

BOOK SEVEN OF THE JACK COMMER SERIES



**BALLOON SHIP
ARMAGEDDON**

MICHAEL D. SMITH

Balloon Ship Armageddon

Book Seven of the Jack Commer Series

Michael D. Smith

Sortmind Press, 2021
press.sortmind.com

Copyright 2021 by Michael D. Smith

cover design by Michael D. Smith
NASA image: globular cluster in the Large Magellanic Cloud

For my wife Nancy

CHAPTER ONE

The Hospital

Wednesday, May 13, 2076

Thrashing under the straps, Jonathan James Commer took in the glossy green tile of the walls, the asymmetrical bars of blue light on the ceiling, and screamed.

A woman loomed over him. JJC blinked at a pair of impossibly huge blue eyes. “You’re all right! You’re all right! You came through fine!” she cried.

“Hey, JJC man, we made it!” came a shout from his left. It was Rick Ballard, whole and human in a hospital bed, clamped by metallic red straps. Bouncing next to them on three bulging spherical tires was the battered tetrahedral *T’ohj’puv* robot, not the perfect chromium tetrahedron they’d all been trapped inside, but the ancient Martian servant robot with the snaking hose arms.

“We did it? We got separated?” JJC gasped. “Into *what*?”

“Into perfect Wounded Robots!” Ballard laughed, snapping his restraints and swiveling off the bed. “Thank you, nurse, thank you! It worked!”

“Here, just lie back,” replied the auburn-haired woman in a white lab coat. “And I’m not a nurse. I’m Dr. Nortel.”

“It--it--” Ballard choked through thick purple lips, gagging and bending to puke.

“Easy, there. The biomatrix for human format does take a few minutes to settle in.” Dr. Nortel grabbed his wrist as Ballard went into a furious coughing fit. “Mr. Ballard, are you really all right?”

Jonathan James felt fresh strength flowing into his arms and found he too could easily rip his restraints. Disjointed memory flooded him. Had he really spent a month cruising the Iota Persei system in the *Garrison*? Trapped in a solid chromium tetrahedron, jammed into Ballard and *T’ohj’puv* partitions in reverberating, infinite sequences of consciousness?

Hundreds of Ywritt entities had refused the *Garrison*’s requests for access to the Ywritt robotics libraries, yet all had been curiously amenable to Ballard’s appeal for secrecy. Apparently the Ywritt took their pledge of customer privacy seriously. During this entire time JJC had remained dazed and of little help. But finally Ballard announced he’d found a Wounded spy on Myndar who’d plundered the Ywritt quantum computational techniques. Was that just yesterday? Had they really made it to the second planet of Iota Persei?

“Mr. Ballard, get your hands off me!” came the next cry. In a tiny hospital gown flaunting well-muscled buttocks, Rick Ballard manhandled Dr. Nortel’s ample chest with his big hairy hands.

“God, babe! To be awakened by an *angel*! Oh my God!”

“Mr. Ballard, *desist!*” Dr. Nortel demanded. JJC noted the doctor was in fact rather voluptuous under that severe lab coat. Her wild hair framed a round face. Her thin lips pursed into a half-smile despite her scolding tone. Those big blue eyes were outrageously hypnotic. “Let me remind you that I am a Class J Wounded and you have no right to assault me. God, are you really all right?”

Ballard doubled up and retched a quart of blood on the cold blue floor. Behind him came the *T’ohj’puv* robot, hose arms whirling, opening a panel on one of its three triangular sides to extend a dustpan and broom.

“That’s an *ancient* thing,” Dr. Nortel noted, meeting Jonathan James’ gaze. “Twenty thousand Martian years old, according to the program. I was surprised it came out intact, in its previous form. Its original device couldn’t speak and unfortunately neither can this one. But of

course the Wounded matrix allows for telepathic contact. Mr. T'ohj'puv, you really don't need to clean up the mess there. I understand it was what you were trained to do, but it's really not necessary."

This entity experiencing random chaos cycles, shot from the robot.

"No, that's impossible," Dr. Nortel retorted. "I used standard Class J. You're fine. The only variable was the three-part-nature of the pyramid, but I can assure you the Separation Coefficient was right on target." Jonathan James picked up communications from not only T'ohj'puv, but also, to his surprise, from both Ballard and Dr. Nortel. Apparently the doctor felt a need to hear herself think and so spoke aloud to underline the telepathic burst.

Cascade failure imminent, T'ohj'puv transmitted. *The same holds true for the Rick Ballard entity. Prepare for Quanta Reversal Paradigm.*

Dr. Nortel's eyes went even wider than JJC thought possible as she whirled to Ballard, who feverishly worked his hospital gown over his head and flung it aside. A jagged line of spurting red opened from the neck of Ballard's magnificently muscled torso to his well-endowed crotch.

"Quanta--*what?*" JJC had time to gasp as purple light erupted and Rick Ballard burst into a thousand soggy pieces of meat spattering walls, floor, and ceiling.

"Oh my God!" Dr. Nortel cried. She and JJC both whirled to the escalating whine of the *T'ohj'puv* robot as it flailed and blasted out random strings of computational symbols.

This time JJC had the presence to dive to the floor before a second explosion shook the room, the doctor joining him there and shoving him with impossible speed under the hospital bed as shrapnel clanged off the tiles.

JJC stared at a twisted six-inch piece of steel that had pierced his palm. "*Ow!* Goddamn!" He hauled himself out and gaped at the floor and walls littered with metal shards, wires, and memory wafers. And human intestines, bones, brain matter, and shredded organs.

"Careful! God, I don't know what happened!" Dr. Nortel said, pulling herself out after JJC. As he regarded the blood pouring from his hand, Jonathan James expected Dr. Nortel to launch a caring physician routine, but she merely said, underlying her words with telepathic instructions: "Oh, that. Just yank the mother out and run Standard Repair Module."

"You--you--" The two hospital beds were soaked with gore. A dozen medical machines were equally spattered; several had overturned. Without thinking JJC ripped the charred junk out of his hand, stared for a moment at the inch-wide hole welling with blood, then located Standard Human Format Repair Module in what he only now realized was a computerized brain taking up far less space in his cranium than his previous one. In a fifth of a second his left hand was entirely normal.

"I--I'm a *robot* now?" he muttered as Dr. Nortel ruefully surveyed her ruined hospital room. She nodded. "Class J."

"You--the Ywritt--*saved* me?"

She sized him up. "Are you dense? I'm not Ywritt. They have no clue about this room. No way they'd help you. They don't understand a thing about Wounded tech, even though their libraries grabbed records of all of it over the past thirty years. They're a bunch of packrats. They'll store anything, but they don't understand a bit of it. All I did was grab the Class J Restoration Data they had on file."

JJC considered his perfect hand. "But I'm *human*. Ballard was too! Oh my God!" The stench of the blown former *Typhoon VI* navigation officer was just hitting him.

"Human-format interface," Dr. Nortel said. "You know that. Classes A to T can have any matrix. Our bodies are robotic, but indistinguishable from human tissue. You just need time to

access your operating manual.” She tapped his forehead and grinned. JJC was taken aback. Was the doctor actually flirting with him as they stood in puddles of Ballard blood and shattered T’ohj’puv?

“What *happened?*”

“Look, I really don’t know. Maybe it was the subroutine for running Standard Class J Entitlement. It should work on a cubic meter of *dirt*. I just don’t understand.” She peered at him. “We need to see if *you’re* all right. I’m Amy, by the way.” She held out a hand for JJC to shake, but he just stared at it. There was a lot of underlying telepathic subtext he couldn’t understand. To his astonishment Amy unbuttoned her soaked lab coat with bloody hands, casting it aside to reveal a large curvy figure in a tight, low-cut blue tank top matching her eyes, and a white pencil skirt spattered bright red. Jonathan James stared in fascinated horror at this abruptly sexy package: rotund, but compact and tightly muscled, buxom, astonishingly proportioned. Giant crazy blue eyes merrily bored into his own.

She dropped the crimson coat to the floor, following his gaze to her skirt, and he watched in bewilderment as the stains disappeared. Likewise the clots of Ballard plastered across her face and neck faded along with the wires and wafers of T’ohj’puv tangled in her hair. “Just a little Class J secret!” she laughed. “If you’d only bothered to check the manual. We can launder our clothes with telekinesis, or hadn’t you figured that out yet?” She tugged at his flimsy hospital gown. “We could wash this but I think the examination needs to happen *now*.”

And Jonathan James Commer stood naked before Dr. Amy Nortel.

CHAPTER TWO

Contamination

“Why, you’re *contaminated!*” Doctor Amy cried, backing away. “You’re not one of *us!*”

Jonathan James froze. Was something amiss at his crotch? But he was happy to note that all seemed well there. “What are you talking about? I’m fine. You got me out. I don’t know what happened to the others.” In fact he did feel excellent. But the memory was still strong of Ballard shattering him into millions of pieces of glass on the planet Altrouda. He recalled the moment of his death in fresh detail, his shocking transformation into a chromium pyramid, and the humiliation of coexisting with his murderer, of becoming the bastard’s buddy and confidant along with that incomprehensible T’ohj’puv entity. At the same time he felt a surge of loss for these two intimate friends.

“Oh my God,” Amy moaned. “I’m running the log files now. No wonder those two blew! They were contaminated! You brought that horrible Alpha Centaurian wavelength with you!”

“Me?” He could still feel the echo of the fascist Alpha Centaurian Emperor, though it was nowhere near the force that had almost killed him last year at Procyon A, when he’d reinstated the ancient Grid and for a few agonizing moments had united the souls of twenty trillion Centaurian citizens in a bond devastatingly more intimate than the mechanical, atomic-scale lockdown in the tetrahedron with Ballard and T’ohj’puv. But he hadn’t been able to handle it; the horror had nearly driven him mad.

He’d felt that Grid every day since, but after months of terror, therapy, and raw will, and with the assistance of his lover Suzette Borman and his *Garthah-/yuu* brother Trotter, he’d shoved it all back into distant, diluted archival storage. Suzette and Trotter? Did they even have the slightest idea what he’d endured? God, where were they now?

“This Centaurian *crap!*” Amy spat. “It’s blocked us from this entire sector! It’s like some stupid alarm that’d tell every Centaurian we’re here. And the mental *flavor* of it! Disgusting!” She jabbed a finger at his bare stomach. “You’re *filthy! Sickening!* And here I have to love you! That’s the worst part of it!”

“Wait! You’re *Wounded?* I am too?”

“Of course, idiot! We weren’t about to abandon Iota Persei just because we lost that little skirmish here last year. Are you really that dense? We just put a few folks underground, and at Sol too, if you must know.”

“You’re the spy Ballard found!”

“Congratulations, idiot! Of course I am!”

“I thought you were a *doctor!*”

“I am, fool! The Ywritt think I’m a USSF *archivist* here. They have no clue, no clue! Those goddamn wisps of gas think they’re so smart. For your information this room is completely hidden on the third floor of Myndar Pre-Quantum Library Prime. Nobody knows this robot repair facility is here but the Wounded. You got that?”

“Well, I guess ...” Only now did JJC register that he too had access to all that knowledge. Yes, he was a robot. He was Wounded tech. He reeled. He understood, no, he *gloried* in the Wounded’s lust to build Dyson spheres around stars, to suck their energy and send it to distant quasars, to create spectacular celestial fireworks, works of art that explained so much, so much. And now he was the mortal enemy of Sol, of Earth, of his father and mother, the USSF, all the friends he’d ever had there, all humanity. “I’m one of *you* now?”

“Yes, exactly,” Amy said, taking a big breath and noting JJC’s gaze traveling to the

magnificent half-naked breasts in that tight tank top. “But unfortunately, the Alpha Centaurian patterns of your contamination can’t be allowed to infect the Wounded General Operating System. You can see what they did to your two fellow robots. I have no idea why you haven’t blown by now as well.” She grabbed a scalpel from a crimson puddle on the floor. “You will now submit to evisceration.”

JJC backed away. “That’s insane! Look, I know it all now! Even if you stab me, I can repair it!” Yes, the Repair Module would work on any wound, just as it had on the palm of his hand. She could saw both legs off and he’d just fashion new ones.

Then he saw the flaw in his reasoning as Amy confirmed: “Not if I cut out your CPU!” She lunged for his eyes. JJC saw how true her aim would’ve been if he hadn’t shifted left at the last millisecond. She sailed off balance to his right and he shoved her hard into the bloody tile wall, twisting her knife arm up behind her back and tearing it loose from her fingers with his teeth.

Full knowledge of Class J capabilities flooded him. He knew they each could choose to feel all the pain of their struggle, or simply cancel it. He felt them both canceling. No use playacting anymore.

“Damn you!” she grunted. “I can’t believe you read the whole Operating Manual just like that!”

“Well, it was there,” JJC mumbled, knife still between his lips. The blade was as dangerous as a rubber toy. Amy had picked it up knowing the dramatic effect it would have on a confused JJC reacting as if he were still a puny human being. She could’ve torn his head off with her bare hands and crushed his central processing unit with her fingers, but starting that process would’ve likely tipped JJC off to the existence of the Operating Manual right there. In his final farewell to human panic, he’d found it on his own. He held Amy tight against the wall with both her arms behind her back. Their strengths were perfectly matched. JJC proceeded to munch the knife, chew and swallow it, eliciting a grunt of surprise from the doctor.

“You do realize you’re an abomination, don’t you?” she hissed, ready to spring free the second he relaxed. “If you don’t voluntarily consent to *autopsy*, you’ll eventually contaminate the Wounded with this AC crap in your brain.”

JJC considered it. As various servers began mapping him in their galaxy-wide networks, the murky existential seed of whatever had gone so wrong with the ancient Alpha Centaurian Grid would propagate. Initial infections might be fended off for a while, but as more and more Wounded robots succumbed to the Grid frequencies, no matter what their level, from the highest A to the most menial clunking T, the chaos would *cascade*. That was the word T’ohj’puv had used; it and Ballard had experienced the first cascade. The Wounded were doomed. And here was Dr. Amy Nortel, a mere Class J Wounded physician, blithely hoping she could stave off disaster.

Guess what? she transmitted. *If I called one Class I here, she could vaporize you herself.*

Thanks, JJC shot back, keeping her arms tightly twisted behind her. *I’ve already shut down all external communication. Nobody at any level is coming.*

You idiot! The higher levels always find out. They always get through. We’re nothing compared to them! To Draka Sortie!

JJC considered the hierarchies of the Wounded. His father had beaten Draka Sortie last year. Draka had built an annihilating Dyson sphere around Iota Persei and tried to do the same to Sol, but the files in Jonathan James’ brain had no further information on that Wounded robot after he’d absorbed a Martian shattergun bolt and burst into jagged glass shards.

Strange to think that a Class A, as omnipotent as God, could be killed just like that. Maybe it

had to do with that nasty flaw in the Wounded JJC was beginning to intuit: the whining, self-absorbed nature that prevented them from ever truly conquering anything. They were always feeling sorry for themselves, they were always depressed, they could never use their powers to chart anything that would grow and prosper. Instead they blew things up for kicks and called themselves artists.

As a Class J, Jonathan James had none of that Class A Trans-Simultaneity, but he possessed enough telekinetic powers to heal himself of major wounds, exert a hundred times the strength of an ordinary human male, and perform clever tricks like doing the laundry with his mind.

“Look, let me turn around and we can at least straighten some of these themes out,” Amy said after JJC realized she’d telepathically hacked his last thoughts. They both knew she couldn’t escape and he relaxed his grip as she whirled to face him. He clamped down again, feeling her firm breasts mash into his naked chest. “Mmmm, much better,” she purred, smiling up at him. “You do realize that, as a Class J, I am in fact fully in love with you.”

Jonathan James met those big insane eyes. “Huh. How ’bout that?”

“We are so wondrously, evenly matched, in spite of that nasty contamination of yours. I do regret having to terminate you. Which I will do eventually, you realize. You would have been quite nice in bed there.” Her eyes beckoned to Ballard’s gory sheets. JJC saw part of a twisted human spine that had landed there. Amy undulated her chest against his.

“Yeah, I imagine it would have been just spectacular,” JJC said, his lips an inch from hers. “Listen, Doctor Amy, I truly appreciate your use of the spoken word just now, and I even see you’ve pitched your voice to Rick Ballard’s most vulnerable seduction frequency. Very nice.”

Amy blinked back from point-blank range. *I assume you’ve discovered that you now have Ballard and T’ohj’puv partitions in your mind?*

Yes, I have the partitions. Very well hidden. Took me awhile. I’ve run the diagnostics and see I have 85.77% of Ballard and 76.59% of T’ohj’puv. The rest was lost to cascade.

Amy smirked. *And you still can’t see how dangerous this contamination is? That you have no choice but to submit to existence cancellation? I’d cut your Centaurian crap out if I could, and make love to you forever, but I can’t get to it. It’s too damn strong. You’re simply going to have to sacrifice yourself for the sake of the Wounded. It’ll happen eventually anyway. It’s in your very programming. And in any case, the higher levels will track you down.*

JJC knew he should fear the higher levels. If a 4’6” eight-year-old Level I girl walked in here right now, Jonathan James was duty-bound to vaporize himself instantly in obeisance to her. But somehow these higher levels meant nothing to him. Was it the Alpha Centaurian contamination? Was his former insanity an inoculation against full absorption into the Wounded?

Well, maybe I’m free. Maybe I got this Wounded body but I’m free!

“Forget it!” Amy shouted. “You’re not free! You can never leave this wonderful room! Because we’re both Class J’s and I love you!” To JJC’s surprise she pushed him back, ripped the blue tank top over her head and came for him, big glorious boobs and pink nipples bouncing merrily.

Ballard Program 624A engaged. Analysis of Dr. Nortel’s pheromonal activity complete: female fully in grip of love delusion. Prepare for sexual intercourse, intro power level 5, option for 6 and above on standby.

T’ohj’puv Recommendation Orange. Ballard program presents hazard to existence of Jonathan James Commer robotic entity.

Dr. Amy Nortel was all over Jonathan James, clutching his naked ass, fondling his chest, kissing her way down his stomach even as she yanked down the side zipper on her pencil skirt.

Ballard 624A--go!

T'ohj'puv Recommendation Red. Review entities in other partitions. Now.

Ballard 624A. Forget that! Let's get laid!

T'ohj'puv Recommendation Red. Now.

JJC blinked. *Other entities.* Oh, of course, his Zarj brothers were part of the contamination. His *Garthah-/yuu.* The Beagle Trotter was still inside him, and so was Clopt, the long-dead Zarj captain, killed in a Warp transfer suicide, probably walking the infinite halls of the *Garr/thahg* afterlife but still living deep within Jonathan James. So he had secret partitions for *four* entities inside him: Clopt and Trotter, most of Ballard and most of T'ohj'puv, amazing resources locked within, keeping him stable and separate from the Wounded.

And a fifth entity, he saw: Suzette Borman, who'd saved his sanity. He'd loved her, then lost her when Ballard had shattered him. What could she possibly be feeling now? Was she grieving for him? Did she think he was lost forever? Wasn't he?

He raised Amy from her crouch and saw the dismay in her eyes. "No! You can't love *her!*" she shrieked as their energies unbalanced and JJC gained more strength than she could imagine. He pulled his fist back and decked her so hard that she whirled across the spine-stained bed and flew into the opposite wall, grunted, and lay still. JJC stood over her and regarded her stunned blank eyes and her smashed, dislocated jaw.

He inspected a large panel flush with the wall. The code for unlocking it, seven million lines of an alien computer language, came into his mind. It took him five seconds to master the WoundLock 95 logic, then the panel door clicked open next to Amy Nortel's inert nude torso.

A small Beagle entered from a sunlit corridor and sniffed the blood-soaked room.

Master, I have been looking for you everywhere! You're back! They got you out of the triangle thing!

Jonathan James scooped up the dog who'd followed his pyramid-imprisoned Zarj brother into the *Garrison* just before it blasted off. "Trotter buddy! Where the hell have you been?"

I was looking and looking everywhere! There are Ywritt creatures all through this building. Big cloudy balls. They didn't care I was here. They don't care about anything! I just kept walking, sniffing for triangle thing. Then it was gone! Then I smelled you from six floors away. You're different. But you smell exactly the same!

"Great, buddy, great! Where's the *Garrison*? We've gotta split fast. I don't remember where Ballard might have parked it."

The Ywritt made it a display on the first floor. Big sign there. I asked one Ywritt what it says: "Typical Current USSF Shuttle."

"Great, we'll get down there fast. Damn, I need clothes. But I think I can just make them." In a moment JJC was clad in his favorite black sweater and pants as Trotter surveyed the room, cocking his brown and white head, sniffing body parts and inspecting Amy Nortel's battered face. *Tear out evil lady throat?*

"Nah, won't do any good," JJC said, stepping into the bright outer corridor. Twenty-foot-wide windows overlooked what seemed to be a park of trees and ponds. Pastel spheres of consciousness drifted down the corridor, transparent in the sunshine. Maybe these were Ywritt librarians. Would any of them consider floating through the open panel behind him into the slaughterhouse? What would they think of Wounded spies in the heart of their precious library?

Trotter padded beside him. *They have elevators for moving objects. How I went up and down levels.* He paused. *Kill Ballard thing inside you?*

JJC smiled. "I don't think that'll be possible. C'mon, let's get the *Garrison*. I think these

Ywritt will just observe the fact that we're stealing their exhibit, then meditate on it or something." He fished in his marvelous new mind for the schematics of all USSF vessels known to the Wounded, coming up with the most efficient way to hotwire the *Garrison* for takeoff by thought alone. Ballard and T'ohj'puv had already upgraded the little ship's Star Drive on the way to Iota Persei, and JJC realized he had the technological ability to enhance the *Garrison* enough to hurl it outside the Milky Way.

But along the way to the first floor he encountered a voice coming from what he guessed would be the most trying of all the partitions he was now responsible for.

This is Ballard, dude. Man, you just passed up a chance for a great lay!

CHAPTER THREE

Distrust

Jack Commer surveyed the crimson-spattered room. Amav stood in the doorway, arms folded. What was truly unsettling was that the Ywritt administrator floating beside them had picked up the human revulsion at the smell of death and, after consulting databases of Terran culture, had substituted what she considered a soothing aroma for her visitors: peanut butter cookies fresh from the oven. So, by the graciousness of the master Ywritt communicators, Jack and Amav were looking over twisted guts and rivulets of blood draining down the walls while emotionally eased by a childhood smell of pleasure and anticipation. To his disgust Jack was salivating. How could Ywritt tech accomplish this?

The fourth member of the group exhibited no such unease. Laurie 283, who'd taken a fast saucer in from Yaraltar, the third planet of Iota Persei, nimbly stepped through the blood, her robotic eyes photographing and analyzing every detail down to the molecular level. Pieces of Rick Ballard, pieces of the *T'ohj'puv* robot, the unfathomable Wounded hospital machines in disarray, the scars on the walls, all allowed precise measurement of the Wounded forces that had blasted this room.

"So he was really here," Amav muttered. "I can't believe it. And somehow he got out?"

"That's what we think," said the Ywritt library administrator, who'd explained that her name translated as Bracket Explore and that she preferred to practice vibrating English words as opposed to making standard Ywritt telepathic contact. "The ship you call the *Garrison* took off with two entities inside: one robotic humanoid, the other biological, much smaller, four-legged. We surmise that this creature was fixated on locating the one you call Jonathan James Commer."

Jack nodded. So JJC's dog Trotter had escaped with him, or with *something*. Because even if it were Jonathan James, he wasn't human anymore. Jack had to remind himself that none of what he was seeing scattered across the hospital beds was human debris, but robot parts machined to human form. This was not Rick Ballard's body, but the remains of an exploded robotic copy. Metallic shards of the ruptured *T'ohj'puv* pyramid littered the beds and the floor, but Laurie 283 had already reassured Jack that only one flesh-and-blood body had exploded here. Which meant that his son Jonathan James must have successfully separated from the pyramid. But he was still a Wounded machine. And the ultimate danger to Sol.

Amav wore her comm at the waist of her tight red flight suit and spoke into the virtual microphone the comm formed at her lips: "No trace of the trajectory?"

"Sorry, it exited so fast, and before we were near the planet, that the primitive sensor systems aboard this saucer were unable to get a bearing," replied the Marsport Automated Transport System aboard the *Stewart Neal Frankston* on the roof of the fifteen-story building. "The *Garrison* was in fact past our sensors before we even knew it was launching. Thus we're looking at Star Drive acceleration magnitudes above what we're currently capable of. The *Garrison's* Star Drive was also apparently reengineered to cause no harm in activating near the surface of this planet. That is an intriguing technological feat which MATS will continue to analyze. Meanwhile I'm scanning for any remnants of Star Drive trails to obtain a vector for the *Garrison*, but so far have been unsuccessful."

That had been gutsy piloting, Jack knew. The *Garrison* had punched a hole in the facility's dome with its mini-PlanetBlaster a millisecond before hurtling through it. Emergency force fields had dropped into place, and Myndar Pre-Quantum Library Prime was now replenishing its lost air. "Okay, MATS, patch what you've got back to Sol via superspace," he said. "They have

much more sophisticated sensors than our saucer.”

There was a long silence, during which Jack cursed himself for forgetting that he was never supposed to issue a direct order to MATS. Only Amav could do that, with her unusual rapport with the system. She knew Jack resented this as captain of their saucer, and kept trying to cajole MATS and Jack into becoming friends, with limited results.

“I’m on it, Jack,” came back not from the Marsport Automated Transport System but from the *Frankston*’s navigator, the Commer’s robot dog Edward. Jack had no idea how he’d survived an entire day aboard the *Frankston* amid the clever repartee and bickering between robot Edward and MATS, which took pains to remind the dog that the Marsport Automated Transport System was fully integrated with all saucer functions, was a billion times smarter than a robot Saint Bernard, and only suffered the dog’s limited navigational abilities out of respect for Edward’s loving owner Amav Frankston-Commer, currently Dictator of Sol on leave of absence.

Though MATS had agreed last month to never again infect a USSF spaceship with its AI tech, it remained a powerful force in SolNet, as well as an important liaison to Ywritt quantum computational interfaces. Being Amav’s special friend, MATS had so earnestly requested to be the interface for the Commer’s vacation saucer that Amav felt she couldn’t refuse. To keep peace Jack had reluctantly agreed, even though he was so sick of MATS’ interference in USSF affairs that he had contingency plans to permanently shut down the damn contraption if it pulled any more stunts like the one during the SolGrid Rebellion last month. Patrick James, one of the discredited SolGrid rebels, but still the foremost computer expert in Sol, would be just the man to tap for that.

But Jack had to admit that MATS’ replacement throughout the USSF, the ill-named Know-How System, was laughably inferior compared to how a sane MATS could coordinate a fleet of over ten thousand ships. The Know-How System’s AI was balky, its superspace connection with other ships was hit-or-miss, and there were thousands of contingencies major and minor the system had yet to adapt to. Despite assurances from USSF Computational Services, Jack didn’t see much hope in getting the system up to speed within the promised two-year deadline. The very name of the system, Know-How, seemed kludged from computer lingo of a hundred twenty years ago. Nobody had even settled on an abbreviation yet: USSFKH, USKH, UKH, KHS. In any case to Jack it was really “No-How.”

His experience with the malfing Know-How was another reason Jack had accepted MATS aboard his civilian saucer. In the event of any danger that put Jack out of commission, he was confident MATS could deliver Amav safely back to Sol. The MATS-equipped J-133 *Frankston* was named for Amav’s father, the planetary engineer responsible for terraforming Venus and for repairing Earth after the Final War. Far too luxurious for Jack, the saucer was a two-hundred-foot-wide yacht, bigger than anyone needed unless you wanted to transport sixty people on a pleasure cruise. But Amav had insisted on the J-133, cramming it with supplies for what she said might become a year-long search for their son. It was just Jack and Amav on the *Frankston*, both of them ostensibly on six-month leaves of absence from their jobs, along with Edward and the touchy, ego-tripping MATS.

They’d left the clean-up of the destruction of Marsport to the Martians, though some had accused them of skipping out when they were needed most. But Amav, the foremost planetary engineer in Sol, knew the Martians were more than capable of taking charge of the reconstruction themselves. And the fact that Jack and Amav had set out to search for Jonathan James, a renegade from the law and likely seeking Wounded advice on how to separate himself out of the chromium pyramid, meant that this wasn’t the vacation they both needed, but was

more likely to be an ordeal. The chromium pyramid might be anywhere, but they'd wanted to double-check Iota Persei first. They'd sought access to Ywritt libraries of Wounded tech, much of which wasn't accessible via SolNet, some of it not even digital, some of it in a quantum form they had to be present to access. They'd spent a month preparing for the journey, but certainly hadn't expected to find JJC in Iota Persei on the first day of their trip.

Jack uneasily watched the petite, red-haired Laurie 283 catalog the room. The Ywritt had upgraded the robot so much in the last month that as far as Jack could tell, and to everyone's consternation, she was indistinguishable from the real Laurie. The fact that she voluntarily wore those tight black sweatshirts with the big white 283 across her chest was comforting, but her continued full interface with the Marsport Automated Transport System was a further unsettling aspect to the former Heroes and Villains of the Thirties robot. Though she and HAVOTT robot John J. Douglas, who'd remained back on the main Ywritt planet Yaraltar, were no longer patched into software on USSF spaceships, they enjoyed helping MATS run all the bus routes in Marsport. It was like a video game for them. But not many MATS buses were moving after Rick Ballard had destroyed the city with a Star Drive burst last month.

"You said there was another injury here?" Jack asked his Ywritt host.

"Yes, the young human archivist I was telling you about," Bracket Explore said. The Ywritt administrator was a spherical mist six feet in diameter, a pearlescent pastel blue in the sunlight spilling into the room from the bright corridor behind them. How she could vibrate to form such wondrously contralto words mystified Jack. Then again, all the Ywritt baffled him. There didn't seem to be any standard Ywritt personality. Each one was unique and baffling. They could be or say anything they desired; they could be overwhelmingly courteous one moment, blunt and insensitive the next. "We found her unconscious on the floor over there. She was quite battered and we took her to the human infirmary on the seventh floor. I'll escort you to her in a moment. From what we gather, Dr. Nortel was looking for one of your experimental quantum computers to interface with an ancient partition in our system."

"Right," Jack said, picking up the hint of Ywritt contempt for human quantum computing. After all, the Ywritt were thousands of years ahead of Sol in that respect. They'd even styled this facility the Pre-Quantum Library because they'd had to dumb down their computers so human tech could access them. In any case Jack marveled at how smooth her personality felt. Her entire race had been trapped in the Wounded's last great assault, the Dyson sphere around the Ywritt's star Iota Persei. Thousands of the foremost minds of the Ywritt had gone mad at the imprisonment, abandoning themselves to alternate quantum computer-generated universes where the trap simply did not exist. Bracket Explore was one of the ones who'd clung to her sanity and survived, but at what cost? What was she really feeling now?

"We certainly had no idea this room was here," Bracket Explore went on, hovering above a bloody bed. "On the schematics this area is what you call an HVAC system, and Dr. Nortel was under the impression that it also unofficially doubled as a storage facility for obsolete machines. She said she wanted to find one of your Series ZX models to test against our interface. We certainly had no idea the Wounded had infiltrated this very building and installed this *facility* here."

Jack nodded. This entire library, including its surrounding campus of parks and ponds under an environmental dome, had only been built in the last year, engineered to human standards for breathable air and pressure to facilitate human interaction with Ywritt information systems. The Ywritt wouldn't need to worry about human air or inspect HVAC rooms. They could exist in a vacuum, and Myndar itself was almost that, its atmosphere less dense than Mars' pitiful one

percent of Earth's.

"At any rate," Bracket Explore went on, "after the two individuals exited through this panel here into the corridor, an alarm sounded and we discovered your human archivist on the floor, injured. We alerted your Committee contacts on Yaraltar immediately and have begun a systematic search throughout this facility for any similar manifestations."

Jack warily regarded the shimmering blue sphere. The Ywritt hadn't bothered to contact the Supreme Commander of the USSF, or for that matter the Dictator of Sol in the copilot seat beside him. It was Laurie 283 who'd called Jack and Amav from Yaraltar and met them here. "How did you know so quickly it was a Wounded robot repair facility, if I may ask?"

"We recognized the technology instantly from our research into Wounded tech and operational methods. We don't understand how it actually works, but we do have extensive documentation on it. The Wounded signature is unmistakable."

"Okay, but what I still don't get is how you could display the *Garrison* in your lobby downstairs like some typical library exhibit. It was here for over twenty-three hours. We'd put out a description of the vehicle throughout Alpha Centauri and Iota Persei. We should've been contacted the instant it showed up here."

"Our extreme apologies for the mix-up, Supreme Commander. Apparently the alert about the arrival of the *Garrison* in our system only went to Yaraltar, and for some reason Central Consciousness failed to inform Myndar. Sometimes," Bracket Explore added with what Jack considered might be an attempt at a windy chuckle, "I think Central Consciousness considers us just wooly-headed academics over here on Myndar, to use a term I find in one of your dictionaries. They don't really think we need to know anything."

"Right, right," Jack said, biting back his impatience. "But my son was here for twenty-three hours, and nobody bothered to tell us. He lands a state-of-the-art USSF shuttlecraft here, and it winds up in a *library exhibit*?"

"Jack, it's okay, they did the best they could," Amav cut in, tearing her eyes from a cherry-red skull fragment perched on a pillow. "We know he was here. That's a tremendous start. Joe can make sure we get the best superspace sensors trained on this whole area. We'll trace the ship."

"It was actually your archivist who thought the ship would make an interesting display," Bracket Explore said.

"Who? This Nortel woman? She's not my archivist," Jack shot back.

Bracket Explore was silent. Jack began to wonder if he hadn't encountered the first Ywritt he'd actually angered. Then the blue sphere vibrated: "Dr. Nortel is one of twenty human archivists assigned to this facility by your Committee to the Ywritt."

"Of which I am a member," Laurie 283 put in, pausing from analyzing what looked like a ruptured rubber air hose, no doubt part of that Martian Empress servant contraption. "I can confirm, Supreme Commander, that Dr. Nortel came highly recommended. She's a young lady just out of graduate school, where she earned her Ph.D. degree in Archival Exobiology. I haven't met her myself, but Jackie Vespertine has been quite enthusiastic about her."

"Huh." Jack didn't want to think about Jackie Vespertine. The rebels who'd surrendered last month--Jackie, Suzette Borman, and Patrick James--had been pardoned for joining Jonathan James' idiotic rebellion. Jackie was back teaching at the University of Mars, and Suzette was on some extended vacation at Groombridge 1618 with some talk of writing a memoir about JJC and the SolGrid Rebellion. And though SolGrid had been discredited and dismantled, Patrick James was back to his various computer programming schemes. Jack might need Pat in a pinch, but he

still didn't respect him.

The pardon has originally been Jack's idea when he'd picked up those three rebels from Altrouda last month. Later, in the face of the outrage over the destruction of Marsport at the hands of SolGrid rebels Ballard and JJC, he'd wondered if that had been the wisest course, and he'd agonized whether he should rescind his promise. But Amav solved his dilemma by confirming the pardons in her capacity as Dictator of Sol. She'd lectured the United System Council about how the rebels had exposed serious flaws in SolGrid, and maintained that Sol needed Jackie's expertise with the Committee to the Ywritt. In addition, Pat would no doubt come up with some useful software innovations before long, and if Suzette were really writing a book, it might provide some clue about what JJC might be thinking and where he might be heading. Unstated was the idea that pardoning these three opened the door to eventually pardoning Jonathan James himself. If he ever came back. If he weren't a Wounded menace.

"Anyway," Jack said, "so this Nortel woman--"

"Her official title is Cultural Nuance Coordinator," Bracket Explore said primly. "And I can assure you her performance here the last four months has been impeccable."

"Right, right, but somehow she moves a USSF shuttle into the lobby of this building and puts it on *display*?"

"Well, she knows we Ywritt are extremely curious about spaceships in general, having developed very few of our own, and, of course, only for travel within our own solar system. She was informed that this miniature ship was a surplus vehicle bought by an influential member of the Ywritt Understanding, and that he'd donated it just yesterday. Apparently Dr. Nortel and the other archivists were so enthralled they didn't check fully. I was told they'd get around to ascertaining the full provenance of the vehicle within a couple days. Again, we're so sorry for the misunderstanding, Supreme Commander Commer."

Jack itched to pile onto this infuriatingly polite piece of mist, but there was nothing to be gained by it. He simply could not understand how the Ywritt, with their mindboggling arrays of quantum computers throughout their solar system, couldn't capture or destroy the *Garrison* upon its entering Iota Persei, or exiting it, for that matter. More than once Jack had wondered whether the Ywritt were engaged in secret dealings with the Wounded, even though the Wounded had nearly exterminated the entire Ywritt race. Could the Ywritt possibly be paying the Wounded to stay away? Were they in thrall to their former masters and paying something like extortion money? Were they assisting the Wounded with quantum computing even as they provided the same expertise to Sol? That didn't make sense. At their highest levels the Wounded had Trans-Simultaneity and could manipulate matter, space, and time at will. Why would they need computer upgrades?

Surely Ywritt assistance to the Wounded would be a monstrous betrayal of all the help Sol had rendered Iota Persei. But Jack lay awake nights wondering if the Ywritt could be playing both sides of the street. He felt so uneasy around them.

"Well, thank you for your explanations, then, Bracket Explore," Jack said carefully. "Of course I'll want to discuss all this with Waterfall Sequence. To make sure we're communicating all our mutual needs." That was a subtle dig at the exalted Ywritt communication expertise which had so obviously failed here. Jack would get no flinch of shock or resentment from a gaseous six-foot-wide sphere, but he didn't care. The point needed to be made that these Ywritt better step up to the communications plate in a far friendlier way than they had so far.

Jack was irked that Waterfall Sequence, Primary Contact to Sol--Jack had learned the hard way the Ywritt cultural taboo against shortening the name to Waterfall--had decided he needn't

bother to come to Myndar himself. He'd airily dismissed Jack's diplomatically-couched remonstrations that the Ywritt's main contact with humanity ought to be on hand for the investigation of this fresh crisis.

This so-called vacation definitely wasn't working out. They'd just missed the *Garrison*, despite diverting to Myndar the instant Laurie 283 radioed him about the Wounded infiltration here. The *Garrison* had left on an apparently untraceable route, and Jack had once again screwed up his relationship with the Ywritt. Hadn't he sworn to match their gracious obfuscation? But he'd been worked up about catching his son, about finding evidence of the Wounded here, and anyway this Bracket Explore character was new to him. He felt he was beginning to understand Waterfall Sequence, but this Ywritt, who'd no doubt picked up Jack's assessment of her voice as feminine and so took on the female gender for purposes of interaction, was throwing him. Those peanut butter cookies, for God's sake. And then this bland apology, even immediately following the discovery of Wounded tech in her precious library.

"Yes, thank you, Bracket Explore," Amav said. "I think we've gotten a good picture of what happened here, and we'd like to interview this Nortel archivist. Now, if we could."

Jack blinked gratefully that Amav had picked up on his petulant mood and effortlessly slipped into Dictator of Sol mode.

Bracket Explore paused at the fluctuation of authority between the Commers. "Yes, we can do that. We'll head to the seventh floor immediately. We do have a special infirmary for humans. I must warn you, though, her jaw is dislocated and she can probably only communicate by comm."

"I'm finished here, Supreme Commander Jack," Laurie 283 spoke. "I recommend an Arkonsky stasis field for this room."

"Do it, thanks," Jack spoke as the room lit in blue, eerily rendering Bracket Explore invisible.