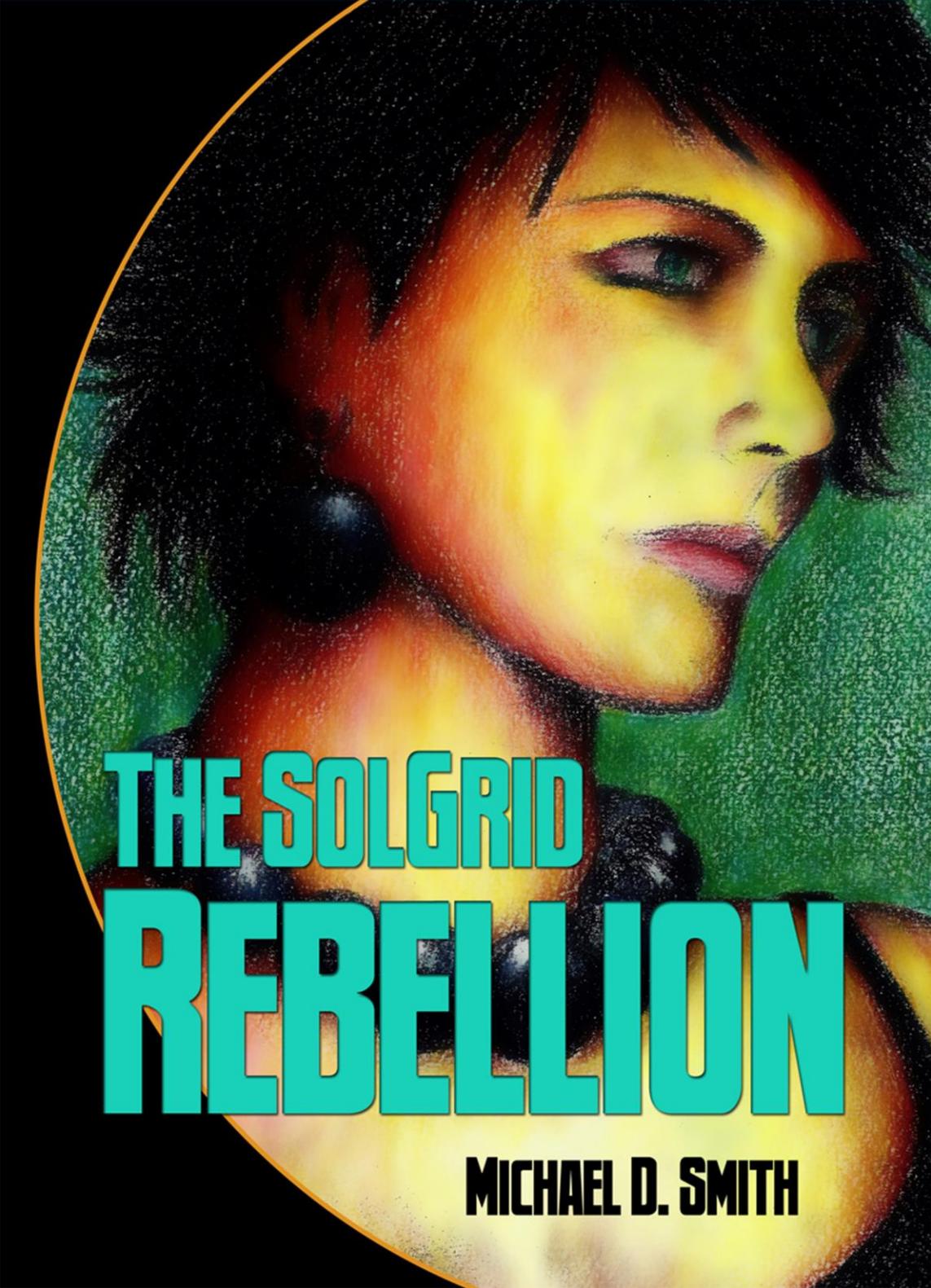


BOOK SIX OF THE JACK COMMER SERIES



**THE SOLGRID
REBELLION**

MICHAEL D. SMITH

The SolGrid Rebellion
Book Six of the Jack Commer Series

Michael D. Smith

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For my wife Nancy

CHAPTER ONE

A Beagle and a Blouse at the Saturnalian
Monday, April 13, 2076, 2025 hours

One handsome young man in black set out plates and another placed five fresh glasses of wine on the candlelit table. As the waiters withdrew, Patrick James looked from his steak to the sixth dinner guest beside him shoving a toothy muzzle into his own meat.

Excellent! Trotter beamed, chewing and gulping.

How did the waiters keep from gagging? How did anyone put up with this? Of course, the management had been thoroughly charmed by Jonathan James Commer over the past six months, just as everyone in New Houston had been. Naturally JJC's Beagle Trotter would be allowed a seat at the Saturnalian.

Trotter outclassed them all tonight in his tuxedo and bow tie. Pat, Sanders, and Jonathan James wore sport coats without ties, and the women were also informal, Jackie in a clingy navy-blue dress and Suzette in orange blouse and miniskirt.

That orange blouse sat to his left. That seriously transparent orange blouse, and that devastatingly transparent orange bra, as if she were topless beside him. And her slender legs crossed in that miniskirt.

Why couldn't Pat just admit he'd fallen in love with Suzette Borman? He closed his eyes to the sound of the tuxedoed dog wolfing steak off his plate.

Thank God Trotter was Dark. They all were. Pat and Sanders had agreed to remain Dark as they worked on the SolGrid programming, and he knew only too well how averse JJC, Jackie, and Suzette were to the Grid. Only Trotter occasionally issued a comment, though this wasn't via SolGrid but through the Martian telepathic outradiance the dog had mastered decades ago.

Pat lifted his wine glass. The Saturnalian kept its gravity at a standard 1G, as Pat did at SolGrid's offices. The absurdly light surface gravity of Enceladus was fun, but he'd found he couldn't concentrate on his work when every movement either went awry or had to be thought through in advance. Even setting a comm on a worktable in one-tenth gravity required some mental adjustment.

He regarded Jonathan James with unease. The young man wore a dark blue coat over a collarless purple shirt. His long brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail and his big hairy hands protruded from too-short sleeves as he fingered the stem of his wine glass. Tall, skinny JJC gave the impression of being frail until you noticed those powerful biceps and forearms. He sat with the women to either side, Jackie on his left and Suzette to his right.

That bastard thought he understood women so well. Maybe that came from frying his brains on being Emperor of Alpha Centauri for a few minutes last year, with trillions of Centaurian females running amok in his mind and worshipping him. In any case the ladies sure flocked to him now. A lot of people had underestimated JJC, Pat thought sourly. Including himself.

Pat set his wine down and tried to ignore Trotter slurping at a bowl of water. "Okay, guys, look, anyone can see something's up here."

Forks momentarily halted. JJC looked up with a smile. "Something *up* here?"

"C'mon, anyone can see something's going on here. You call this dinner, you say it's the last time we can get together, and so what's the deal?"

JJC grinned. "Why don't you just dip into your little SolGrid and find out?"

"You know damn well that's not how it works." Any idiot knew that if the others weren't participating in the Grid, Pat wouldn't find any information unless he happened upon some other

person privy to whatever JJC's knew. "So you call this dinner, and it's all *so* mysterious."

"I didn't *call* any dinner. I *invited* my friends here because I wanted their company. I'm not some hotshot corporate president who *calls* dinners."

Pat blinked at the insult. Okay, so he'd called a few dinners here himself as SolGrid president. But the others weren't SolGrid, just Pat and Sanders. Jackie had her own projects to attend to and had never shown any interest in the company, and Suzette had her complicated life running between her husband back on Mars and her new lover Jonathan James. Jonathan James and his damn telepathic dog.

"Okay, okay," Pat said, "I just wanted to say I know your little secret and it's damn stupid if you ask me. I can't believe it of any of you."

The others were silent. Pat had a moment of satisfaction seeing JJC blink, but Jonathan James took a sip of his golden wine and recovered, turning to the other tables to assess the noise level. Pat followed his gaze to the windows and the icy mountains beyond the small buildings of New Houston's main street. Above it all loomed the giant yellow sphere of Saturn undergoing reconstruction by the Martians.

JJC turned back. "I'm surprised, Pat. I really didn't think SolGrid could pick that up if we were Dark."

"*Grr ... uff!*" Trotter put in with a hint of warning.

Pat winced. He kept forgetting that the dog understood every word they said. He was also tired of JJC's irritating nicknaming habit. Things had definitely changed between them since their first dinner last December. He and Sanders had been deep into creating SolGrid when Jack Commer's son showed up asking for an interview. Sanders had maintained that JJC might have some insight into the software, but Pat protested that everyone knew the twenty-eight-year-old had burned his brains out messing with the fascist Alpha Centaurian Grid a few months previously. But since JJC was his old friend Jack's son, Pat reluctantly agreed they could take some time out and invite the kid to dinner.

Two things had immediately surprised Pat. First, instead of applying for a job, JJC pleaded with Pat to scrap all plans for SolGrid, but seeing that Pat wasn't budging from his fresh United System contract to build just such an application, Jonathan James began a campaign to introduce safeguards against any Alpha Centaurian-style brainwashing. Over the past few months Pat had promised a dozen add-ons which he always found excuses not to implement. There just hadn't been time with the threat of Wounded spies in Sol.

The second revelation was more astounding. It was painfully obvious that both Jackie and Sanders' girlfriend Suzette were smitten with the young man. Jackie was seventy-six but rejuvenated to mid-thirties, and she was *drooling*. Pat's own girlfriend was drooling for this brain-damaged fool. And Suzette Borman, forty-two but never rejuvenated, looking so alarmingly hard and used up, was giggling, swatting JJC's thigh, and hanging onto his shoulder. Lee Borman's wife, who'd been having an affair with Sanders Hirte for God knew how long.

Pat had recoiled in disgust at JJC's charisma. It was an unruly and much more powerful version of his father's leadership charm, and over the next months Pat had gotten more than enough of it shoved down his throat. But before long JJC was somehow part of the SolGrid group, even though he was passionately devoted to dismantling Pat's ultimate achievement.

"Look, it's obvious something's been up for a while. This opposition to SolGrid you have. And somehow you've brainwashed everyone else into it."

JJC narrowed his eyes. "Let's not use that term if you don't mind, Mr. Patster."

"Okay, okay, all I meant was that something's up, and now I know what it is."

“Here’s how he found out,” Sanders said, passing his comm across Jackie to JJC. “He hacked Jackie’s comm. She hadn’t upgraded to 9.22 yet and so it’s been relatively unprotected.”

“Really?” Jackie said, hand to her breast. “I thought 9.22 was optional.”

“It’s optional if you want your boyfriend to hack into your messages,” Sanders grinned, the wild tattoos all over his face expanding and contracting.

“Dammit, Sanders!” Pat cried. “How dare you!”

“That reminds me,” JJC said. “Sanders, let’s get all our comms upgraded with the latest darkware.”

“I just did right now,” Sanders replied. “All four of us are now on the latest.”

Pat pointed at JJC. “*You--giving orders to--to--*” he sputtered.

JJC shrugged.

“*Grrrr!*” Trotter said. He gulped down the rest of his steak and eyed Pat’s.

Pat turned to Sanders. “You’re *taking* orders? From *him?*”

Sanders also shrugged.

“Dammit, you’re my first assistant!”

“Aw, c’mon, Pat, you know the problems of SolGrid,” Sanders said softly. “It’s out of control, man, it really is. It’s time we all admitted it.”

“It’s *not* out of control. You of all people should know that.”

“Well, looks like we don’t have a serious security problem after all,” JJC drawled as he scrolled through Sanders’ comm. “Mr. Patster here just knows from his hack that we’re all sick of this crap and that we’re leaving. Let’s just say I’ve kept the *means* in my head this whole time. And Sanders’ head, of course. We do things the old-fashioned way. We *talk*. So as far as I can tell, you don’t know everything.”

“This is *unbelievable*. So you’re leaving, all of you! Even Sanders! Even *you*, Jackie! Where the hell do you think you’re all going? What’s all this going to prove anyway?”

JJC leaned back in his chair, again assessing other diners’ ability to overhear. “Let’s just say that I’ve got a nice, Dark place all picked out. Sanders knows exactly where it is.”

Sanders nodded. “Sorry to turn in my resignation, you know, Pat. It was fun for a while.” To Pat’s dismay, Sanders reached into his coat pocket and withdrew a sheet of plasti-paper folded into thirds. He passed it across Trotter who sniffed it as it went by.

“Dammit, Sanders, I can’t believe this!” Pat gasped, unfolding the letterhead.

*SolGrid, Inc.
1522 Main Street, Suite 114
New Houston, Enceladus
Office of the First Assistant*

I hereby resign at the end of the business day, April 13, 2076.

Pat involuntarily checked his wristwatch. 8:30 PM. “Really? You’re already gone? After all we’ve been through together?”

“Don’t take it too hard, man. You’ve been great to me, you really have. But I have to get out on my own now. And hell, Pat, it finally hit me just how wrong SolGrid is. How wrong the whole *concept* is. I just can’t do it anymore.”

The letters on the page surged in and out of focus. With trembling hands Pat laid the paper atop his salad. He turned to Jackie across the table. “You too? You’re leaving the Committee

and--and *everything?*”

He couldn't bring himself to add: *And me too?*

Jackie shrugged. For the first time in months Pat saw her as a beautiful woman, not just as a girlfriend who dropped in now and then to interrupt his work on SolGrid. God, she was elegant. That perfectly sculptured face, that flawless body in that tight dark blue dress. What had he been thinking all these months? Why hadn't he noticed how noble she was? He'd been so consumed with the business. Four hours of sleep was the standard. His mind was so locked into programming that a few nights ago he'd exited the office airlock with his EnviroField's AutoMode switched off, to find himself on Main Street with no air, no pressure, temperature four hundred degrees below zero. Fortunately Sanders had been right behind him and maxed his own EnviroField over him, saving his worthless life. Another quarter second and he'd have been gone.

“This--this is just something I need to do,” Jackie said. “I'll take a leave of absence from the Committee. Get back to them later, after things settle down. The Ywritt won't mind. I think they need a break from us too, tell you the truth. Look, Pat, I know SolGrid's important to you, I really do. But after looking into it, after *knowing* it, there's something wrong. I can't explain exactly, but it's wrong for *me*.”

“And you're going with *him*, without even knowing where you're going?”

“Yes, dammit! It has to be secret because of SolGrid itself! Can't you understand we're all tired of being under your *surveillance?*”

“We're *all* pulling out, Mr. Pat,” Suzette put in gently. “Jonathan James knows where he's going. We *trust* him.”

Pat whirled to her; he'd forgotten the goddess next to him. “Yeah, I suppose you'd have to go, wouldn't you?” He was aware of the bitter disdain in his voice but the sight of her dark nipples clearly visible through the orange blouse was too much for him. He could feel her smiling brown eyes and finally looked up to meet them.

“Of course I have to go with my man, Mr. Pattycakes! And I'm sorry to report right to your dear face that SolGrid *does* suck, Patio! Sorry to be the one to tell you that, honeycakes!” She pressed warm fingers to his upper leg. Pat stared in shock.

I love her! I love her!

His eyes wrenched from the hand still on his leg, across her miniskirted thighs, up over the full, nearly nude breasts, and finally to that unfathomable, taunting Mediterranean face.

“We've taken a vow to fight your SolGrid, Mr. Pat. That's just the way it is!”

Pat was lost in her laughing eyes, and everyone at the table knew it, even Trotter who was nuzzling the remains of Pat's meat and potato off his plate. What had happened with her rejuvenation? How did she get to be so transcendently beautiful? She'd been *horrifying* before, even though the tough, aging creature had somehow captured Jonathan James within a week of that first dinner. The two had openly been a couple since then, and Sanders truly didn't mind. “What the hell, it was time for her to switch off,” was the only comment Pat had gotten out of his first assistant. But to Pat, Sanders Hirte's former saucy girlfriend and Lee Borman's wandering wife had always seemed akin to an ex-whore meth addict.

So he'd scoffed when Suzette announced she was finally getting her first rejuvenation therapy this spring. He'd assumed she'd be frozen at her stone-hard texture for the next two hundred years, but everyone was astonished when she'd emerged from the treatment at the end of March, just two weeks ago. Suzette was dazed to find her body, her skin, her energy, her sexuality, all reversed to age nineteen in one of the rare cases where rejuvenation actually turned

the aging process backwards. Usually rejuvenation kept you at a robust late thirties or early forties, but there were varying results including people like JJC's own counselor, who so far hadn't taken well to his treatment and looked his eighty years.

The group had been thrown into disarray by Suzette's impossible beauty and the sex hormones blasting everywhere. JJC was delighted, but the fact that he'd already been besotted with her before rejuvenation only added to her own addiction to him. Jackie was secure enough to show no jealousy, but it was obvious that she, like Pat, struggled to accommodate an extremely sexually active teenager in their midst.

Pat had wondered if Sanders would turn back in Suzette's direction, but he'd seemed to shrug the entire thing off. What was he doing with that huge oversexed body these days? Was he heading over to the prostitutes on Cleaver Street? Pat had been there twice himself and each time had sworn he'd never return. Now he was contemplating leaping from this table and going for his third.

Because there was Suzette. And he *loved* her. She was so magnificent. And she *smiled* at him, half-naked right next to him, touching his leg, arousing him, for God's sake. Even as she insulted SolGrid, his sole reason for existence.

Like the rest, she knew SolGrid was broken. But how could they know how bad it really was? Pat hadn't even told First Assistant Sanders how bad it was.

He wrenched his glance from her dangerous eyes, from her lips, from the intoxicating blouse. "Look, none of you really has the slightest idea what you're talking about!" he tried, even as it sank in even further than they all knew. The entire solar system knew.

CHAPTER TWO

Draft One Must Die!

JJC laughed. “You know, Mr. Pat, my first thought when I got to Enceladus was to blow up your damn headquarters. Not that I’d want to hurt you personally or anyone. I figured I could do it in the dead of the night, you know. But I’m not a terrorist, and anyway Hirte says you have so many backup locations it wouldn’t matter.” He waved at the frozen mountains outside, at the temperatures flirting with absolute zero. “And I can’t bring myself to blow up this charming little artist colony.”

Pat stared at Trotter, who was fully onto Pat’s plate, scarfing down the salad with his nose pulsating under Sanders’ resignation letter. Pat knew it was over. He loved SolGrid. He loved the office and the state-of-the-art computer equipment in there. But it was all over anyway whether JJC blew it up or not. The endless nights working on the program, so elegant, so mesmerizing. All for nothing.

Okay, so he wasn’t getting enough sleep. So he wasn’t sampling the wonders of the damn artist colony. He loved New Houston anyway. Enceladus had originally been the province of Martians repairing it from the Saturn explosion of 2031 and guiding this and the other moons back into their former orbits. Then scientists arrived to probe the newly-discovered primitive life forms in the underground ocean, and somehow museums had gravitated here, science museums and art museums and then galleries and pottery studios, restaurants like the swanky Saturnalian, and endless bars. Freaky creative types in EnviroFields pranced everywhere in the one-tenth gravity, and bikers roared through town on moon motorcycles, though they actually roared by broadcasting EnviroField frequencies which anyone could turn off or on as they chose, depending on how much local color they wanted. One brainless jerk had actually hit escape velocity on his bike and had to be rescued by the USSF.

But Pat’s friends were leaving, mocking him, turning on him. Suzette whom he loved. His friend Sanders Hirte. How had this Jonathan James son of a bitch gotten control of his Sanders?

Sanders had been the bouncer at Lee and Suzette’s nightclub in Marsport, and Pat had snatched him up the day he’d finalized the contract for SolGrid with the United System Council. Yeah, people had squawked; nobody could understand how an apparent drifter like Hirte could become Pat’s top programmer, but Pat knew Hirte’s talents and was certain he had just the man for the job. It was the first week of December and they’d had to move fast to get SolGrid done by the end of the year.

“Dammit, guys, doesn’t anybody remember that we’re really still at war?” Pat cried. “Doesn’t anyone remember the Wounded?”

JJC sat back. “Mr. Patster, we must’ve had this conversation a hundred times.”

Hirte shrugged. “We did what we set out to do, Pat. Now we’ve got to come to terms with the *problems* in SolGrid.”

“Nobody knew whether they were coming down our throats the next second or not!” Pat yelled. “Can’t you idiots ever understand that? Sanders, *you* understood!”

“I know, man, I know, but think about the static, and the privacy violations, and the damage to SolNet itself.”

“There’s ... no damage, really.” But nobody knew better than Pat what the so-called auxiliary application SolGrid had done to the SolNet infrastructure. Even Sanders didn’t know all of it. The thirty kid programmers still coding away down at 1522 Main this evening on their cute little SolGrid apps had no clue. Or the five hundred employees of the Marketing Department

scattered across the solar system, in fact the largest part of SolGrid. Despite involving Hirte in much of the secondary programming, Pat had written Draft One of SolGrid himself in defiance of Section 14 of the contract. And nobody but Pat was allowed to look at the Telepathic Kernel.

People called him a genius. If they only knew he'd just memorized Phil Sperry's hack of the Alpha Centaurian Grid last summer. He'd been fully inside the Grid. All anybody had to do was *look*, and commit the damn Grid kernel to memory.

Yes, SolGrid was based at its core on the *Alpha Centaurian Grid*.

God, what if he just blurted that out? Sure, he had safeguards in place. Special human frequency blocks. Too bad they just didn't work.

Faces turned away from him. Even Trotter had his head down.

They all must have dropped him a long time ago. He'd been working nonstop since December 2nd. Even after they implemented SolGrid on the last day of December, he just couldn't let up. How much of the group dynamics had he missed? He'd tried to persuade himself that JJC might provide interesting counterarguments for him to gnaw on, that his presence in the group might be a catalyst for breakthroughs. He'd dismissed Suzette's whines as mere echoes of JJC's thinking, but hadn't realized that Jackie had also turned against SolGrid.

Sanders was the big surprise. Over the last week he'd been coming to Pat with concerns about the static, the SolNet pollution, and database decay, but Pat had assumed Hirte wanted to work on these problems. Now he'd given up.

They all had. Pat would return to Command Cubicle One tomorrow without any of them. No more dinners at the Saturnalian. No more Jackie. She wanted Jonathan James. God, the kid would take both women. Maybe share them with goddamn Sanders.

Pat reeled at the vision of the four of them groping each other in bed. Another chug of wine didn't help. "Dammit, we've outed 7,129 Wounded robots since December! Fifteen more just today! We *saved* the goddamn solar system from getting Sphered like Iota Persei last year! And what do you do? You whine and complain and run off to start some *sex commune!*"

"Wow, what's Mr. Pattycakes have on *his* mind, I wonder?" Suzette laughed, poking his thigh. "Dear Mr. Pattycakes, aren't you *romantic!*"

Trotter barked happily.

"*Dammit ...*" Pat muttered, aware of other diners following this exchange.

JJC laughed. "C'mon, this ain't no sex commune, Patio. Believe me, we're gonna pick up *followers*. If you haven't noticed, there are millions of people totally fed up with SolGrid. The only ones who still love it are the SolGrid addicts."

"*No ...*" Pat moaned. He was tempted to roll into the Grid and verify what JJC was saying, but he kept up his guard. He'd only allowed himself into PublicGrid a couple times for quick tests. AdminGrid was a different matter. It had only one member. In fact, he'd been so rattled he'd forgotten to delete Hirte from EditGrid. He burst into Admin and it was like a cold bucket of water over his head.

Across the table Sanders blinked at being deleted.

"Sorry, man, sorry," Pat muttered, reluctant to relinquish the cool Admin and return to his humiliation at the dinner table. "But I can't have you in there anymore. And I demand you honor the nondisclosure agreement."

"Agreed," Sanders said. "No big deal. Anyway, we're leaving, and I'm done with any sort of Grid. JJC has this *vision*, I guess you could say."

"Look, Pat," Jackie put in, "we know SolGrid has done some good, especially in January when it began flushing out all those Wounded. But SolNet's never been right, and think about

the Martians. About all that static coming into their outradiance.”

“Aaah, screw the goddamn Martians,” Pat said. “Bunch of wimps. I told ’em they’d feel it a little bit, but of course they have to exaggerate it all out of proportion.”

“A *little* bit? It’s *wrong*, Pat. It’s not working, and you know it.”

“But this is my *life*. This is what I was called on to *do!*”

“And anyway, if there are any Wounded left, they’re probably just better at hiding now. Anyone can go Dark, obviously.”

“Sure, but the patterns of millions of people on the Grid, I mean, then you *sift* the patterns and you can easily figure out who’s a goddamn robot or not,” Pat protested, itching to jump back into AdminGrid. What if he could follow the logic paths for isolating robotic behavior based on the input of millions of SolGrid connectees in their various random contacts with that robot, and then strengthened Scanning Matrix at Polarity Axis?

“We’ve gotten too paranoid, Pat. SolGrid’s *destroying* us.”

“Dammit, Jackie, I can’t believe you turned on me like this!”

“I can’t believe you turned on *me*,” Jackie shot back with the slightest nod in Suzette’s direction.

Somehow the sex hormone-drenched Suzette didn’t pick up this inference. Pat looked away from Jackie’s glare, down to the scraps on his dog-soggy plate. Did Jackie know how he felt about Suzette? Oh God, of course she did. Everyone did.

But if that were the case, what if a Pheromone Scanner Subsystem was interpolated into the Bypass Matrix and then every time someone questioned the stability of a sexual relationship, Frequency Node would take a snapshot and port it over to the resulting--

No, it would never work. Frequency Node didn’t interface with--

Dammit, stop it!

“Look, I know SolGrid has problems. That’s why I’m trying to fix them. That’s why I’m working these twenty-hour days! But then you *abandon* me!”

Hirte shrugged. “There’s something really, deeply *wrong* with SolGrid, dude. Something that can’t be corrected. You have to know that.”

“No! Draft Two will take care of all the problems! I’ve got it all in my head!”

“Draft Two?” JJC said with a raised eyebrow.

“Yes, Draft Two! I *know* Draft One is crap! I admit it! But Draft Two will correct everything!”

“Will it be based on that same Telepathic Kernel you won’t let anyone look at?” Hirte said. “All the problems lead right back there. I’ve just never been able to get any further.”

Pat blinked. “Of *course* I’ll change the Kernel ... a little.”

Sure he would, just as soon as he figured out how it worked. Was he an idiot or what, to think he could inflict the Alpha Centaurian Grid on the whole solar system? It was all a failure. They’d gotten some Wounded, but his ex-friends here were right. Anybody could figure out how to outwit RobotScanGamma.

And there was Jackie looking so irresistible. When was the last time they’d had good sex? Any sex?

“All right, I’ll admit it. SolGrid sucks! See, I agree with you! Okay? I’ve been working my ass off on it for five months now and I’m as sick of it as any of you! Okay?”

He met JJC’s sad brown eyes set incongruously in that merry laughing face. Yes, Jonathan James was now the leader. All this time Pat had thought he was actually running something, but he wasn’t. JJC had walked in here and grabbed it all. And it was funny because Pat loved the

guy, everyone did. *He* had the charisma, not Pat. *He* had Suzette. Pat could never lead a glorious escape to a new life, a new sex commune, a place where people communicated telepathically, not with some stupidass code. JJC was a sexy rock star, and Pat was a sucky poet locked in his room writing stupid crap nobody would ever read.

Pat was thrust back to a memory of his college days he hadn't replayed in decades. Yeah, there was Edwin Ratliff, mustached, stoned, casually perched on the concrete railing of the third-floor balcony, strumming his acoustic guitar, surrounded by cooing coeds while Pat cringed in his room trying to shut out the graceful flowing notes so he could write "Mr. Waterwaterhead," the worst poem anyone had ever written anytime, anywhere, and almost as bad as Draft One of SolGrid.

Could he tweak SolGrid back to sanity? He'd always thought that someday he'd magically understand the Kernel. But it was impossible to make sense of the damn thing. Who was the first Alpha Centaurian to come up with it, eons ago? So often Pat wished he could've met him.

"When ... are you leaving?" he moaned to the accompaniment of a telepathic burst of pity from Trotter to his right. Yes, a snuffling telepathic Beagle *pitying* him, here at the end of everything.

"Tomorrow morning," JJC said, grinning. "Care to join us? There's always room for one more rebel!"

CHAPTER THREE

Amav Declines

Tuesday, April 14, 2076, 0400 hours

Joe stepped inside the steel and glass Commer home as Amav buckled her weapons belt and punched a command to cycle the front airlock. "He's up in the Turret, making some calls," his sister-in-law snapped, yanking a thigh zipper on her red flight suit.

"So you're going with us?"

Amav brushed long uncombed hair off her forehead. "No. Absolutely not."

Joe blinked. He opened his mouth but thought better of it. Her deep brown eyes were cold and he could see by the set of her jaw that it was prudent not to ask questions. "Well, I'll just get on up there."

"If you *must* know, I was set to leave at 0500 for Venus. Then this *crap* happens. I told Jack to just figure it out. I'm tired of dealing with this. I told him I'm taking the saucer and that's that. I've had this meeting with the Four set up for *weeks* now. And I'm not changing my plans for *him*." She sized him up. "So you got roped into this, I take it?"

"Well, there's no copilot for the *VI* yet, and I need some flight time. Anyway, Jack thought I could maybe talk to him or something."

"It's so *stupid*. He just *faked* his way through all that counseling. Nodding and smiling to everyone, telling everybody what they wanted to hear. And now *this*. Damn him to hell! I'm not gonna figure this one out for Jack. I just refuse!"

"Well, I guess I can understand."

"Look, Joe, I'm sorry. I'm sure you'll find him on Andertwin and then, hell, I don't know. I need to get going." Amav opened a zipper on her sleeve, checked her comm, and zipped up again. She grabbed a silver valise off a table. "Jack will keep me posted. I just can't deal with this. See you later." She slid the airlock open, shut and depressurized. Joe saw the sparkling of her EnviroField kicking in as the outer door slid aside. She marched across the rock garden and opened the hatch of the twenty-foot-wide Commer saucer faintly shining in the Martian night.

"Shall I escort you to your brother Jack?" came a soft bass voice beside him.

Joe turned to the hulking Saint Bernard by his knee. "Sure, Eddie. But I know the way."

"Of course, Mr. Joe," Edward said, "but I'm heading to him myself, so it's no trouble at all." Joe noted the holster draped around the service robot's neck. It held standard USSF blaster/shattergun, superspace comm and a backup comm, as well as med kit and dagger. Joe already had all his equipment on his belt.

"This way, if you please," Edward said, leading Joe to the plastiglass elevator and pawing the up button. They rode to the fourth floor through girders and transparent panels bathed in multicolored lights. "Master Jack is quite stressed," the dog warned. "Mistress Amav is also quite stressed, as you no doubt noted yourself."

Joe nodded. Through the glass walls he could see the Commer saucer hovering, then blasting straight up. That had been a fast preflight check, if there had been one. Amav must really have wanted to blow this place. "Yeah, I did see that. I'll let Jack know she's gone."

It wouldn't do for Edward to talk to Jack, because Jack was certain he'd deactivated the speech function of the robot dog Amav had bought him for Christmas, claiming that while he appreciated having an energetic valet to keep his home life in order, even to the point of setting up and paying for plumbing services, he drew the line at a talking dog. Jack shunned humanoid robots and barely tolerated the presence of USSF technician robots working at the spaceport. He

wouldn't allow them on USSF ships. But he'd acknowledged that Edward made life simpler at the Commer residence as long as there was no disconcerting speech issuing from the thing.

But Amav had reactivated the speech function to allow the dog to talk to anyone except when Jack was within earshot. Joe wondered how long it would be before something screwed up and Jack found out. Anyway, Jack got messages from Edward on his comm, so what was the difference?

On the top floor, the thirty-foot-wide plastiglass hemisphere Jack called the Turret, Joe found the Supreme Commander of the United System Space Force in his black underwear, jabbing at an image on a ninety-inch viewscreen. At Joe's urging Jack had recently ramped up his workouts and was in great shape, with huge pectorals and biceps, muscular thighs and flat stomach, his skin smooth and taut. Not bad for an old fart of seventy-three.

"To tell you the truth, Jack, I think my presence would be detrimental," came a voice from the screen. In the background Joe could hear a woman shouting: "I *never* trusted that son of a bitch! I *told* you I saw this coming!" Joe recognized Alycia's voice on the other end of the Superspace connection, and now he saw Urside Charmouth on the screen, and in the background Urside and Alycia's Illinois mansion. Those two hadn't taken rejuvenation very well, though Urside claimed they were beginning to see some results.

"So he really didn't give you any indication of this?" Jack said.

"No, as far as I knew everything was going fine. We talk every couple weeks or so. He was upset when Trotter got so sick in February, I mean, *really* upset. He said he didn't think he could live if Trotter died. You know how bonded they've been. He was really on edge, and I have to admit I was damn concerned. But once Trotter was okay, he seemed normal again."

Jack turned to Joe. "The damn thing's *twenty-three*. Why are we wasting rejuv resources on *dogs*?"

Joe shrugged. Rejuv wasn't that expensive for pets these days, and in any case Trotter had received his while still in Alpha Centauri. "I don't know, Jack, he had that weird *Garthah-yyuu* trip with the dog and Clopt. He told me this Zarj brothers thing was an incredible *sharing*. That when Clopt killed himself, it was like one major foundation pillar going for both him *and* Trotter. But he thought he could make it as long as Trotter was okay."

"Damn." Jack turned back to the screen. "Hey, Urside, you think he could've headed for Andertwin? They've upgraded the cloaking and we just plain can't track them right now. Would he try to go back to where he bonded with the dog? Is that possible?"

"Look, I just don't know," Urside said. "This is all such a surprise."

"It wasn't to *me*. I saw this coming all along!" his wife Alycia shouted from the background. "I *knew* he was faking it!"

"Dammit, Urside, why didn't *you* see this coming?" Jack snarled as Edward nudged him with the holster of weapons. "Just set them on the table there and get my blue flight suit," he told the dog. Edward shrugged the belt onto the low table and padded into the closet.

"Jack, I've told you from Day One I'm a goddamn *artist*, not a professional counselor!" Urside flared. "Maybe you should have gotten JJC one of *those*."

"Yeah, maybe. Look, I'm sorry, Urside. I thought you guys had a *rapport*."

Urside shrugged. "I thought we did, too."

"Well, I appreciate your insight on all this, I really do. I need to sign off but please call me if you have any ideas."

"Will do, Jack, and if--"

Jack cut the call. Edward returned, pushing a light cart with his nose. Atop the cart's

iridescent surface lay a bright blue flight suit and a pair of boots. “Thanks, Edward. I’ll also need my flight valise. Standard military contents.”

Edward wagged his tail and padded out. Joe wondered whether Jack even considered how a dog was going to pack a USSF flight valise, and whether Amav had ever revealed that all four of Edward’s paws could extend into full human hand functions, that the dog could stand erect on its hind feet, and, as Amav had told Joe, could fling two thousand Ninja throwing stars to nail an outline of the *Mona Lisa* on a wall in fifteen seconds. She thought Jack was too proud to admit the need for any sort of bodyguard, but hell, he was the SCUSSF, wasn’t he? Who knew what sort of crackpot might try to target the Supreme Commander’s house, no matter how many security force fields and AI sensors it had? Amav also said she slept better with Edward around.

Jack had a leg through his blue pants when the viewscreen flashed.

“Hello, Jack, I’ve made further inquiries here and throughout the Procyon A system,” said Dar, his wife K’sla at his side. The Emperor and Empress Emeritus of the Martians were still on their extended vacation on Andertwin, living in Jonathan James’ old guest house. Though the familiar Martian outradiance wasn’t coming over the Superspace link to Andertwin, after decades with the Martians Joe could detect the tiny lines around the two Martians’ eyes and intuit the worry they felt. Both also had a trace of that scattered look all Martians had these days. Even eleven and a half light-years away, Dar and K’sla reflected the new disruptions in Martian culture.

“Yes?” Jack said, drawing his blue shirt across his back.

“Still nothing within half a light-year of Procyon A. We can penetrate ’60’s cloaking technology, but still nothing. Of course, we’ll keep monitoring and let you know whatever we find. But I think Jonathan James isn’t choosing to return here.”

“Right, right. The thing is, someone must’ve hacked the cloaking tech and upgraded it somehow. Hell, the only stuff we *can’t* break is like ’71 on. So somebody, probably with a lot of USSF expertise, has been fooling with the ship’s systems. If its cloaking is upgraded to ’70’s, it could be *anywhere*.”

“Really?” Joe said. “You think he really hacked it to modern standards somehow? Is that even possible with something that old?”

“I don’t know. The ship just *disappeared*. We couldn’t even track it out of Sol, couldn’t even trace its Star Drive.”

“Wow ...” Joe said. Cloaking Star Drive trails had only been introduced last October, and was only intended to be used under combat situations. “This looks a little more serious than I’d thought.”

Jack finished buttoning his shirt. “I don’t know what to think. How the hell could he *do* this?” He reached for his weapons belt. Joe noted a paperback book on the table. He knew Jack still liked these sorts of books and mixed reading them with e-versions on his comm.

“*Julius Caesar*?” Joe said, hoping to break the tension. “We had to read that in high school, didn’t we? Mrs. Nortel?”

“Yeah, I couldn’t sleep. I was up reading it when the call came. It’s kind of a page-turner once you get into it.”

“You haven’t had any *sleep*? Can you fly? You want me to pilot?”

“Yeah, maybe. I’ve just got to calm down a bit.” Jack looked up to the viewscreen. “Look, Dar, keep us posted and we’ll do the same for you. Just let me know if anything happens.”

“Sure will, Jack. Good to see you as well, Joe. You’re going to pilot the *VI*? The *VII* is still not ready?”

“Yeah, we’re still aligning the Star Drive computers and there are some other glitches to chase down. On top of that I don’t have a full crew yet and I haven’t flown anything but my own saucer in a month. Jack’s short a copilot for the *VI* so here I am.”

“Well, we wish you all--”

“Hey, Dar, sorry, we’ve got to move on,” Jack said. “We’re getting a feed from Enceladus and we need to check it out. Talk to you later.”

“Sure, Jack, good luck and we’ll be sure to--”

Jack switched off and studied the text and images coming up. “The other hack was scrambling the records of everyone at the museum. But I had Information Services on it first thing. Looks like they’ve been able to reconstruct something.”

Joe studied the screen. The museum had just opened at 10 AM on Enceladus, though that was 0300 hours here; he’d long ago given up trying to figure out why certain moons or planets decided to be several hours before or after Martian time. In any case thirty-five humans and six Martians had just entered the museum. A map showed where everyone had been standing. There was a cluster of dots at the airlock to the ship itself.

“Thank God no one was hurt,” Joe said, pointing to the low-level weapons readings. Twenty-five stun-level pulses.

Jack pointed to the list of people accounted for. Thirty humans, five Martians, all museum visitors and staff. “So there are six gone. One of ’em a Martian.” The Info Services software began offering its best guesses for these six from the scrambled records.

“There’s JJC,” Jack said, pointing to the first name. Then, at the second: “*Suzette Borman?* That’s crazy! What’s wrong with this damn software?”

Joe regarded the image of the dark-haired, languid beauty perched on a bright red stool, leaning forward in her low-cut tank top. “Wow, they updated her photo fast,” he mused. “*After* the rejuvenation, I see.”

“But why the hell’s the software pulling *her* up?”

Joe shrugged. “Well, she’s Hirte’s girlfriend and she spends a lot of time on Enceladus. You think he could have kidnapped her or something?”

“Damn, Joe, is my son a *kidnapper* too?”

Joe punched at his comm. “Lee? You there? Heading to the *VI*?”

“Yeah, Joe, you in on this deal too?” came Lee Borman on Joe’s comm. “I’m heading to the spaceport. Should be there in ten.”

Joe sent Lee’s image to the corner of the viewscreen. “Yeah, great. I’m copiloting, or maybe piloting, or whatever.”

“Lee, we’re trying to figure out who’s on the ship,” Jack cut in. “But the records got scrambled and for some reason it’s pulling up your wife’s name.”

“So we called to ask where she is,” Joe said. “Take a look at what Info Services is guessing at.”

“*Dammit*,” Lee said. “Look, guys, I haven’t seen her in like a couple weeks. Tell you the truth, things have been a little tense at home, you know how that goes, and, uh ...”

“*And?*” Jack demanded.

“Well, you do know about Hirte, don’t you?”

“Right, right, we know,” Jack said, though of course neither he nor Joe had ever admitted this in Lee’s presence.

“Well, now that she’s taken up with JJC instead--”

“*What?*” exploded from both Jack and Joe.

“Yeah, yeah, she told me a while back. Like they can have this goddamn love nest out on Enceladus and I’m not supposed to do a damn thing and, you know, the Response is almost bankrupt as it is without her there to keep an eye on things, and she goes and gets all rejuvenated and who the hell thinks I have time to run the damn place?”

“God, Lee, I don’t care about your stupid nightclub!” Jack said. “Are you saying you think Suzette went *willingly* with JJC?” He turned to Joe. “My son and *Suzette Borman*?”

“Well, you know what she’s like, I mean, I only saw her once after she got rejuvenated, and then she’s off to goddamn Enceladus again!”

“*Sanders Hirte!*” Jack cried, pointing to the third name appearing on the viewscreen. “*Sanders Hirte* is on the ship? With your wife? And Jonathan James?”

“That--that’s not possible!” Lee sputtered. “*Is it? Are they having some stupidass threesome?*”

Joe pointed to the fourth name coming up. “*Jackie Vespertine?* Jack, this just can’t be! The records must be totally scrambled or something.”

Jack pulled up another window on the viewscreen and dragged the ID’s of the four onto the USSF Sol Human Locator. The existence of this software was top secret and Joe knew Jack hated to consider its existence. By law Martians were excluded, but SHL gave the precise location of any human being in the solar system.

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