.

The Arcturian chuckled suddenly, and his mood lightened. He was being a proper fool and insufferably vain besides. There was no reason in all space why any of these people should want to spy on him at this stage in his life. He was no longer of any importance to anyone but his own immediate comrades, and if the hate generated in the War still burned strongly enough to demand his death—well, that could be accomplished readily enough without resorting to an elaborate program of espionage.

“Come, Small One,” he said to the gurry. “I shall order some food to be brought to us and then get back to work. I do far better by keeping my mind occupied with some concrete problem.”

Yes!

Varn laughed aloud, not caring if anyone was watching him. He could not decide whether Bandit had merely been agreeing with his ever-welcome suggestion that they eat or commenting upon his final statement, and he did not press her for clarification. His ego might well be the happier for letting matters rest as they were.



Several hours passed quickly, then a knock roused the War Prince from his studies. The disturbance surprised him, but he gave his visitor permission to enter.

A very young man clad in the Doge's blue livery came into the room and advanced until he stood before the desk at which Varn was working. He was obviously ill at ease, for his orders, like those given to the rest of the staff assigned to the house, were explicit in that he was not to intrude at all upon this guest.

Sogan realized what troubled him. He had never enjoyed overawing others, even the menials serving in his palaces, and he spoke quickly to help dispel the Thornen's sense of trespass.

“Aye, lad?” he asked. “Mikron, is it not?”

“It is, Prince,” the boy replied, pleased to be recog-

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nized by this distant, widely famed man. "I am sorry to disturb you, but—"

"Go on. I know you would not have come to me without good cause."

"An Adm. Sithe has planeted and has asked to meet with you and Princess Islaen. He is being held in the port area. If you would prefer not to see him, he can be ordered to lift immediately."

"Of course I shall see him! Prepare a flier—"

"He will be brought here," the other replied stiffly. "You are the Doge's guests."

"Very well, then, but do not delay him any longer."

"Whatever you wish, Prince."

Sogan gave him a half smile, but his eyes were troubled. "It is rarely good policy to keep any admiral waiting, lad, and Ram Sithe is a man who has earned his rank. He would not have journeyed all the way from Horus without a pretty good reason."

"Your instructions will be obeyed at once, Prince," the Thornen assured him, his own voice mirroring concern.

"Recall Col. Connor as well. Send a fast flier for her."

"Aye, Prince."

Mikron started to turn but suddenly faced the Arcturian again. "You have been named a prince of our people," he said, speaking hastily but with determination. "That is not an honor we give lightly, and no off-worlder's rank counts for anything among us when laid against it."

He bowed low and hurriedly took his leave before the man could recover enough from his astonishment to make him an answer.

TWO

Varn rose to his feet when Navy Admiral Ram Sithe was shown into the room.

The newcomer was a relatively small man with the slim body and fine features typical of his southern Ter-ran sub-race. Strength and the aura of command rested on him, and his black eyes were steady. They could be either highly expressive or utterly inscrutable as the situation demanded.

He returned the Arcturian's salute but nodded almost immediately to the chair from which his host had risen and took the one set before the desk himself. "Sit, Captain. We might as well be comfortable."

Sogan obeyed. "I am terribly sorry about the delay at the port, sir."

"No problem. I presumed I wouldn't be admitted quickly. Thornens don't really like having off-worlders wandering around their planet." His eyes sparkled. "They put the time to good use by making sure I understood our relative status, or, rather, to stress that I have none where you and Col. Connor are concerned."

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His hands raised to silence the other's apology. "Relax, Captain. My ego's not that tender. I'm glad you two have found so comfortable a retreat."

Ram Sithe studied Sogan without making his scrutiny obvious. It was not often that he got the chance to do so. His dealings with this pair were almost exclusively conducted through Islaen, and he rarely saw the Arcturian at all.

Varn Tarl Sogan was a moderately tall man, slender of body with a soldier's carriage and a spacer's grace of movement. He had the strong, hard features of his race's warrior caste, and his hair and eyes were the same dark brown, a trait rarely found even in the Empire's highest ruling families, only in those who were closely connected by blood to the Emperor's own line. There was an authority on him that seemed his by right of birth and a reserve that set him apart from most of his species.

That, too, was part of Sogan's caste and the place he had held within it, War Prince as well as admiral, but the Terran imagined it had grown into a far more powerful force in the years since his exile. The Spirit of Space only knew, Varn Tarl Sogan had cause enough to distrust the greater part of humanity and those other races like it. He had not merited the brutality with which his own had used him, and the features he bore were enough to bring him a hard if fast death in a great many places throughout the Federation. The hatreds generated in the long War were bitter, and they were not likely to fade soon.

Despite the darkness of his history and the continu-

ing caution required of him, the former admiral had retained not only his courage but also the compassion which had moved him when he chose to spare Thorne of Brandine, a fact graphically illustrated since he surfaced on Vishnu. Those coming to know him even slightly responded to that and to other, less readily definable qualities, and many of his closer acquaintances evinced a sometimes fierce loyalty to him—witness the Thornens' efforts to screen their former invader from disturbance even by a ranking Federation officer.

Ram Sithe himself felt some guilt about troubling him. Both Sogan and his colonel had surely earned a measure of peace. More than that, they needed it. He had contemplated calling in one of the other Commando units and might still do so, but his instinct demanded that he choose this team, and he had learned long since never to disregard its promptings.

He had intended to see Islaen Connor, though, and it was unfortunate that her absence forced this interview. The Federation admiral sighed in his heart, though he took care to conceal his thoughts. The War Prince had to be uncomfortable behind that frigidly formal mask. Space knew, he was himself. Had there been any justice at all in this grim universe, Varn Tarl Sogan should be facing him as an equal, not as a subordinate, although they would then be representatives of two hostile powers. Sithe often wondered how he would have responded had fate treated him as monstrously. He found it easy to sympathize, to empathize, with the man, now and in a larger sense, and wished there was some way by which he might ease this meeting for both of them, especially

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since he preferred to hold off discussing the purpose of his visit until the Commando-Colonel was also present.

The Terran started as a feathered ball hurtled itself onto the desk in front of him. "What in space—"

The strange little creature looked up at him, whistling insistently.

He realized then what it was and ran the tips of his fingers down her back. "Your gurry! She's the talk of every maintenance crew on Horus, but Col. Connor never brought her to any of her meetings with me."

"That would hardly have been appropriate, sir."

"More's the pity," he replied gruffly. "She's a nice little thing."

Varn's eyes danced for a moment, although his expression did not otherwise change. It seemed that even the famed Adm. Sithe was not immune to Bandit's magic.

Despite his amusement at the immediate response she provoked, his mind sharply repeated his answer to Sithe.

The Jadite ignored him. By that time, she had assumed as a right her role of acting as a buffer between this human of hers and others of his kind when he chanced to encounter them. Besides, the newcomer was already friendly to them, and his long, sensitive fingers seemed to have been trained in the art of bringing pleasure to a gurry.

She returned to her former perch across the room a few seconds later when the Terran raised his eyes from her to face Varn once more. She knew Sogan

did not want her to remain too close, but she was satisfied with her performance. The feeling between the humans was better now.

The War Prince was relieved that Bandit had not fluttered to his shoulder as she often did during an interview. Ordinarily, he welcomed her presence or at least was not troubled by it, but this case was different. His disgrace shamed him enough before this one with whom he had so often matched wits and the strength of their fleets. He did not need to further reduce himself in the Terran's eyes.

Sogan felt annoyed with himself. These considerations were inconsequential now. Ram Sithe had not come to Thorne of Brandine without a good reason. What mattered was that his team would probably be in action again well before they had anticipated.

"How may we help you, sir?" Varn asked quietly.

"I periodically check my Commando bases and am currently on such a tour. Perhaps my visit is no more than that."

It was impossible to read the black eyes. Varn did not try. "Thorne is not a base," he responded a little wearily.

"She has become one as far as your team is concerned." He smiled. "You don't appear to believe me, Captain."

Despite himself, the Arcturian answered with a fleeting smile of his own. "I am afraid not, sir."

"Nor do I," a soft voice interjected from the doorway.

Both men looked up. They had not heard or, in

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Varn's case, felt the Commando-Colonel enter the room.

Varn Tarl Sogan's head raised in pride when he saw the way in which the other man straightened. Those who knew Islaen Connor were accustomed to seeing her either in uniform or, more commonly, in the casual spacer's garb normally adopted by the guerillas. That plus her rank and her competence tended to blind her associates to her startling beauty, and it pleased him to have that aspect of her receive its just homage as well.

The woman saluted smartly. She was well aware of how ludicrous the gesture must appear in one clad in exotic Thornen costume, and Varn felt her amusement even as she completed it.

Islaen maintained contact with him. She could read her consort's relief at her arrival and sensed that there was more behind it than his dislike of this interview, although his mind shields were so set as to deny her entry into his deeper thoughts.

Another mission? she asked.

I believe so. He has not said yet.

Sogan brought another chair over to the desk so that the Commando might sit beside him. *Are we alone?* his mind demanded sharply.

The Commando was surprised. She knew Varn sometimes brooded over the possibility of their attendants spying on them, but he recognized that as a weakness, a scar, of his and had never before mentioned it to her.

She caught herself. It was certainly not an unreason-

able fear now. This conference could be expected to arouse the interest and concern of their hosts. *Aye*, she assured him. *Thorne's people wouldn't violate our privacy without better motive than satisfying their curiosity.*

Once she had settled herself, she turned to their guest. "Well, Admiral, to what do we really owe the honor of this visit? You have a job in mind for us, I presume."

Ram Sithe nodded. "I do if you believe you're fit to take it on. I know the kind of pressure your team, and you two particularly, have had to bear since Vishnu, and I don't want to risk burning you out, not for this."

Islaen was quiet for a few seconds. She glanced at Varn and received his almost imperceptible nod in answer to her unvoiced question. "We've had time enough, though a little more would have been better."

"You can take it after this," he promised.

"The problem?" she asked.

"The site is in Quandon Sector."

The colonel started. "Quandon Sector! That's half-way around the ultrasystem, and—"

Sithe nodded. "And is normally serviced out of Deneva, not Horus. I know. I also have Commandos stationed there whom I could've ordered to take it on."

"Those were my thoughts, sir."

"As you know," Ram continued, chiefly for Sogan's benefit, since the former admiral might well not share his companion's knowledge of the region, "it al-

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ways was a fairly quiet Sector. It still is compared to some of the others, including this one. Quandon's planet-rich, but the War stopped development, and most of those now settled are in the first-ship stage or, at best, first or second generation from it. Most of the worlds have never been formally explored at all, and it's believed that there are probably as many more again yet to be discovered.

"Because of its undeveloped state, Navy and Patrol service has been light and irregular, and there's a chronic, low-grade pirate infestation, but the general paucity of good targets, surplanetary or merchant traffic, has served to hold them in check. They've never become the major threat they represent in some areas. Chiefly, they use the Sector as a rest base, a relatively safe region in which to overhaul their ships, though on a couple of occasions, they've staged major raids involving several packs out of there."

"Things are changing for the worse now that the War's over and development's progressing again?" Islaen asked shrewdly.

"Aye, or that seems to be what's happening."

The Terran leaned forward over his side of the desk, his eyes narrowing as a frown formed and deepened between them. "I'm not so sure it's that simple, and neither are the people on Deneva.

"Ships have been disappearing, right enough, all the ones that concern us from one general area. Vessels of every type have vanished, including a few that should have been of no interest to any wolf pack, and when I use the word 'vanished', I mean precisely that. No

sign of wreckage and no sign of their cargoes have surfaced.

“It’s hard to spook freighters servicing a rim Sector, but this Quandon situation’s getting to the captains operating there. They’re threatening to boycott the affected region entirely if something is not done fast. If they do, then three fine new colonies are likely to wither.”

His eyes went from one to the other of them. “They aren’t the only ones who’ve demanded help, either.”

“Who else?” the Commando asked, frowning. He was transmitting strong concern, almost fear. Where was all this leading?

“The pirates themselves.”

Both she and her consort straightened. “What?”

Sithe nodded grimly. “Aye. They haven’t approached us openly, of course, but some have sent requests for aid under the guise of being merchantmen. It seems their ships have been disappearing as steadily as legitimate craft and without any more trace, including a task force of their own that they sent in to investigate. After that failure, they decided they had enough and came to us, too.”

“You wish us to take up that investigation?” Sogan inquired quietly.

“I do.”

“You say one area appears to be involved. What does that mean in terms of distance, and do we have any clues, any planet which might be the focus of the trouble? I doubt it originates in the starlanes unless it is some natural phenomenon.”

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“That is a possibility. Unfortunately, the region’s a poorly studied one. We must act under the assumption that the source of the mystery is a more conscious agency, however, and our computers have selected nine planets from four star systems. Any one of them could hold the answers we want. I’ve pulled together everything we have on them and on the Sector itself. You can study the material while en route there.”

“Good enough. We may be able to pick up something from it.”

“Direct assault has proven a failure, so I’ve resolved to be a bit more subtle in our approach. You will be taken as close as is prudent to your target planets on a Patrol cruiser apparently on a routine sweep and will planet in your flier or in a lifecraft if the distance is too great for the former.”

Islaen felt Varn stiffen, although he gave no visible reaction. He had no desire to play the role of passenger on any other captain’s starship.

She was not pleased by that prospect herself, particularly if the Terran meant what he had said just now. “You mention a Patrol cruiser, sir,” she said, successfully keeping the sharpness which threatened to invade it out of her voice.

“Aye. A Navy craft would probably attract too much of the kind of attention we wish to avoid. You’ll fly to Deneva and pick up the *Free Comet* there. She’s a one hundred-class with a record to match anything of her size in the Navy. Patrol Commander Marta Florr holds the bridge. She’s something of a legend herself, as you’ll

find out from those nanos.” He looked into Sogan’s eyes. “Can you have the *Maid* off-world by tomorrow night, Captain?”

“I keep her space-ready,” Sogan replied stiffly. “We could lift within the hour.”

“All the better,” the admiral said. “Wait until morning, though. No use in making your departure too hurried even here. As long as you catch the *Free Comet* before her next scheduled lift-off, you’re all right.”

“Are we to work alone, sir?” the woman asked him.

“No. Capt. Karmikel and Sgt. Danlo are already en route to Deneva. They should planet well before you do.”

Both were relieved to hear that, but Sogan in particular. The unit was a team in fact, and it was well to know that he would have comrades upon whom he knew he could depend when they entered into potentially hostile territory, be it on the planets of Quandon Sector or on the Stellar Patrol’s *Free Comet*.

They discussed the upcoming mission in greater detail, then, after some more general conversation, Ram Sithe took his leave of the pair.

Varn said nothing for some moments after the admiral had gone. He stood with his back to his companion, apparently staring at the door leading out to the terrace but not actually seeing it.

He felt the colonel’s question touch his mind and turned apologetically. *Sorry. I was thinking.*

Obviously, she responded, frowning. What’s wrong?

Nothing. He stopped. No, I lie there. I have a very ill feeling about all this, Islaen Connor.

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Over and above your dislike of shipping out on this Free Comet? she asked him bluntly.

The man flashed her an angry look but nodded in the next moment. *Aye.* He shook his head, as if trying to banish the thoughts filling his mind. *It is stupidity, I suppose. Spacer's superstition and nothing more.*

Maybe. Islaen could put no conviction into her reply. Sogan had experienced misgivings about assignments in the past, and they had proven all too well founded. That coupled with Ram Sithe's strong instinctive belief that their unit must be the one to take this assignment on did not speak well for their upcoming mission.

With a great effort, the War Prince threw off the gloom pressing down on him. *Are you very tired?* he asked suddenly.

No, Islaen replied in surprise. *Why?*

I thought we might go for that sail you mentioned this morning. It appears we shall not have another chance for a while.

The Commando stared at him for a moment, then the answer came to her. Varn Tarl Sogan was sorry to be leaving Thorne, a regret sharpened by his ugly premonition regarding the work ahead of them. He wanted, and wanted fairly strongly, to have what might be his final interaction both with her and with the ocean he had come to love.

She nodded her agreement, smiling and screening her own thoughts so that he should not realize she had guessed what lay behind those tight shields of his.

Order the boat, Admiral! I'll be with you as soon as I get

into something a bit more appropriate.

THREE

The frenzied yet ordered activity that preceded lift-off was in full progress around the Patrol cruiser *Free Comet*. To the untrained eye, the scene would have seemed one of utter disorder, but the former admiral, watching it all from the high observation walk, could only admire the precision and apparent ease with which the hands carried out their complicated tasks. A highly professional crew, he thought with grudging admiration, probably the match of most in the Arcturian Navy.

They had to be. The history of their ship was proof of that. The War had hit the Stellar Patrol hard. Many of its personnel had volunteered or were mustered into the great Federation Navy, and replacements had not been easy to find. Supplies had been equally scarce, to the degree that commanders had been forced to scavenge to meet even their most urgent requirements. Conditions had scarcely improved since the end of the great conflict.

It was a bad time for such general weakness, for never had there been greater need for a strong Patrol fleet. With the best of every Federation planet still on the front or scattered in the general demobilization, the scum that remained behind in wartime in an ultrasystem so governed had found an almost clear field for their

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activities. Pirates had flourished, some wolf packs becoming so large as to constitute small fleets, miniature navies in their own right.

The rim planets, with most of their own defensive forces gone and unable to depend on the weakened Patrol for aid, had been hard-pressed to resist the vermin preying upon them and on the few freighters daring enough to continue servicing them.

For year after weary year, during the War and since, the desperately undermanned ships of the Stellar Patrol had fought a seemingly hopeless battle to stem the growing power of these outlaw fleets, which in places became great enough to threaten to destroy from within what countless Federation soldiers had died to preserve.

The *Free Comet* was one of these. From the time she was commissioned, she had proven a fighter, penetrating endangered star systems and succeeding in her missions with startling regularity. As her reputation grew, she had been given the difficult, then the nearly impossible assignments that arose out of a universe in turmoil, and still she triumphed.

The cruiser's amazing record was directly due to her mistress, Marta Florr of Terra, and to the crew she had forged from the seemingly poor raw material left her by the heavy musters. A daring, resourceful company with a penchant for discovering unorthodox solutions to the challenges confronting them, they had made their starship the terror of every dark-souled spacer operating in Quandon Sector and in those adjoining it. She was the logical choice to aid in the solving of this mystery.

The man glanced at his companion. *We had best be*

going down, I suppose.

Aye.

They lifted their packs and stepped onto the descent platform. A few minutes later, they were standing at the base of the cruiser. Varn ran his eyes up her sleek side. She was a fair ship, showing the care and pride of her crew. She was also a large vessel compared to the *Fairest Maid* and the others of her class with which he now chiefly dealt.

In actuality, though, he knew her to be relatively small. Even the Patrol had larger ships, and she would not have served as a lifecraft for one of the enormous battleships of the Federation Navy, vessels so immense that they never set down on any planet but were moored like satellites in space.

All this passed through his mind as they approached the boarding ramp. They paused there while Islaen presented their orders to the sentry, a Sirenian if the red tint of her skin spoke true. The woman spent a long time checking their credentials against her own orders.

Sogan smiled. Her obvious youth plus a certain stiffness in her manner betrayed her as one who faced her first voyage in deep space.

Satisfied at last, the yeoman returned their papers and gave the pair formal permission to board. Perhaps because she was so unfamiliar with her surroundings herself, she volunteered directions both to the commander's office and to the crew's cabin before they had to ask for them.

The pair passed through the open hatch but halted once they were inside.

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I had best see Commander Florr at once, the colonel told her comrade. Go on and wait for me in the crew's cabin. I'll join you there when I'm done.

He frowned slightly. *I might do better to check out our quarters first.*

Agreed, but in both services, the first thing a newcomer does on any ship is head for the crew's cabin for a quick look at his crewmates, even before he drops off his pack. For us to do otherwise would mark us as decidedly odd.

And I am odd enough as it is?

I didn't say that!

The woman saw the rather welcome sparkle in his eyes and stopped herself. *You wouldn't have been too pleased if I'd agreed with you,* she told him tartly.

Probably not. You will keep Bandit with you? he asked doubtfully as the gurry poked a sleepy head from beneath Islaen's service jacket.

Aye. I think it's best to introduce her to the commander right away. This isn't a ship noted for mascots, apparently, and I don't want to chance having any problems about keeping her with us.

They separated, and Islaen Connor turned into the hall to her right, following the Sirenian's instructions. It was fortunate she had them, she realized. There were few enough around whom she might have asked. This section of the *Free Comet* was all but deserted, the greater part of her crew still being occupied outside and below with the tasks of loading and fueling.

That was work of no small importance, and she was pleased with the attention the Patrol agents seemed to devote to it. They had learned the ways of the starlanes

through hard experience, and they accorded these port-side duties the respect they merited, knowing there would be little opportunity to acquire forgotten supplies on the rim many weeks hence or to repair the effects of a careless error now.

It was eerie walking through the empty hall. The life systems had already been activated, and she found herself wondering for whom—or for what.

The feeling was queerly familiar. The Commando placed it suddenly. It had been like this when she preceded the salvage crew aboard that projectile-blasted brig in her first year of active service.

Islaen Connor shook off the strangely unsettling sensation. There was reason for it then, she reminded herself. Horror had its place in war. Here all was normal, as it should be.

The guerrilla located the cabin she wanted without difficulty. The door was plain, with nothing to distinguish it from any of the others lining the passageway but its number and the neatly stenciled name of the commander. Islaen received an immediate reply to her brisk knock. She entered the cabin and came to attention before the *Free Comet's* mistress. She studied the Terran woman closely with eyes and mind and liked what she found, including the intensity and nature of the scrutiny she found turned on herself.

There was an air of ease as well as the expected competence and custom of command about Marta Florr. The neck clasps of her tunic were unfastened, giving even the binding Patrol dress uniform a relaxed appearance. Her desk was cluttered without

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giving the impression of a rodent's nest.

Marta was a classic Terran, though of a type different from those who had given rise to Noreen's offspring. Her body was stocky and strong without real bulk. The features were heavy but were not unattractive for that reason.

Her age was difficult to determine and was irrelevant in any case. Science had long since eliminated the deterioration which had once accompanied advancing years so that there was little physical difference between a person of twenty-five and one of eighty-five. The lines marring her face and the gray she permitted to shoot through the otherwise dark hair were born of the care she had known these past years rather than of the effects of time. There was certainly no blight in her eyes. They were steady, confident, and their particular green color gave them a strangely piercing look. Her hair was worn short rather than in the tightly coiled braids adopted by Islaen and most other female spacers.

Marta returned her passenger's salute and then waved her into a chair. "Welcome, Col. Connor. I've been eager to meet you after the account Adm. Sithe gave me of your unit's history."

"I only hope you won't find us a disappointment, Commander."

"I won't," she declared flatly. "I just hope we won't be going into anything as dramatic as some of your previous missions."

"That's a wish we all share," the guerrilla agreed a trifle grimly.

A sharp chirp drew the older woman's attention to the colonel's shoulder. "This must be your gurry."

"Aye. Her name's Bandit."

The Jadite looked directly into Marta Florr's face, her bright, black eyes meeting the human's green ones. She whistled for more attention and purred in apparent delight at receiving even so much notice.

The Terran restrained herself from actually petting the small creature, but a soft, amused smile gentled her expression. "Ordinarily, I don't encourage the presence of animals aboard the *Comet*, but this little thing doesn't look like she'll be much trouble."

"She won't," Islaen Connor assured her. "Besides, Bandit is part of my unit, not merely a mascot."

Marta's smile broadened. "So your papers indicate, but after seeing her, I must confess to a certain difficulty in envisioning an attack gurry in action."

Islaen laughed. "It'd be an unlikely role, all right! Her kind loves just about anyone who fusses over them." She grew serious once more. "In truth, though, she did go for one of the locals on Hades when he assaulted my second-in-command."

"With what result?" the Patrolwoman asked in some surprise.

"We'd already disarmed him, but she succeeded in defusing a very nasty situation."

"I imagine the idea of doing battle with a gurry would be likely to produce that effect," she agreed. The green eyes narrowed. "Why was your comrade

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attacked in the first place? It can't have been by the pirates if the trouble was aborted so readily."

"Hades of Persephone suffered heavily during the War. Her people hate anything reminding them of an Arcturian."

"Your teammate did?"

Islaen's head lifted. "Aye, and so would a good third of your crew, to judge by what I've seen of them." She quickly turned back to the Jadite. "Bandit was the real heroine of that mission."

Islaen went on to describe the role the gurry had played in Jake's rescue from the crawlway in which he had been trapped far below Hades' surface.

Marta Florr did stroke the little creature when the Commando finished speaking. "It's hard to believe she could manage so complex a task. We tend not to see intelligence of that level in an animal of this size."

"Jade's guries are quite bright, and Varnt was directing her during the whole of it. She works very well with him."

Islaen Connor seemed to use the name that Sogan adopted for his alias at the beginning of his life in exile casually, but in fact she had done so intentionally, as she had purposely mentioned the trouble they had experienced on Hades. This one was sharp, maybe *too* sharp, and she had felt from the beginning of their interview that it would be a better move to draw down Varn's apparent resemblance to their former enemies at once, as if without thought, than hope it would pass unnoticed and have the truth about his race be guessed or suspected during the voyage. That discovery could bring trouble on

them all, and the real possibility of such a situation's arising was the cause of most of her reluctance to ship out in a Patrol vessel.

Varn's recent history would not be as well known or appreciated in this service as in her own. A similar Navy crew, at least one basing out of Horus, would be well aware of it, and whether they knew his full story or not, they would be friendly toward him, toward them all.

"That's quite a tale, Colonel," Marta told her. "You don't have to fear for Bandit's reception here. So brave a little soldier will always be welcome aboard the *Free Comet*."

"Thank you, Commander."

Their conversation turned to graver matters after that, their mission and the knowledge the *Comet's* mistress had regarding it, which was chiefly a more detailed repetition of Ram Sithe's earlier account.

At last, the Patrol commander rose to her feet. "I hope you'll be comfortable, Colonel." Her eyes narrowed slightly as they fixed curiously on her passenger for a moment, but she did not voice her question. "Your admiral requested that we give your team as much privacy as possible, and I've turned our Exploratory Force's quarters over for your use. You'll have them to yourselves."

Islaen arose as well. "I'm sorry for that trouble."

"Don't be. It won't hurt my Rangers at all to mingle with the Regulars for a while. They're part of the crew even if they do most of their work on-world. Your gear has been brought on board. You should check it out as soon as you can. We'll be lifting shortly, but

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there's still time to secure anything we may have forgotten."

"And my other two comrades, Capt. Karmikel and Sgt. Danlo?" she asked.

"Both have been on board since yesterday morning. They oversaw the equipping of your unit."

"Excellent! You seem to have thought of everything, Commander." Islaen smiled. "You've gone to a considerable amount of trouble for us. We do appreciate it."

Marta Florr touched one of the files on her desk. "According to this, you've more than earned a little consideration, Colonel. The *Free Comet* is glad to supply it."

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