

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.