

CHAPTER ONE

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

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

Excellent! Trotter beamed, chewing and gulping.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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