

Supreme Commander Laurie

MICHAEL D. SMITH



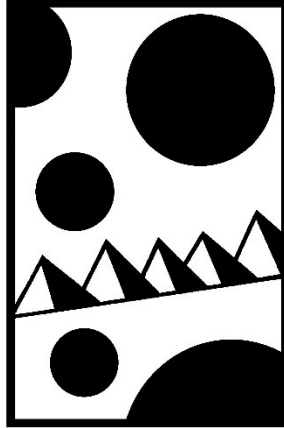
Supreme Commander Laurie

Book One of the
Supreme Commander Laurie Series

Michael D. Smith

Sortmind Press, 2024
press.sortmind.com

Copyright 2024 by Michael D. Smith



cover design by Kara D. Wilson
<https://www.emergingink.com>

For my wife Nancy. All my books would be impossible without her. Her advice that everything in this life is for my art continually guides me.

I also want to thank YA and SF author Kara D. Wilson for her support. She beta-read this book, provided numerous incisive comments, and created the excellent cover.

CHAPTER ONE

Design Specs for the *Typhoon VIII*
Tuesday, May 19, 2076, 1630 hours

“That, sir, seems to be the only possible explanation,” Laurie said from the copilot’s seat.

Jack Commer frowned at his command console. “I just can’t wrap my head around this. You say you’re not really a *robot*? How’s that even possible? And you’re now telling me this after *three days*?”

Why didn’t he come right out and say she was crazy? She was certainly scrambled. Who could really say whether she was the real Laurie Lachrer or robot Laurie 283? Surely the med exam she’d just handed over proved she was human. But Jack probably thought he held a clever forgery.

The silence extended uneasily. Laurie and Jack were alone in the control room after she’d invoked a ten-minute Privacy Mode; copilot Ywer had grudgingly given up his chair and retreated to the empty communications office further down the fuselage. Beyond the curved cockpit canopy, the compact curved wing of the *Typhoon VIII* gleamed in the starlight.

It had been thrilling to conjure this lovely beast straight out of her mind. She’d followed the Typhoon Design Group’s rough draft specs, marveling how *VIII* concepts broke tradition with previous *Typhoons*. The familiar triangular wings had been transformed into semicircles merging into a more oval fuselage, and the ship looked more like a sports car than the dependable *Typhoon* family sedan of recent years.

She was exhausted. The Trans-Simultaneity had taken a lot out of her. Over the past three days she’d come to accept that its unexpected gifts were on the wane.

What imperfections might have arisen during those magnificent energy bursts? She hadn’t created the ship alone. Robot Laurie 283 had memorized the *VIII* specs as well as those for the destroyed *Typhoon VII*, and reconstructed the entire Know-How operating system everyone thought had been erased.

But recreating the *VII* and conjuring an *VIII* from scratch involved billions of technical decisions. Had Laurie screwed something up along the way? Was that why they now floated nowhere? Was that why she still couldn’t be absolutely sure she was the real Laurie?

She was drained. Three days of being stranded here, pretending to be a cybernetic machine even when she damn well knew she couldn’t be, had her nerves aflame. Yet all this time she’d resisted confiding in her captain, because how would Mr. Jack Always in Charge take it?

She drifted into calculations about *Typhoon VIII* Version 5.6.33. The Ywritt tweaks to Star Drive Four, ported over from the *Typhoon VII*, had downloaded fine. The Nav 13 equations should have taken the *VIII* right to the n-dimensional sphere. So where was it?

“I asked you a question, robot,” Jack snapped.

“Uh ... sir?”

“I’m asking you why you would only realize this after *three days*.”

“Oh. Sorry. I was just thinking about the specifications, and our course here, and all. But really, I’m *not* the robot.” She pointed to the printed med report in Jack’s hands.

He flipped through it. “Did the flight through the star mess up your programming?”

“Look, Jack, all I can think is that Laurie 283 and I must’ve *switched* somehow. I mean, if I could just *concentrate*. I could look through the Trans-Simultaneity conditions again, see if there’s some logical explanation. But I’m so blasted right now.”

They all were. Not even Edward the robot, or the Wounded Amy Nortel entity jammed

inside him, had been prepared for the horror of the star Wiiryvel coming directly at them. Plunging into the impossible brilliance. A millisecond of unbearable heat. Knowing it had all been an insane mistake, that you were now *extinguished*. But a second later you were floating in darkness, the ship crippled. Probably everyone thought they'd gone mad.

The first indication that something was amiss was when she'd begun ministering to the dazed crew as if she really were a human doctor. Jack had looked askance at software hubris from an upgraded Heroes and Villains of the Thirties robot handing out sedatives. Then again, the guy had assigned robot Laurie the physician/engineer duties, so why was he so bent out of shape? He'd probably figured 283's medical database might be useful, but everyone caught him frowning at Laurie's disturbing medical empathy.

She regarded *Typhoon VIII's* dim, sleekly curving control room. Until now she hadn't appreciated the specs' emphasis on turquoise and forest-green throughout the vessel. But it was all lovely, in stark contrast to the unease churning in her belly.

Jack regarded the report. "I'll need Ywer to verify this as accurate. If it's true you're the real Laurie ... hey, what's with your arm there?"

Laurie was startled by the wet cut on her right forearm. "Oh, wow, I didn't even notice. Edward was roughhousing in engineering. I must've scraped my arm. He was complaining about his Amy partition getting riled up." She grinned. "He told me he'd applied just enough force to knock me down *gently*. But that was anything but gentle."

Jack looked away. "Do you think Edward's malfunctioning too?"

She frowned at the persistent implication that she, like Edward, was a glitching device. "No, he's fine. I rechecked his parameters. He says it took him a while to get this Amy thing under control. He'll be okay. *She'll* be okay too, I think. Well, as okay as any of us right now."

"Well, robots don't bruise, or bleed, do they? I mean, that is, if you're the real Laurie, and if it's really possible you got ... switched somehow?"

Laurie met Jack's muddled brown eyes. "Well, given all the craziness we've seen, anything's possible. Going into an anti-dark energy star and supernovaing it. Who knows what could happen?"

"No, what I mean is, if ... if this is really *you*, and I just got through appointing you supreme commander and sending you back to Sol, I mean, God, if *that's* screwed up now ..."

Laurie froze. "I guess I pushed that out of mind. Been so out of it." The only thought she'd given to the promotion had been a hazy musing about what she might say when she reported back to Sol in the *Typhoon VII*. All this time she'd gone through the motions of being physician/engineer, even as her mind short-circuited. But there'd been nothing but madness on the *VIII*. She'd been hallucinating for three days.

Jack let out some air. "Oh God. Oh my God. You know, I'm having trouble wrapping my mind around ... what you're saying. Look, I've been pretty out of it myself. We've spent all this time here thinking we're actually *doing* something. Are we all so deluded? Taking sensor readings telling us *nothing*? Readings on something we have no idea even exists?" He swept his hand at the dense star field. "There's nothing there. We all know that. Didn't I appoint, uh, Laurie as SCUSSF with the understanding she'd be heading back to Sol to link up with Joe? While I took Laurie 283 with me and Amav to figure out this n-dimensional anomaly?"

"R-right ..." She almost added: *No worries, Jack, you can have it back!* But wasn't that inappropriate? Ethically wrong? Really out of the question? But who was she to tell the famous Jack Commer she was now his superior officer?

"I still don't *get* this. Can you really be the real Laurie?"

“Really, I am ...” She bit off adding *sir*, or worse, *I get it, Jack, if you think you still need to be supreme commander, then ...* “I’m actually getting a few more of the equations on that as we’re talking. It’s all vague, but I think I see how it could happen.”

Jack sagged in his seat. “Damn it all. This was supposed to be my last mission. And then I was going to retire.” He held up a hand. “No, just hear me out. When you--if this is really you--volunteered to fly the *VIII* into Wiiryvel by yourself, I could see in your eyes you thought it was a suicide mission, but that you were ready to do it because you knew what the stakes were.”

“Well, we all knew the stakes, I guess.” Again biting off *sir*.

“That sort of decision-making isn’t the only reason I appointed you SCUSSF. Hell, I knew the bureaucracy would have to confirm it, but we both knew Joe would take care of that. But I wasn’t just trying to spare your life. Somehow I was absolutely certain I could fly the *VIII* into Wiiryvel and not only would we all survive, we’d find an answer to this n-dimensional thing. Then I’d retire, knowing you could run the USSF.” His dark brown eyes scanned the star-filled plastiglass canopy. “Well, we did prove a *Typhoon* can fly into a star, supernova it, and come out *somewhere*. So we’ve done part of it, I guess. Not that it means a damn thing to anyone.”

“Well, when you look at it that way ...” Laurie contemplated the severe depressions she’d noted in Jack, Amav, and herself the past three days. As for copilot Ywer, couldn’t they all feel his jagged red-violet Martian outradiance? Hadn’t it all been blaring in their heads the past three days even as Ywer pretended not to broadcast it? And Edward’s robotic systems were “okay,” meaning sixty percent functional. If anyone hated being a D- student, it would be Edward.

“And we have zero idea where we are,” Jack grumbled.

“Well, we know we’re not in the Milky Way or the Local Group.” Laurie, Edward, and Ywer had run enough calculations on that.

“So you see, I haven’t completed my mission yet.”

Laurie braced herself for the demotion.

“And so, Supreme Commander, I ... await your orders.”

Laurie blinked. “Well, uh, sir ...”

“Don’t call me *sir*,” he barked, then grinned. “Uh, I mean, don’t call me that, sir.”

“Are--are you kidding?”

“No, sir! And you can be sure I’ll offer all my expertise to assist you in this situation.”

“Oh my God! I mean, right! But, Jack, you need to be captain of this ship!”

Jack checked her bleeding arm. “Well, I’ll certainly be happy to captain the *VIII* for you, if that’s your wish, sir.”

“Don’t call me *sir!*” Laurie reddened. “I mean, really, we should just call each other by our first names if we’re going to pull this off, right? I mean, Admiral, sir, uh ... Jack?”

“That’s another thing, Admiral Lachrer. I told you and everyone that my retirement would start the second we entered Wiiryvel. So basically I’m out of the service now, and as I may have mentioned, the *Typhoon VIII* is now essentially a pirate ship.”

“I reinstate you, as admiral, right now! And as of right now, the *Typhoon VIII* is the flagship of ... the supreme commander! On a valid mission! Sir!”

“Don’t call me *sir!*”

“Don’t you call *me* sir! I mean, if we’re going to work together, sir!”

“Yessir!”

“Hey, what’s up with Privacy Mode? We’re past your damn ten minutes!” came a shout at the hatch, and pounding.

CHAPTER TWO

Laurie's Dread

Tuesday, May 19, 2076, 1630 hours

*From Fathom the Doomboat Stars,
the greatest science fiction novel ever written
copyright 2076 by Mickey Mal Michaels*

Infinite copies of the *Typhoon VIII* were made. This is the story of one of them.

But don't worry about me. I'm okay. I guess you could call this house arrest or something, right? Who the hell does she think she is, throwing me in the brig in the middle of a space battle? Okay, so I propositioned the lovely lady. Who wouldn't have? But she sure didn't figure on me starting a novel while I'm locked in here. A novel that'll explain *everything*.

Talk to Easterling if you want some answers as to why he thinks I'd want to seduce ya, babe. Hell, there are a lot of reasons, one being you look so much like Laurie, in fact everyone thinks you *are* Laurie. But you're a damn robot and that makes all the difference. Well, I guess Easterling's talking *at* you now with those forty PlanetBlasters I can hear thumping away on this dinky ship. Guess there's really nothing to worry about, I mean, given that there are an infinite number of universes, it really doesn't matter much what happens in this one, am I right? It's okay if we screw this one to hell, okay?

Now if there are an infinite number of universes, there are also an infinite number of *Typhoon VIIIs*, and only one needs to succeed, true? Like any fool can see that Jack Commer's stupidass scheme to shoot the *Typhoon* straight into an anti-dark energy sun to deal with some totally unknown Universal Sphere of Weird Indefinability has practically no chance of succeeding. But he had to have pulled it off at least once, right? So we must be living in the one universe where the *Typhoon VIII* did win the jackpot. Are we straight on that?

Okay, then deal with this: I *worshipped* that Jack Commer dude. Way back, back when he was just Captain Commer of the *Typhoon I*, way before he became supreme commander, which of course was after I bought the fucking farm. Jack in turn trusted me totally. He made me, a lowly lieutenant, turret commander of *Typhoon I*, after all. Why? Because I was the best gunner in the fleet and, more importantly, he knew my leadership skills. No way was Craig Reynolds gonna get it, with his constant undermining of me with his wisecracking so-called humor and his doodling during important meetings. So I got Turret One and Reynolds got Turret Two and he had to obey my every order and watch his mouth with me. I laughed to see him relegated to the rear and have to watch the computers cancel out his PlanetBlaster fire every time he whipped it across the *Typhoon's* tail. Yeah, I fought for the front turret and I made it. Got that?

So I know Jack Commer probably better than anyone, even his damn wife I never met because I had to die before he ever laid eyes on her. All because flaky little brother John Commer had to be a hero and ram the *Typhoon I* straight into Mercury and blow the whole crew to quarks. Except Jack and Joe who escaped, and more power to 'em, sure. Yeah, Jack Commer got to go on living and I've followed every single action he took since then and studied all his leadership skills and so I know exactly what the dude was thinking when he fired *Typhoon VIII* straight into that asshole sun.

The last telemetry from the *VIII*, which the *Typhoon VII* brought home on May 19, was that it blasted straight into the Greater Magellanic Cloud anti-star Wiioryvel and supernovaed it. So the task of *Fathom the Doomboat Stars* is hereby declared to be to render exactly and logically

the most likely outcome of that probably idiotic action.

People have pissed all over me as a sci-fi novelist. They never said so in so many words, but you could always tell they were thinking, what's a stupid lieutenant doing writing this SF crap when he should be focusing on his turret commander duties? Jack didn't care, though. He knew I could run Weapon Turrets better than anyone. Even Lee Borman got some recognition for his sex manual. He published *The Sexual Conquest of Your Inner Mount Everest* way after I died, but he must've already been on an ego trip about it because, sure, I knew he was a writer but when I showed him my stuff he just had to one-up me out of pure ego and crap all over it, like he was so superior and my stuff was so adolescent or whatever he said. Screw him. None of his HAVOTT versions ever got close to my super-cognitive abilities, that's for damn sure.

Yeah, it took an alien from Iota Persei, Waterfall Sequence, to pull together some truly amazing shit when he cobbled together a bunch of us old museum pieces to do some serious attitude adjustment on the United System. *Typhoon I* Heroes and Villains of the Thirties robots were the perfect solution. Am I right, Senator Borman Mediocrity Jerk?

*

So what's going on in Jack's head right now? Okay, I know for me it's May 23 and I'm writing all this out in my head in the *Pegasus* brig, and believe me I've got this thing so password-protected and partitioned they'll never find it even if they take me apart to look for it. Except Laurie. Or Laurie 283. Either of them could find it, I'm sure. But now it's time to get back to Jack Commer on May 19, okay? That's what this asshole novel is all about, right?

Okay. His mentality on that day: cocksure, full of himself because he just defeated the Wounded, or at least reamed them so bad they'll never recover and everyone knows it. And he finally got his flaky idiot son Jonathan James to kowtow to him, he retired as SCUSSF, and he appointed Laurie Lachrer to be the new supreme commander. Then he sends her home in the newly restored *Typhoon VII*. So naturally he thinks it's a great idea to shoot the brand-new *Typhoon VIII* directly into Wiioryvel and theoretically transmute the ship into some interdimensional mindfuck at the center of the universe. Right, scope it all out and fix it. Well, that was actually Laurie's idea and she was the one who first volunteered to do it, but here's magnanimous Jack saying no, little girl, you go be supreme commander and be nice and safe and meanwhile I'll be the one to sacrifice myself and save the universe.

Weirdly enough, his exceedingly hot wife Amav agrees to come with him. So I guess she must have worshipped him as I do. Sure, I know he was a fool to shoot his ship into that star, but, hell, if I'd been there I would've volunteered too. You know I would've followed that guy anywhere. He also took the Martian Ywer, his robot dog Edward, and robot Laurie 283, all of whom apparently thought it was a great plan too. Idiots all of them!

Okay, so now picture me, the science fiction novelist, the guy who would've volunteered if Jack had only *asked*, writing the *only possible true story* of what really happened. Again, the only actual facts we have come from the *Typhoon VII*'s report sent ahead to Groombridge 1618, back in the Milky Way, that Jack's sun dive went as planned, and the stupid star Wiioryvel did supernova and its entire solar system of anti-dark energy was successfully obliterated once and for all.

Yay. But what must have happened to Jack and the *Typhoon VIII*?

Its radiation sensors are blocking the ship from getting closer than three light-years to this Sphere of the Uninhabitable that everybody seems to think is gonna wreck the universe. That is,

if it's really there and not just some cruel illusion destroying the crew's minds. The Uninhabitable Anomaly is like a zillion times more evil than anything the Wounded could ever have come up with, even if the Wounded might like to have claimed they helped make it. Now those jerks are practically exterminated and we don't have to worry about them, okay? But now we see there's something even shittier out there for us. Bummer.

So Jack's ordered the *VIII* to take up station in a really wide orbit of three light-years around this stupid thing. Trying to figure out his next move. They've been trying and failing to take sensor readings for three days, and you've got to know everyone's beginning to think they've all just punched their one-way ticket to personal doom, am I right?

Picture Jack slumped in his command chair in the huge *Typhoon VIII* control room. Keep in mind that though he's seventy-two, Jack's been rejuvenated like most USSF officers to look mid-thirties. He's six-foot-one, in great shape, with powerful pecs and thick muscular arms. The dude's broad-shouldered and rugged and his stomach is taut like he can take a lot of punches and not feel a thing, and if he then decided to turn on you, those big hard hands clenching into fists of rock would be the end of your miserable life. That solid, square, slightly uneven face has inspired respect for decades throughout the USSF even as it pissed off a handful of envious USSF underlings who've wanted to kick him out so they could rise in the organization and grasp more and more power.

Jack's deep-set brown eyes don't miss a thing except when something gets him flustered and irritable, which believe me is happening right now. Yeah, this whole Fucked Anomaly thing has made him damn insecure, and though he says to himself he trusts his crew, now he wishes he'd brought along the human Laurie to explore this Anomaly with her marvelous genius intuition and the mystical Trans-Simultaneity BS which the Wounded stupidly bequeathed to her much to their later chagrin.

But he chose not Real Laurie, but the Laurie 283 robot, to be *Typhoon VIII's* physician/engineer, and 283 doesn't have the cosmic insight Real Laurie has. Yet at the same time he considers that the real Laurie Lacherer's ungodly Trans-Sim powers are probably diminishing by now anyway; nobody can keep up that transcendental mindshit for long, if the accounts of it that the *Typhoon VII* brought back to the Milky Way on May 19 make any sense. In any case Jack's thankful she's back at Sol by now and assuming her SCUSSF duties. He knows there may be some hassles with the United System bureaucracy about him retiring and appointing her in his stead, but he figures his brother Joe will smooth all that out. Which is pretty damn naïve if you ask me. Keep reading if you want to know why.

Look, I said I worship the guy, and I know him inside out, but that also means I can see through his BS and write it down here. He had to know the U.S. would screw him over about appointing Laurie. And so he's basically a severely misguided asshole. Think about that.

Jack knows *Typhoon VII* needed three days to get back to Sol. Real Laurie is needed there so much now. After all, she rebuilt that destroyed ship with Trans-Simultaneity and put together a new *Typhoon VIII* from *blueprints in robot Laurie 283's head*, with all the latest Ywritt modifications which the robot also memorized. So Jack feels some relief that Real Laurie will soon have the United System all tidied up and things'll be okay at home. But then he suddenly flashes: *Jesus H. Christ, none of that matters if I screw up this sphere thing.*

Let's be honest and admit Jack's more worried than he's ever been. His sensors don't show anything and all of a sudden he's wondering if coming here was such a great idea after all. The sphere's invisible, of course. It's been called leftover insanity from the beginning of the universe, located at the exact center of the cosmos (if that can even be defined) and it's apparently the

source of all the evil and delusion and fuck-up that's ever been. So naturally Jack feels he's dutybound to wipe all that crapola out. You gotta be wondering how he thinks they can find out anything at all about this mother, much less do anything about it, am I right?

Now, fighting down a new panic, Jack worries whether three light-years is still too close for comfort. He moodily surveys his console, alone in the vast starlit control room, and reflects on how everyone seems to be keeping more and more to themselves, getting more and more surly. Both he and Amav are moody and irritable, and in the past couple days they've taken to bouts of truly nasty fighting. They both recognize this as totally irrational and make quick apologies, but then they go right on withdrawing and sooner or later they start yelling at each other again.

Jack's more dumbfounded by Ywer's decline than anyone else's. Everyone's been picking up increasingly jagged outradiance from his second-in-command, and an hour ago Ywer refused a direct order to inspect the Amplified Thought Xon Bomb delivery system. Jack's puzzled and indecisive, pissed at himself for *being* puzzled and indecisive, and so he just lets it all slide.

And here Jack's always been in such awe of the genius Ywer, so open and honest with his mental outradiance, yet such an unusual Martian, such a mystery. Ywer's something like 1414 Martian years old and unusually tall, with the slightly larger pink fin that indicates a predisposition to lead vast armies in combat. But back in the 2034 war, Ywer fought Sol not as a soldier but as Senior Martian Chef to the psychopathic human usurper of the Martian throne, Sam Hergs. Eventually, though, Ywer joined the United System Space Force to fight the Alpha Centaurians. He could easily have become a Martian Star General, but chose to rise within the human ranks of the USSF. Everyone who's served with him has been wowed by his rigorous balance of telepathic outradiance and expert command.

Is Ywer only experiencing a temporary deterioration, and some undefined noble Martian strength is about to reassert itself? Or is that just more deluded wishful thinking, like his mistaken assumption that the robots wouldn't be affected? Meaning Edward, his household robot Saint Bernard, and the super-genius Laurie 283. They've both been scarce the past day. A couple hours ago he asked Laurie 283 to run a diagnostic on the robots, but thirty minutes ago she reported she just forgot to do it. She wasn't inclined to obey a fresh order, so Jack let the matter drop. He broods on how easily her usually boisterous and flirtatious self could implode like that. But he can't bring himself to order her to run another self-diagnostic.

And his super-loyal doggie Edward, normally so serene and efficient, has been making idiot mistakes and, like Laurie and Ywer, forgetting or refusing to execute orders.

Are we all just breaking down? Have I really screwed up royally by bringing us here? Jack's appalled that his crew is getting lost in arguing hairy metaphysical questions, like what's fundamentally wrong with the universe? Or who are we to think our tiny little human spaceship is qualified to do anything about this? Isn't showing up here a grandiose, abstract gesture that'll ultimately make everything worse? Why are we playing God? Isn't it all just heroics, just like his brother John taking the *Typhoon* into Mercury to rupture its Star Drive?

Yeah, that hysterical *Typhoon* suicide was all futile anyway, a meaningless act given that the Martians already had enough Amplified Thought to take us all completely out with a wink. Listen, babies, the very last millionth of a second of telemetry from the *Typhoon I* as it went down to Mercury was beamed back to Mars. Mickey Michaels' heart rate was on target to hit 300 beats a second, but he didn't have a second. None of them did.

Nevertheless that tiny bit of telemetry was central to the CPU kernel of the Mickey Mal Michaels Heroes and Villains of the Thirties robot, copyright 2043 by RoboticsMindPump. And it got *way* amplified at the Typhoon I Museum at Quontax when MMM Unit 609 finally got his

upgrade.

So I know all about futility, right? I can damn well recognize it as it unfolds in the only possible scenario for the *Typhoon VIII* as it fucks around with this Raw Universal Evil Bullshit. Look how listless and depressed everyone is after only three days. What'll it be like after three weeks? Do they even have three weeks? The fools should've expected this: orbiting a system, even at three light-years, that's draining them all to corpses. Jack went in swashbuckling but now he's rotting apart, his crew is dying, and he doesn't have the slightest idea what to do next. He finally gets a listless update from Edward who reports he's now engaged in pissing matches with the newly combative Amy Nortel part of himself, that truly nasty Wounded lady robot who got combined with the robot dog. *Was I a fool to allow Edward to continue to exist with that Wounded bitch inside him?* Jack wonders. *What the hell was I thinking?*

Anyway, get a get a load of *this*:

Alone in the control room, Day Three. Laurie 283 enters and secures the hatch, then evokes Privacy Mode and asks for the standard ten minutes. Says she needs to talk. Ywer stands up to excuse himself for their Privacy Mode, but Jack can tell his copilot's pissed at being shoed out of his seat. As 283 takes the copilot chair, Jack notes the robot is disturbingly nervous and fidgety. *Dammit, how can robots be nervous and fidgety?*

Although he says to himself he's had a big change of heart about Laurie 283 over the past week, due to all their adventures and shared mindfuck in the Greater Magellanic Cloud and on doomed planet Ailyuae, this particular robot has always flustered him. The damn thing flirts so hard you have to wonder if she's about to seduce you even when you're both standing in front of a dozen people. Also she has IHAGs, Illegal Human Artificial Genitals, both the male and female set in one rotating package. That gets everyone thinking, you know. Right?

Jack was especially weirded out when a few days ago, on the Big Adventure, the *real* Laurie Lachrer thought it was cool and necessary to *masquerade* as the robot Laurie for a while, going so far as to flirt her ass off with Jack to maintain the deception. How she pulled this off when she's so painfully introverted is anyone's guess. It's pretty obvious she wants to ball him but she has to keep all that forbidden female passion hidden away, right?

Anyway, 283 sits down across from him and Jack notes how carelessly unbuttoned her light blue flight blouse is. When he next sees there's *nothing* beneath that, he figures the sexy robot is gonna cocktease him one more time.

And get this: Jack swears to himself he's not attracted to Laurie, but he's always found her intriguing, even back when his brother John was alive and dating teenage Laurie. So he begins to enjoy the sight of that blouse and even wonders if further unbuttoning and outright *revealing* might not be the most appropriate thing right now, given the general unease and tension aboard the ship.

Suddenly Laurie 283 blurts out that Will Connors is affectionate enough, but that he's turned sort of godlike after his quasi-mystical adventures in *Garr/thahg*, and the distance is getting unbearable. "Do you think he's really the one for me, then?" she says.

This knocks Jack totally off balance. Why would the robot say such a thing? Will's one of The Four (the others being Martian Emperor Z'B, Martian Senior Scientist Kner, and K'ufunb of Alpha Centauri) who walked for billions of years through the Alpha Centaurian *Garr/thahg* afterlife, but the amazing knowledge they all gained during that time has been steadily eroding. But the big deal is that Will is human Laurie's boyfriend, and after all Laurie should be back at Sol by now and so why would robot 283 give a flying fuck about Real Laurie's personal relationship?

So Jack's really sweating as the robot is leaning like *way* over and he can see just about *everything*, those lovely medium-sized breasts he's always fantasized about, against his will, all these decades, and he's trying to remind himself that these are really just robot breasts, but all the same he's wondering seriously about the dual IHAGs a little further down.

The mission is doomed, he thinks, we're all dying, so maybe this robot knows something about the real Laurie's relationship with Will, maybe it's going downhill and the robot is using this loose talk as a way of hinting that Real Laurie might be available soon even though Jack will never see her again because he's at the Center of the Cosmos about to die in humiliation along with his whole crew, and so if he can't have the real Laurie he's always wanted, which he could have had if he'd just had the sense to go back to Sol with her instead of being a hero and trying to save the universe, anyway, why not score with a robot who's spraying five tons of sexual pheromones by now because Jack is really getting hot, so like wouldn't it be so damn easy to make a pass at Laurie 283 and in so doing gratify all his sex fantasies about Real Laurie? After all, the robot locked the door for ten minutes, hadn't she? Isn't that enough time for a quickie and in any case nothing's being recorded in Privacy Mode, am I right?

"Well, I don't know," he finally stammers. "I mean, whether Real Laurie belongs with Will or not, you know."

"I don't know, either. All I know is my own powers are failing. I mean, maybe Will and I are a pair somehow. He's failing, I'm failing. I can hardly think anymore. I shouldn't be here. Will keeps putting off marriage, and now he's getting so distant. And I'll never see him again anyway."

Jack's truly flabbergasted. He's never seen a robot malfunctioning so bad. "But Laurie's *back* with him now. They'll either work it out or they won't, you know."

The robot smiles ruefully. The smile is so delicate, so ironic, so full of suffering, those lips are so sweet and full and kissable that Jack's fingers are moving for her forearms and then all of a sudden he notices a streak of blood along her right arm.

"Uh ... what's *that*?" he babbles.

She looks down. "Oh, Edward was getting way too crazy down in engineering. He said Amy Nortel was hitting him with different kinds of cybernetic migraines. Amav thinks she's testing to see if she can take him over. He knocked some plates over and then jumped on me. I'm surprised you didn't hear all that. And something cut my arm and I bled all over my shirt, so I went ahead and changed to a new one." She looked down at her blouse and Jack's thinking she's pretending to just now notice that it's all enticingly unbuttoned, and that her little head shake of embarrassment is just an act, that she's now buttoning herself up again as one more seductive feminine delaying tactic. But all the time he's thinking he's gotta get in there and grab those babies before she finishes hiding 'em. Magnificent, perfectly shaped! *Gotta have 'em now. They're mine.*

But instead he just keeps staring at the blood. "I didn't know robots could bleed, I mean, that's an ... amazing tech development, I guess."

"They don't!" she screams. "You idiot! Don't you understand what's *happened*?"

"N-no, not really ..."

Laurie bursts to her feet, she's *crying* now, and if anything can push Jack Commer over the edge, that does it. "*I'm the real Laurie!* I just realized it today!"

"*Whaaaat*?" Jack stands too. "That's insane!" He wonders if this robot has an off switch he can get to fast, because obviously this clunky machine has gone totally schizoid.

"No, it's not! Maybe we *switched* or something. Maybe at the exact moment we dove into

that stupid asshole sun!” Well, I guess Real Laurie doesn’t curse like that, but I bet you’re thinking that in this situation she probably would, so let’s leave it like that. It sure heightens the sense of desperation, right?

“No, that’s not possible!” Jack screams back. “We sent her back to Sol on the *VII*!”

“Somehow it happened! I’ve been *crazy* the past three days! It’s taken me three days to admit I’m the real Laurie! I’ve been *sick* all this time!”

“Are--are you sure? I mean ...” Jack stares at her fully buttoned blouse. For a second he thinks of ordering her to strip it right off. How can she be doing this to him?

“We’ve seen more than enough craziness out here. *Anything’s* possible! Either I switched with Laurie and she’s back in Sol on the *Typhoon VII*, or maybe we combined somehow, like Edward and Amy. God, I can’t think that! She *can’t* be gone. She *has* to be alive.”

She’s not alive, she’s just a damn contraption, Jack’s about to blurt, but he smartly realizes that’s a stupidass thing to say right now, especially when he’s insane himself and none of this is making any sense, and that saying this will further diminish any chances he’ll ever have of getting into her IHAG.

Or Jesus God what if this really is Real Laurie? he thinks in horror. *Is that even possible?*

“We should have you ... medically examined, I guess,” he gasps. Now he’s feverish. Because if this is really true, and it turns out this isn’t just a malfunctioning robot who doesn’t have the slightest idea who she is, and somehow the real flesh-and-blood Laurie is really here, then a medical exam would prove she’s more than capable of spreading her very real legs for Jack Commer, correct?

But her crying and screaming mess with this line of thought, and it’s absolutely getting on his nerves now. “We’re all doomed out here! We’re never going back!”

Jack fights the urge to shout he feels the same way. But then it occurs to him that somebody’s got to get their act together, though this is a rather forlorn and despairing thought as it means dispensing with the urge to take this sexy babe on the floor right this second. Yes, he’s always wanted to. Admit it, Jack. You’ve always wanted to prong her!

But he clears his throat. He’s captain of a goddamn starship, for God’s sake. He has to put on an act of being professional. “Uh, listen, Laurie,” he says, still not sure who he’s addressing, but “Laurie” seems close enough to cover everything. “A med exam would probably be a good idea right now, don’t you think?”

“Forget it! I’m the real Laurie! I’m fucking *bleeding*, asshole. You got that?”

“You--you--Laurie would never speak this way!” Jack shrieks back.

“She would too! When she realizes the idiot captain of this ship is too fucking *chueless* to accept what’s really going on!” See, this confirms my earlier theory that Laurie would never use the word “asshole” unless she was really provoked.

Jack’s trapped in her angry blue eyes. Totally hooked into them. She’s super-Halloween scary. He’s never seen any robot mimic *that*. He stares at the blood on her arm which is still beading. “So you’re saying you *switched*? Somehow?” Listen to that voice go up two octaves!

“Yes! Idiot!”

“So Laurie 283 is back in Sol now? With the *VII*? You think?”

“I don’t know how, but I’m certain of it. We must’ve switched!”

So Jack’s thinking, whoa, maybe he gets the real Laurie babe after all. That is, once she calms down. Because Fate must’ve switched the two Lauries at the last second so he can get the human one. Who wants a double IHAG when you can have the real thing?

“So I just named Laurie 283 as supreme commander?” he finally gasps. Then he finds

himself laughing like a maniac. “Oh my God! Oh my God!”

Okay, let’s back up a second, now that it’s penetrated even Jack’s useless brain that this is in fact the real Laurie Lachrer, and we’ll objectively check out what’s now confronting him. Our petite babe is five-eight and 108 pounds, with a lovely ass achingly outlined in those tight blue USSF pants. Just turned sixty-one a few days ago, her rejuvenation seems to be enhancing her more every month, and she could easily pass for thirty. Last year her hair was turning a bit gray but now it’s back to her stunning bright red and flowing airily past her shoulders. Also tightly outlined are those small-medium boobs Jack (and I!) have always found mouth-wateringly irresistible. Her smooth oval face and serious demeanor fool everyone because she seems so placid, so muted and thoughtful, but you discover to your dismay that she’s on top of everything in a way no other USSF officer can touch. Her stunning blue eyes meet yours and she’s looking right through you as if you’re some Star Drive engine problem which she insists on immediately solving for you on the spot, at no charge. She also has this uncanny knack for looking merely cute one moment, then staggeringly beautiful the next. Even more intimidating, on the Iota Persei mission last summer she wound up with this scary sense of having dual citizenship in both the United System and the evil Wounded. The Wounded abandoned her but along the way they gave her Trans-Simultaneity, exhilarating and terrifying powers which seem to come and go of their own volition.

“Dammit, this isn’t funny!” Laurie finally snaps to end Jack’s insipid cackling, then adds, with a chilling professional tone that floors him: “You named *me* SCUSSF right before we dove into Wiioryvel, if you’ll recall. You report to *me* now.”

“Aw, jeez,” he mutters, finally catching his breath. “You wouldn’t ... I mean, I’m still captain of this ship ... I think?”

“Right, right. Reporting to me as SCUSSF.”

“No, wait. I mean, if we sent Laurie 283 back to Sol, with the official orders transferring SCUSSF, then--” Jack wonders if he’s going to start laughing again.

“Then they’re going to have to sort it out *there*.”

“God, what a mess, then, really.” His brain is overrevving. “I mean, if this is true ... can a robot pull that off?”

Laurie cocks her head. “Yeah. If anyone can, 283 can. At first I thought she could just hold SCUSSF for me until I get back. But, since we’re *not* getting back ...”

“So the USSF will be overseen by a *robot*. Oh, well, who cares?” Now he’s thinking, what the hell does it matter, now I’m just an ordinary ship’s captain marooned out in the middle of nowhere, facing death, and it seems pretty unlikely I’ll ever get into Laurie’s little pants, but on the other hand, maybe after a few weeks she’ll settle down and get that cold SCUSSF look out of her eyes and she can climb on top of me stark naked and that would certainly do the trick.

So at this exact Amav bursts into the control room with a shattergun to blow these illicit cheating lying motherfuckers away.

Well, I guess that’s not really how it happens, but Jack’s sure thinking that, only now remembering that he has a wife, and not only that, that she has full access to all ship’s systems and can easily broach Privacy Mode and unlock the control room hatch any day of the week.

“Heard you guys shouting,” she says. “Everything okay here?”

Now Jack relaxes a bit, as he sees the standard USSF shattergun is set to stun. “Yeah, all okay. Just, uh, some revelations, you know.” Would Amav really have stunned one or both of them? he wonders. Because his wife has to be as unhinged as everyone.

“Look, I finally realized I’m the real Laurie,” Laurie says simply, holding up her dripping

red badge of humanity. “And, actually, head of the USSF now.”

Amav nods. “I kind of figured that out yesterday, but I didn’t know how to go about talking to you about it.” She pulls a med kit from a side console. “Honestly, we do have some bandages on this ship.”

As she tends to Laurie’s cut, Jack can take in the sight of Amav in her tight red flight suit. When Laurie created the *Typhoon VIII* out of thin air, her ship specifications called for a full set of uniforms for everyone, and Amav had marveled at the huge selection of red suits at her disposal.

Now let me tell you that Jack’s now wondering what the hell he ever saw in Laurie because Amav Frankston-Commer, with that long lustrous dark hair and that tall lithe figure, is so absolutely flawless, so beautiful, so sexy, that it’s only been Jack’s being supreme commander that’s kept a hundred thousand USSF officers from propositioning her, and you gotta believe that at least one of ’em would’ve had the balls to press his case until she finally gave in, maybe just to be polite. As it is, about a hundred fifty guys have hassled her, to no success of course, over the forty years of her marriage to Jack. That narrows the odds and it looks like she never was unfaithful to old Jacko. But all that’s another story I can tackle in a future novel.

Okay, I never laid eyes on that enthralling piece of ass; Jack met her just a couple days after yours truly bought it along with five other *Typhoon I* crew at Mercury. But as a HAVOTT robot I interacted with numerous other Amav Frankston-Commer robots, and believe me, they’re all masterpieces of *intoxicating raw eros*. Anyone who’s seen the illegal surveillance videos on SolNet, made by tiny flying robots infiltrating the Commer Marsport home, before the vids were yanked of course, will agree that the nude Amav Frankston-Commer is a sight to fuck entire civilizations. In any case, none of us HAVOTTs, even the Jack Commer HAVOTTs, could imagine Jack Commer really deserving this visionary female. And yet somehow, this utterly sensuous creature seemed to fasten on Jack and they’ve been together since 2034.

Aw, hell, who am I kidding? Is this account of Day Three on *Typhoon VIII* even slightly accurate? This Jack dude has *Amav Commer*, after all. Don’t you remember that Amav got the Six Months’ Erotic Teachings from the Martians and knows *everything*? So naturally there’s no way Jack would really want this skinny Lachrer bitch.

Goddammit, maybe there’s some glitch in NovelProg. Maybe something in my own programming interacting wrong with NovelProg. Because you damn well know that Mickey Michaels was jealous of John having that cute nineteen-year-old Laurie Lachrer for a girlfriend. She was just a spaceport technician at the time, an airman first class. How on earth could she have fallen for that John dildo? Yeah, I wanted her from the first time we all got together at that downtown bar and I saw how achingly beautiful she was. If I’d somehow survived the *Typhoon I* disaster with Jack and Joe, that would’ve been great because then John would be out of the way and I could step in and console the grieving ex-girlfriend of the idiot who’d exterminated us all with his BS heroics. Yeah, I hate the mother. I hate his John HAVOTT that I have to work with every day. *I demand justice for the Typhoon I crew!*

Okay, getting off-topic. So maybe NovelProg picked up on my own hots for Laurie and messed up my novel? Huh. Gonna have to run this thing through some hard software checks.

But I have to have it right that it really did happen that Jack found out that his physician/engineer aboard the *Typhoon VIII* wasn’t really a robot as he’d thought, but Real Laurie. Gasp! I mean, that part’s got to be true, right, or none of this would make sense. But if this switch happened, where the hell did robot Laurie go? Did Jack’s lust for Real Laurie switch her with Laurie 283 and bring Real Laurie to the *Typhoon VIII* so he could finally bang her? Or

is that the glitch in my own programming? Because even as I'm writing this I see how shitty all this is, because The Switch is also, I now see, depriving me of Real Laurie returning to Sol where at least I might have had some chance of hooking up with her.

Especially as how the *Typhoon VII* wound up at the furthest outpost of Alpha Centauri, Groombridge 1618. Where I was, at the Typhoon I Museum! Damn! I came so close!

But The Switch intervened and deprived me of my rightful redhead. And also made me screw up my relationship with Laurie 283.

Look, I get it that you probably think I've screwed up this account. But I can't have! *Fathom the Doomboat Stars* is a true rendering. Even *doctrinally* true, you could say, as anyone can easily envision fresh new religious cults rising from this very writing. My account is the *only* logical explanation for May 19, 2076 at the Big Universal Evil Mindfuck. It's just that the NovelProg subroutine must need some tinkering.

So, no worries!

Believe me when I say you can trust me on this one!

CHAPTER THREE

The Robot Comes Home
May 19, 2076, 1630 hours

Green planet Marox glided past the fifteen-foot window to port. The supreme commander of the United System Space Force swiveled behind her desk in the captain's stateroom. Her comm buzzed. "Yes, please come on in."

Through the hatch came what could have been her twin, the redhaired Laurie 1014, still in her transparent white gown. Behind her stood the frowning, arms-crossed robot Rick Ballard, also clad in a gauzy white robe.

"Sorry, Rick, I need to speak with Laurie in private," the supreme commander called out. "She'll be with you in a minute. Laurie, please come in. The hatch closes automatically."

Laurie 1014 reluctantly did so and the door slid shut. "It's just that, well, Rick and I are afraid to be apart from each other." Her glossy wooden breasts and dark pubis were clearly visible through the thin fabric, but nobody onboard this ship was about to get riled about that. The supreme commander certainly didn't care, and 1014's tormentor Jonathan James Commer had spent the voyage holed up in his stateroom, probably consumed with horror over the suffering he'd doled out over the past eight hundred years; his dog Trotter might be the only thing holding him together now. The supreme commander estimated the Commer fool would need yet another eight hundred years to recover.

She was still amazed by the wooden robots from Ailyuae. Jonathan James's impossible creations now ignored him altogether. Hopefully the insane fantasy he'd harbored about Laurie 1014 had finally collapsed, but in any case JJC had serious work ahead. His father had tasked him with finding the scattered remnants of the Wounded and convincing them their cause was lost. But how long would the United System have to wait for him to get his act together on that score?

"So, Laurie, have a seat. How's it going?" said the supreme commander.

The wooden robot gathered her loose dress and took a chair. "Well, we're a little concerned about the delay in landing. Have you heard anything more?"

They turned to the green mists of Marox. "No, sorry. Tell you the truth, I'm beginning to get a little annoyed about this whole deal."

"Is it just this one solar system?"

"Apparently not. From what Groombridge Command is saying, it looks like we would've run into this landing clearance rule anywhere in the system."

Running a newly-created starship three days hard from the Large Magellanic Cloud, with no rigorous systems checks, had not been the wisest decision the supreme commander had ever made. On final approach to the Orion Arm, the *Typhoon VII's* Star Drive had begun making ominous noises, and initial checks showed that several minor but potentially serious anomalies had already burned out their sublight drive. She'd elected to stop at the furthest outpost of the United System, Groombridge 1618, rather than hope the *Typhoon* might make it another sixteen light-years to Sol. She didn't want to calculate how many centuries it would've taken them to drift to Sol with both nonfunctional sublight and nonfunctional Star Drive.

She'd established orbit with thrusters only. They had fuel to maintain orbit for months, and she was beginning to wonder if this was what the bureaucracy had in mind.

"Do they really think we've brought *contamination* with us?" the wooden robot said, looking to the hatch as if hoping Ballard would step in.

The supreme commander assessed her petite counterpart. For the first time it hit her that Laurie 1014 and Ballard, both built in the Large Magellanic Cloud, might consider the Milky Way scary alien territory. The huge galaxy had always dominated their night sky; maybe they'd thought it a domineering fascist empire.

"Apparently they want to triple-check all the telemetry we sent the past couple hours," she replied. "Even though we all know it all checks out. There's not a single particle of anti-dark energy left in the Cloud. There's no way we're a threat to anyone here. But I guess that's not stopping paranoia about the Wounded, and the fact that we have a former one on board."

Laurie 1014 looked away. The supreme commander regretted bringing up Jonathan James. The fool claimed to have been profoundly in love with his servant robot, but in reality he'd built a sex slave. For hundreds of years. The supreme commander was quite ready to see the last of the tiresome JJC and his sycophant Beagle.

"But you're head of the USSF now. Can't you just order them to let us land? I can't stand this--this *spaceship*."

So that was part of it. The robot had spent her entire existence on Balloon Ship *Armageddon*, floating above Ailyuae's toxic ocean, but at least she'd had open air to breathe. Now she and Ballard were trapped in a metal shell as bureaucrats thwarted their bid for freedom.

"Actually, Laurie, that was what I wanted to talk to you about," the supreme commander said. "But first I need to know if you have any sort of Robotic Ethical Delivery Subroutine or similar programs. All Sol robots have some form of REDS, of course." She winced to recall all the times REDS had failed.

Laurie 1014's startling sapphire eyes finally met the supreme commander's. How had Jonathan James managed to make such lovely eyes out of Ailyuae *plants*? "Yes, Rick and I have something like that. You'd probably find it in the Fundamental Decency Matrix."

"So, if I ask you to keep a secret, you'll tell no one? Not even Rick?"

"I ... I think you've trapped me on this one, Miss Laurie," Laurie 1014 said, mustering a rueful smile. "Yes, if you want to confide in a simple wooden robot, because we're so similar, you and I, well, yes, I'll keep your secret. But I want to repeat that Rick and I intend to go off by ourselves and find a place just for us. Maybe even a whole planet just to ourselves. And for that to happen, we need to land and find further transportation. We don't want anything to do with your Milky Way politics."

"Understood. Now, what I have to say may sound absurd, but given everything that's happened the last few days, I think you'll find it plausible."

"Okay."

"Our mission is obviously just to report back to Sol with all our data about Ailyuae and the Wounded. And let everyone know Jack flew the *Typhoon VIII* into Wiioryvel to get to the Sphere of the Uninhabitable. Remember how sure he was he could pull it off? Especially since he took Laurie 283 with him, armed with all the proper calculations?"

"So are you thinking he made it? Or not?"

"Well, that's the thing. And it's taken me three days to really accept it. At first I thought I was just going mad."

"*What?*"

"But I did the calculations over and over. There are so many variables, so many unknowns, that nobody can be certain. But I think I have what has to be the final explanation."

"Which is--?"

"Well, I remember sitting at the physician/engineer station in the *Typhoon VIII*, and then

suddenly, I'm in the *pilot's* chair. *Here*. On the *Typhoon VII*. And I'm wearing Laurie's new *admiral uniform*."

The wooden robot shook her head, long red hair flying. "I don't get what you're saying, ma'am."

"The calculations postulate this could happen, but it took me three days to accept it. I was totally confused all the first day. I mean, I really tried to believe I was Laurie Lachrer, but finally I logically *had* to accept that I was *Laurie 283*."

The wooden robot stared back. "*What?*"

"Laurie and I must have switched places the moment the *Typhoon VIII* went into *Wiioryvel*."

"That--can that *be?*"

Laurie 283 picked up a heavy black lamp from the captain's desk. She casually bent the steel shaft in half, then moshed the thing into a lumpy black softball. Laurie 1014 nodded in awe. "I hate that stupid lamp," 283 continued. "If you were a Sol robot I could interface with you and download everything. I've wondered if JJC as a biorobot can sense me, but apparently not. As for Trotter, maybe he knows, maybe not. Those two are hiding from everyone anyway. I refuse to worry about them."

"Well, you look totally biological to me. But why are you telling me this?"

"I just want someone to know. I figured a fellow robot would understand. I also invoked Privacy Mode for this conversation and made sure Know-How isn't listening. I don't trust that system, no matter how much Laurie says she upgraded it. I don't know if this switch can happen again, and in the meantime I have to protect Real Laurie's status as supreme commander."

"So you're saying you're *Laurie 283*."

"Absolutely. God, it's such a relief to just come out and *say* that."

"And so you need to play the supreme commander part for a while."

"Exactly. I think Laurie and I both have to know by now what's happened. But I've got to make sure everyone accepts her appointment as supreme commander. Our superspace report included Jack's decision to promote her. So I also need to make Joe Commer believe I'm SCUSSF. I think he's planning to retire, so either I work with him or hire a replacement. And I certainly wasn't programmed to do any of this stuff."

"Well, I'm not sure I'd be of any assistance in that regard, really."

"No worries there. I just needed someone I can trust to bounce all this off."

"Well, like I say, Rick and I want to, you know, go elsewhere as soon as possible."

"And that's fine. It's just that I was so *primed* for the Sphere of the Uninhabitable. I wasn't really sure if the *Typhoon VIII* could make it. I'm still not sure it did. But if I died finding the n-dimensional sphere, but sent a report back in the last second, that would've been fine. But now here I am, supposedly supreme commander, stuck in orbit around this stupid planet."

"Why aren't they *telling* us anything? Wouldn't a supreme commander *order* them to speed this stupid process up?"

Laurie 283 laughed. "I'm not really playing my part very well, am I? Hold on a sec. Why didn't I think of this?" She searched the ship's library and came across *Command and Control: A Manual for USSF Officers*. After downloading its 678 pages she also found the current USSF table of organization and ate that as well. She tapped the console on her desk.

"Groombridge Command, Marox Office," came a crisp response.

"This is Supreme Commander Lachrer aboard *Typhoon VII*," Laurie 283 rapped out. "We've been in orbit three hours and assume Alien Diagnostic has had more than enough time to

evaluate our condition. Request immediate landing protocols at Marox.”

“One moment, please. Let me get the major.”

A rough male voice came through. “Detention Services. Darkerbier.”

Laurie 283 checked the name and rank on her console. “Major Darkerbier, this is Supreme Commander Laurie Lachrer aboard *Typhoon VII*. Please clear us for landing at Marox. All appropriate decontamination procedures have been downloaded to your office.”

“Ah, yes. Colonel Lachrer, we’ve just received new instructions from USSF Command Central.”

Laurie 283 exchanged a wary glance with 1014. She had to remind herself that a wooden robot was by no means naïve about power politics, having witnessed much of it, along with a lot of bloody combat, aboard Balloon Ship *Armageddon*. She and her counterpart both knew that Monsieur Darkerbier was either misinformed about her promotion or, more likely, was indulging in foolish disrespect to his new boss.

“Belay that! I *am* Central Command!” 283 shot back, pleased to fully slip into the role.

“Excuse me, Colonel Lachrer, but USSF Central Command, now under the direction of United System President Robert Easterling, mandates that *Typhoon VII* is to be indefinitely quarantined in Marox orbit for a thorough check for alien contamination.”

“What?”

“All personnel aboard *Typhoon VII* to be quarantined except for Colonel Laurie Lachrer, who will submit to arrest for insubordination.”

“That’s idiotic! You fool! Get me Joe Commer! Deputy USSF Head!”

“The office of Deputy USSF Head is vacated. Colonel Lachrer and crew will now board Detention Services Shuttle 4043 for transport to Asteroid Decontamination Facility 990.”

Laurie 283 glanced out the control room plastiglass. A white shuttle maneuvered close and disappeared beneath the fuselage. The *Typhoon* shuddered to confirm a docking. “You bastard, you can’t *do* this!” she snarled, punching the cancel button and wondering if she was overdoing the human emotional response.

The airlock door hissed open below. Then came clomping boots. Laurie 1014 stood. Her glistening naked wooden body under that robe would undoubtedly be a treat for Major Fiock Ponro Darkerbier’s sex-starved Detention Services meatheads.

“Don’t worry, Laurie, we’ll get you and Rick out of here,” 283 said. “You have a Stasis Mode. Use it as needed. I’ll straighten this out. Damn, how did they figure out I was a robot?”

“C’mon, isn’t it obvious? They’re not arresting you because they think you’re a robot. They’re arresting you because they think you’re *Laurie Lachrer*. Can’t you see there’s been a palace coup? They’re *blocking* her as SCUSSF. So don’t think about protecting Laurie 283. Take on the real Laurie and protect *her*. And don’t worry about me. Rick and I will demand asylum here. I may not see you again. But I won’t reveal your secret.”

The hatch opened. “Oh, for God’s sake,” sneered a USSF stormtrooper eyeing Rick Ballard’s coarse wooden penis pushing his transparent robe out nine inches. As more soldiers entered the stateroom, all encased in white decontamination suits, another trooper confirmed that wooden Laurie 1014 was a sight to elicit military drooling.

“Colonel Laurie Lachrer,” a lanky USSF lieutenant with nametag SORENSON announced, “you are under arrest for high treason to the United System.”

About the Author

Michael D. Smith was raised in the Northeast and the Chicago area, then moved to Texas to attend Rice University, where he began developing as a writer and visual artist. His Jack Commer, Supreme Commander science fiction series is published by Sortmind Press. In addition, Sortmind Press has published Smith's literary novels *Sortmind*, *The Soul Institute*, *CommWealth*, *Akard Drearstone*, *Jump Grenade*, and *Asylum and Mirage*. All titles are available from Amazon.

Smith's web site, <https://sortmind.com>, contains further examples of his novels and visual art, and he muses about writing and art processes at <https://blog.sortmind.com>.

Amazon author page

<https://www.amazon.com/author/smithmi/>

The Jack Commer, Supreme Commander Series

The Martian Marauders
Jack Commer, Supreme Commander
Nonprofit Chronowar
Collapse and Delusion
The Wounded Frontier
The SolGrid Rebellion
Balloon Ship Armageddon