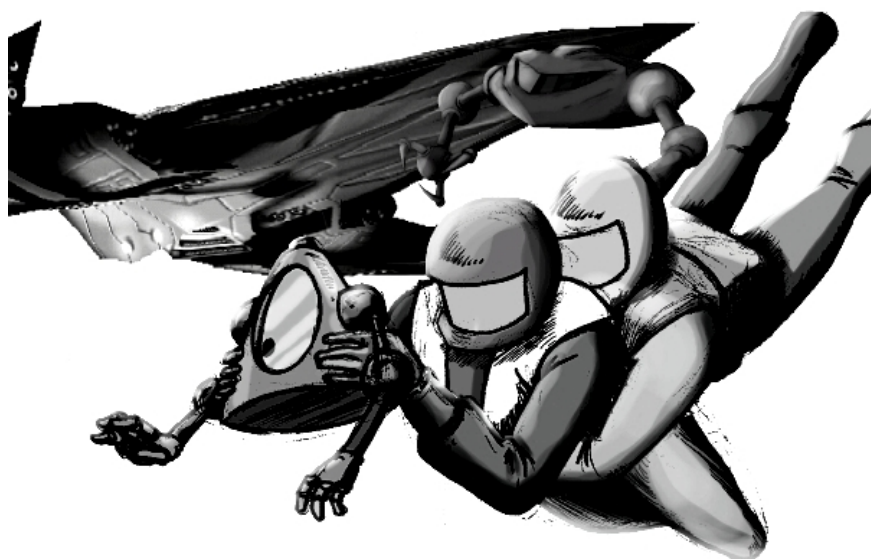




Dedicated to my mother
Jeannie Hess



JACK RYDER

The Rundorth Faction



All characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. The names, incidents, dialogue and opinions expressed are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real.

Jack Ryder

The Rundorth Faction

Free Preview

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Space scene illustrations based on
Starfleet Command: Orion Pirates
Developed by Taldren

For technical information and advice on self-publishing, I am especially indebted to the admin, forum moderators, and writers at www.lulu.com.



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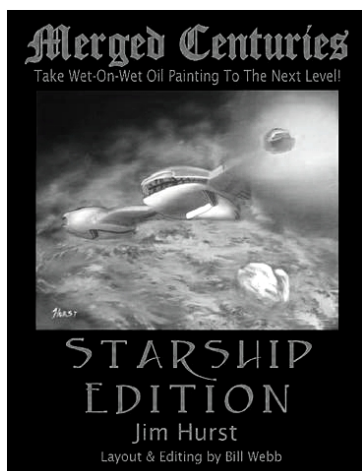
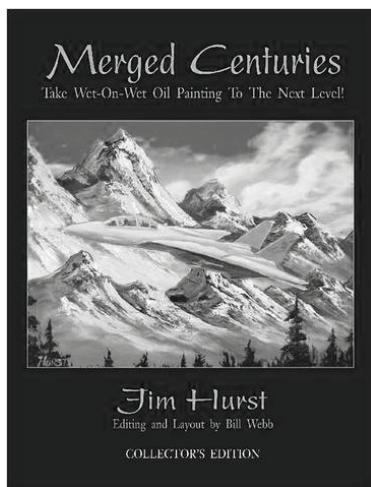


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Introduction

In mid 2004 I flew across the country to my hometown of Merced, California to visit my mother and siblings while on vacation for a week. Before leaving, my mother pulled out an old trunk and told me to take what I can back with me. Inside, I found old forgotten drawings and comic strips I made as a teenager over 30 years ago.

Inspired by the memories of my youth, I sat down at my computer and began typing the first words of this science-fantasy novel based on the character stories I created so long ago.

As an artist, I have the unique opportunity to illustrate this book as well, for most other writers must hire others to illustrate their vision. Those writers, who are indeed artists, have my greatest respect. Putting out thousands of words in a meaningful fashion is a daunting experience. The word is their brush. For me, I thank God there's spellcheck.

Though I'm a painter, I have elected to illustrate this book with the help of the computer. The characters are drawn by me and scanned, and then colored with a graphics program and pasted upon backgrounds (much like an animation cell). The starship pictures are actual screenshots of Starfleet Command: Orion Pirates, a fantastic PC tactical starship simulator developed by Taldren, in which I had the great opportunity to help beta test. The full color version of the illustrations can be found as an online slideshow at my website <http://embark.to/paint>.

As this book is self-published, I do not have the powerhouse advertising ability of corporate publishers. Word of mouth is the most powerful type of advertising known to exist. If this is a book that you know others will enjoy, spread the word and share it with them. It can be ordered online at www.lulu.com/mergedcenturies, or ordered over-the-counter at your local bookstore using ISBN#: **1-4116-2575-7**.

I hope you enjoy reading Jack Ryder – The Rundorth Faction as much as I did writing it. Feel free to send me comments about the book to Reptor7@Yahoo.com and visit my website at <http://embark.to/paint>

Jim Hurst

Contents



Prologue: The Parallax Incident 1

Chapter 1: The Academy 10

Chapter 2: The Reception 18

Chapter 3: Of Music And Dreams 25

Chapter 4: Socks And DNA 31

Chapter 5: The Rundorth Factor 36

Chapter 6: The Ride Out 42

Chapter 7: The Infiltrators 46

Chapter 8: The Calm Before The Storm 56

Chapter 9: The Betrayed 64

Chapter 10: The Retreat 70

Chapter 11: Beskilon Bound 76

Chapter 12: Out Through The In Door 86

Chapter 13: Into The Lion's Den 94

Chapter 14: The Star Faction 107

Chapter 15: The Chase 118

Chapter 16: The Asteroid 124

Epilogue: The Reunion 131

Jack Ryder



The Rundorth Faction

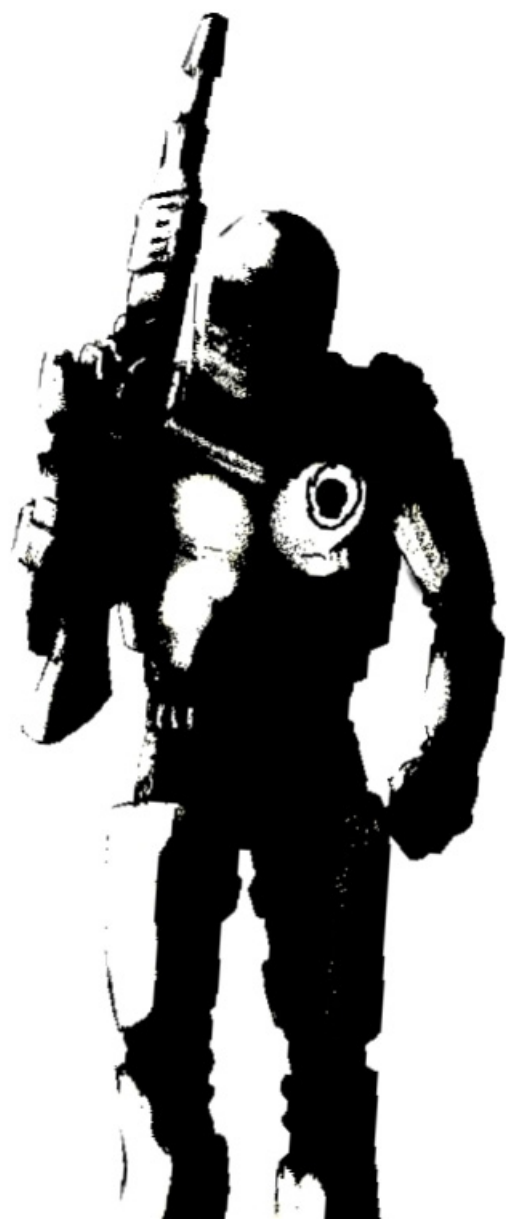
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Prologue



The Parallax Incident

Space. A brilliant nebula far away offsets the stark blackness while a lone space freighter arrived in this particular sector. The ISF Parallax, old that it may be, had many years left in its life as it sliced through the void toward its destination delivering cargo one more time. The outpost station was only a day away, and the freighter's crew bristled with activity while they prepared their arrival.

The warehouse was especially busy. Mechanical loaders prepared and aligned containers destined for delivery. The loaders were walkers, large robotic contraptions piloted by operators and designed for the sole purpose of moving large objects. The sounds of metal clanging and the heavy footsteps of metallic feet filled the warehouse

Jack Ryder – The Rundorth Faction

while their operators maneuvered them, lifting and moving containers in preparation for tomorrow's busy unloading.

A loader lifted a pallette containing medical supplies and stomped across the cargo bay toward a neatly stacked pile of pallettes. Inside, Larry Ryder controlled his loader and amongst the radio chatter he could hear the foreman's voice distinctly in his headset: *"...Morgan, I said cargo container B7 goes to docking bay sixteen! I said sixteen, you dimwit! Karl, move D5 to bay four will ya, and quit slacking off! Larry, it's your wife again. For crying out loud, it's the third time today!"*

Larry cringed. He could hear the other loader operators laughing, and after tuning them out, he dialed his living quarters. A few seconds later, the small view screen in his loader on a panel in front of him beeped and his wife appeared. He could see his son behind her sulking in a chair, and he suddenly remembered his promise to take him to the simulation chamber for some flying. Yep, he thought. She looked angry. "Uh, hi honey!"

Mary pointed to her own view screen at her husband. "Jack has been sitting here for the past hour waiting for you to take him flying in the simulation chamber. You promised, you know."

"I'm sorry, babe. We're behind schedule and it'll be another couple of hours before I can get out of here." Larry explained. *"Tell you what. Tell Jack to head on over and I'll ask Frank to set him up in the simulator. It'll be okay. See ya in a few hours."*

Mary's view screen went blank. Exhaling, she walked to her son and squatted next to him. "Jack, your dad can't get away from work right now."

Jack sighed, and standing up he said: "I understand. Mom, perhaps I can get Norman to come along?"

Mary gazed at her son. He is growing fast, she thought. Too fast. It wasn't long ago when he was just a toddler, and look at him now. Thirteen years old and almost as tall as her. Where has the years gone? She ran her fingers through his thick lock of dark brown hair and smiled. "With all the activity going on, the simulation chamber is most likely available. You head on down, and I'll give Norman's mother a call to have him meet you there. Okay?"

"Thanks, Mom." He gave her a hug and headed toward the door.

"Aren't you forgetting something?"

Jack stopped and looked at her, not sure of what she was referring to.

Jack Ryder – The Rundorth Faction

“Wait a second...” She scurried into her bedroom, and after a moment came out holding one of his father’s blue coveralls. After holding it against him to check it’s size, she handed it to him. “Not quite a flight suit, but close enough.”

He slid the coveralls over his clothes and zipped it up. It fit slightly baggy, but did give the feeling of wearing a real flight suit. “Thanks, Mom!” He gave her another bear hug and quickly headed out the door into the ship’s passageway.

The freighter was huge, but he practically grew up here so he knew his way around. He especially knew how to get to the simulation chamber. He’s been there many times before.

He made his way toward the ships aft, several times almost getting trampled by the many people hurrying about. The walls were color coded, with lines and arrows painted to give aid with navigation within the ship, but he rarely needed to glance at it. Pipes and valves adorned the ceiling, a stark contrast to the smooth walls at his sides.

Coming to a steel ladder, he descended downward through an open hatch and dropped to the floor. Frank stood there looking down at him.

Jack looked up, always a bit startled at Frank’s height. He was very tall, much taller than his dad. His orange coveralls designated him as a technician, one who repaired the ship’s many electronic systems aboard.

“Well, if it isn’t young Jack. Come in, come in!” Frank stepped to the side and allowed Jack to pass him. The simulation chamber was fairly large, with the seven flight simulators lined up in a row waiting to be occupied. Not one was in use.

“Thank you, Mister Frank.” He stepped to a flight simulator and peered inside the open cockpit. “Dad said I could fly today!”

“You know the rules, boy. Your dad must be here with you if you want to take one of these puppies out for a spin.” Frank grinned as he watched the young boy’s shoulders sag. “But... it’s slow here today. I’ll give you an hour or so of flight.”

The young boy’s eyes brightened up and he leaped into the simulator cockpit. “Thanks, Mister Frank!”

Frank laughed. “No, its just Frank. As often as you and your dad been coming here, it’s just Frank. Here, let me help you strap in.”

“My friend Norman is supposed to meet me here!”

Jack Ryder – The Rundorth Faction

“Sorry, Jack. His mom called me a bit ago and said that he wasn’t able to make it. It had something to do about not behaving. You remember that the next time you don’t do what you are told.”

“Yes sir.” Jack sat back in the pilot seat as Frank strapped him in. The simulator was connected to an antigravity module allowing it to float a few feet above the deck and simulate movement that could produce a bumpy ride. “Frank, have you ever flown the real thing?”

“No.” Frank mused, thinking of his youth when he did want to do so. “No, I’m more of a fixit guy. No real flying for me, but I do love these simulators. There. All strapped in and ready for action! Any particular scenario you want to do?”

Gripping the joystick between his knees with anticipation, Jack said: “Random will be fine!”

“Random it is.” Frank stepped up to the control booth at the far end of the chamber to start the computer. Flipping a few switches, the control panels surrounding him came alive.

Jack slid the large flight helmet over his head and adjusted its straps. The helmet’s headphones came alive with Frank’s voice and artificial radio chatter. *“Flight leader this is control. You are cleared to start your engines.”*

“Roger that!” He slid the engine lever to idle and flipped the ignition switch. “Ignition on.” The many flight control displays lit up and the simulator vibrated making his already big smile even bigger. “We have ignition! Sealing the canopy!” He pulled the canopy lever at his right side and the canopy slid shut with a thud sealing him inside. The view of the simulation chamber through the canopy was immediately replaced with the realistic simulated image of a launch bay in a star carrier. “Control this is flight leader. All systems are go!”

“Flight leader, you are cleared to launch.”

The young pilot moved the throttle a bit past idle and he could feel his star fighter lift a few feet higher above the deck, hovering with a slight swaying motion as the onboard gyros fought to keep the craft stable. Gripping the thruster handle in his left hand, and joystick in his right, he maneuvered his craft carefully to face the exit leading to the dark void of space.

“Jack, this is Frank.” Jack adjusted his helmet position so he could hear Frank better. *“I’ve just got dispatched to repair a broken down loader in the warehouse. I’ll be back in an hour. Have fun!”*

Jack Ryder – The Rundorth Faction

“Thanks again, Frank!” Jack replied. “Here I go!” He slammed the thruster forward and his small star fighter shot out of the launch bay into space...

* * *

The bridge of the freighter was under normal routine. Captain Jean Mercer sat in her command chair and browsed through log reports as her crew chatted about what they plan to do once they reach the outpost station. The reputation of outpost station Gamma preceded it with its recreation facilities and the many things to do there, compared to the working environment of the freighter.

Listening to the talk of envirodomes and relaxation amongst her crew, she took her eyes off her logs for a moment and thought of her favorite massage parlor there, a destination she have been planning for a few weeks now.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a faint rumbling noise. The loose chatter of the crew stopped as everyone listened.

“Report.” The captain said to the engineer at her left.

The engineer, an older fellow of some years and quite experienced, shook his head in confusion as he checked the various displays at his console. “I’m not sure, Captain. I think it’s coming from outside.”

The rumbling intensified, followed by a vibration that shook the very hull itself forcing the bridge personnel to grab someone or something nearby to steady themselves. The sound of a hammering pulse and tearing metal diverted their attention upward, and disbelief turned to horror as they observed the hull buckle and crack.

“Launch a distress buoy!” That was the captain’s last words. With a flash the hull above them exploded outward. Electronics showering sparks and bodies were sucked out into the darkness of space.

All through the freighter people screamed as they were knocked off their feet by the blast with flickering lights being replaced by the dim glow of red emergency lights.

The freighter’s warehouse bay shook as the bay doors itself blew outward with loaders, operators and cargo being pulled into the void, and as the bay cleared of bodies and debris, the intruders entered...

* * *

Jack Ryder – The Rundorth Faction

Jack pulled back on his joystick and his star fighter responded. He closed in toward the targets that were getting closer with each passing moment. He packed two long-range missiles, and with a press of his thumb sent one flying through space toward its intended target. A moment later, the missile impacted and the enemy ship exploded with a blinding flash. “Yes!” He yelled, with the explosion making his ship shake. He quickly turned his ship to the left to avoid the onrushing burning debris.

The shaking never stopped. He glanced at the Master Caution lights, but there were no indication of malfunctioning systems or damage. All systems checked good but the shaking grew violent. A sudden jolt slammed his helmeted head against the canopy, and through dazed eyes he could see the simulated scene of space flicker and disappear.

After a moment the shaking subsided. He opened the canopy and stood up, his hands grabbing and lifting his helmet off his head to relieve the pain, and another jolt caught him off guard and sent him reeling out of the simulator cockpit, the back of his head striking the deck, his body bouncing and sliding as more rumbling jolts followed.

Once again the shaking subsided and Jack laid there, the back of his head feeling warm with a high pitch ringing between his ears, dazed and confused, and not able to move. Through unfocused eyes he saw the flickering chamber lights go out and be replaced by dim red emergency lights, the dark crimson shadows that were created providing a haven for things unseen. All was quiet. Not even the ship spoke to him. The once familiar hull vibration was gone, replaced with the silence of dead stillness.

After what seemed like a long time, the silence was broken by a sound far off. With droopy eyes he glanced toward its source beyond the entrance at the top of the ladder and listened to far off screams and blasts of weapons echoing off the metal walls, and an odd clicking noise. The sounds of carnage grew louder as he drifted into a world between dreams and reality and he began his slide into darkness.

Jack awoke. It wasn't the slow, gradual awareness type of waking, but the sudden startling type that made him lean up quickly with eyes wide open and darting left and right in confusion, then

Jack Ryder – The Rundorth Faction

wincing as his hand reached behind his head to sooth a painful bruise. It was quiet. The simulation chamber was dark, with the dull red emergency lights providing just enough light to see the steel ladder and the darkened exit above.

Using the simulator to steady himself, he slowly stood up and hobbled to the ladder and stopped. Warily looking up to the dark exit, he tightly grasped a rung and climbed up the ladder until his head passed through the hatch above. With eyes at floor level, he looked down the passage that was darkened and red as the chamber below and saw nothing. Nothing moved. There was no sound.

He couldn't decide what to do next. A part of him wanted to climb out and find out what happened, the other part making him want to drop back down into the simulation chamber and hide. He just stood there clinging to the ladder, his head poking up out of the floor, his narrowed eyes looking into the darkness beyond.

A far off yell startled him, making him duck slightly lower, yet with eyes now locked toward its direction in the dark. It was almost a scream, yet deeper with a resigned fear attached that echoed through the silence.

The sound of rapidly approaching footsteps widened his eyes and a man broke into view, his uniform showing him to be a member of the freighter's crew, and in a moment he passed Jack by with eyes burning in fear. Another panicked yell bellowed from the man as he ran deeper into the darkened metallic passage and a different noise caught Jacks attention, a distinct metallic clicking sound from whence the man came.

Out of the shadows it came, a one-meter oval shaped robot floating in the air, its antigravity module whined and fluttered as it fought the freighter's own still functioning gravity generator. Its front side widened twice the size as its rear to house a large circular eye-like sensor that was rounded at the bottom and flat at the top and an appendage jutted out from each side of its body. The right, a triple-jointed tubular arm with attached pincer-like claws, opening and closing, and clicking. The left, a thicker double-jointed arm that lifted and aimed at the retreating man, a beam of red light erupting from its tube shaped tip striking the man in the back.

Jack watched the man fall like a rag doll, and turning back toward the robot, it was as though their eyes met, its large eye-like sensor aiming directly toward him. Gasping, he dropped down the ladder and landed in the simulation chamber with a loud thud, and he

Jack Ryder – The Rundorth Faction

spun away from the ladder and hit a table. One of Frank's spare toolboxes tipped and spilt over, its many tools loudly clattering on the deck.

Panicked, he quickly glanced around for another way out. The room was sealed. Even the air vents provided no escape, as they were high up and out of reach. The sharp, metallic clicking noise arrived at the simulator chamber entrance hatch above and Jack pressed his back against the wall away from the ladder. It's coming!

As the robot's dark shadow passed him, he spotted a metal bar on the deck, a tool extender that Frank was fond of. Grabbing it, he swung with as much strength he could muster and struck the robot's left arm as it passed by. The arm separated from its body with a shower of sparks and the blow spun the robot around, its pincers snapping at him just inches away, and Jack swung again nailing the robot on the side sending it crashing against the wall. It landed on the deck in a heap of broken metal.

After stabbing it a few times with the tool extender to make sure it was dead, he once again climbed up the ladder and poked his head up. A large, black-gloved hand grabbed him by the collar and hoisted him up, slamming and pinning him against the wall. Jack crumpled and went limp as he lost his breath, fighting to breathe, and he looked at the imposing figure that gripped him. Attached to the hand was a large figure encased in a dark space suit, its many alloyed plates making it more armor than suit. He saw a peculiar emblem emblazoned on its chest plate: a black skull surrounded by red flame, and he looked up at its large helmeted head that was hidden behind a dark visor. As the imposing being held Jack securely in his left hand, it clutched a gun in his right with its barrel pressed against Jack's neck.

A beeping sound came from a wrist panel on the figure's left arm with a corresponding blinking of a small yellow light, and the large armored figure turned and walked down the hall, half lifting and half dragging Jack behind him.

After a series of turns, the large figure abruptly stopped. Looking up, Jack could see three people surrounding them, rifles raised and pointed at the armored being. They looked not at all like his captor, smaller in stature and dressed in form-fitting suits with silver straps securing a pack to their backs and their own heads helmeted with a shiny silver visor. A shiny five-pointed star adorned each of their breastplates. "Drop the boy." One said while they slowly tried to encircle the captor.

Jack Ryder – The Rundorth Faction

The dark armored figure held Jack up as a human shield; his own gun aimed at the rescuers as he stepped back and came to a doorway. With a loud hiss he tossed Jack toward them and jumped back with remarkable agility, the door slamming shut between them.

Landing hard on the deck, Jack lay on his back and looked up. One of the rescuers kneeled over him, and with blurry eyes he saw the rescuer lift its helmet off and a lock of long blond hair dropped to her shoulders. “Don’t worry.” She said as she gently stroked his forehead. “You’re safe now.”

An angel, he thought, and once again drifted into unconsciousness.

Jack Ryder – The Rundorth Faction

Chapter 1



The Academy

Jack sat strapped in the hard seat of a transport vessel surrounded by many others his age and he gazed out the window while the ship descended into the large planets atmosphere. The planets warm violet haze against the dark of space at the horizon provided a beautiful sight to behold, but his thoughts were on the events that occurred that fateful day three years ago. The people who rescued him were Interstellar Rangers. Not much is known about them in the general populace, except that they are some kind of space police.

He remembered the events as though it was a dream. The rangers were alerted of the attack by the distress buoy, and their small

Jack Ryder – The Rundorth Faction

patrol ship arrived at the disabled freighter only two hours later. The intruders were pirates, criminals who steal precious cargo and wreak havoc upon shipping lanes. There were different factions of pirates, some friendly and in alliance with each other, and others more dangerous that hold no alliance with anyone.

The rangers small patrol ship was outgunned by the larger pirate vessel, so with reinforcements on the way the rangers kept their patrol craft hidden past the far end of the freighter and three of the five suited up and entered the freighter from the far side. Not long after, they found Jack.

He didn't remember much, though, as he was sometimes awake and other times in a dazed dream-like state. He often had nightmares of the event. At times, brilliant flashes of light cutting through the darkness haunted his dreams while weapons were fired, and the scream of one of the rangers would wake him up with a scream of his own.

The pirates escaped before reinforcements arrived leaving few freighter survivors behind. The body of Jacks father was later retrieved with the many other bodies floating amongst the debris outside, but his mother and many others were never found.

With his head bandaged and him safely inside the Rangers patrol craft, he remembered watching the recovery ships clean up the area as the rangers departed. He enjoyed the few days he spent with them before they delivered him to his aunt and uncle. Quiet as he was and withdrawn into his own world, he stepped off the craft and after thanking the rangers, he asked them in a mouse-like squeaky voice: "How does one become a Ranger?"

Three years later and older now at the age of sixteen, his invitation to the two-year Ranger Academy arrived, and today he himself arrived with nineteen other cadets to the academy itself, a day he waited for with anticipation.

The transport vessel broke into the planets atmosphere and quickly descended, its destination a flat valley between two forested mountain ranges. Jack saw a couple of buildings come into view below, one that was large and old fashion looking in the distance with two smaller unimpressive buildings to its side, and surrounding the buildings was the flatness of concrete extending about one hundred yards from the center.

Jack Ryder – The Rundorth Faction

The transport vessel dropped quickly in a surprising way and circled around, its landing struts emerging just before it settled on the ground a fair distance from the three buildings.

With a metallic clang and the hissing of air, the vessels door opened and a deep voice screamed at them from outside: “Fall out, you mangy maggots! Everyone, fall out!” The cadets unbuckled themselves and slowly began to exit. “Faster! Faster, faster, faster!”

Grasping his bag, Jack got in line and followed the others. As he stepped out, he saw the source of the demanding words being shouted at them, a big uniformed man standing there tall with arms crossed, an irritated look upon his large chinned face, his eyes squinting at the cadets as they exited. “Everyone in line, now! Eyes forward!”

They dropped to the soft grass covered ground and shuffled about to make a line the best they could as the loud man stepped up to them. “So, you wanna be a ranger, eh?” He yelled as he walked from one end of the line to the other. “I have never, ever, seen such a worthless group of maggots in my entire life!”

He stopped in front of a shaken young redheaded girl and bellowed out at her. “The rangers are an elite core of specialists that has what it takes to get the job done! What makes you think you can cut it?! What makes YOU so special?!” She just looked up at him, unable to speak. He turned to his left and continued his stroll. “Regardless, I am stuck with you. I am Major Stone. Welcome to the elite Academy of the Interstellar Rangers! You have volunteered to spend two miserable years here to find out if you have what it takes to become a Ranger. Mark my words, some of you will not be here two years from now as it is my job to wash you out, understand? It is my job to weed out you worthless softies and not allow you to enter the distinguished ranks of the Interstellar Rangers! Only the best of you will survive, and you others will crawl back to your mommies and live the rest of your life an embarrassing example of failure! Do you want that!?”

A few of the cadets stammered a weak “No, Major.”

“What? I CAN’T HEAR YOU!”

“No, Major!” The cadets yelled in unison.

“Good.” The Major pointed across the field to the taller building standing between the two smaller single-story structures a good mile away. “That is your new home! You are to immediately run there and wait outside at the main entrance! If all you maggots get there in one

Jack Ryder – The Rundorth Faction

piece without tripping over each other, you will then report to the main lobby for indoctrination and have your uniforms and equipment issued!” Jack looked at the building one mile away. He saw no activity. No people. No vehicles.

A mile wasn’t that difficult, he thought, as walking and climbing ladders on the freighter had strengthened his legs a few years back, and the three years of living with his aunt Peggy and uncle Hanky had him chasing after tungas, large two-legged lizard-like steeds that sold well at markets. His uncle owned a tunga ranch and it was he who had to chase down the ones that got out late at night.

“Well, what are you waiting for?! Run! Go, go, go! And don’t let me catch you walking!” The twenty new cadets hoisted their bags and bolted forward, and they ran toward the large building one-mile away.

Jack pumped his legs hard wanting to make a good initial impression and stayed with the pack of runners at the lead. Half way there, the pack of runners thinned out as some tired and slowed down while others pulled ahead trying to be the first to reach the lobby, and Jack stayed with the front runners, himself just one behind the lead.

Just in front of Jack was a tall boy with thin bleached blond hair, his long legs working hard to stay in front of the pack, but Jack pressed on and began to catch up, eventually running side-by-side as they reached the concrete.

They both glanced at each other for a moment as they ran, then the boy moved toward Jack and struck him with his shoulder causing Jack to tumble and fall, the hard concrete tearing at his clothes and ripping at his skin. Jack rolled a few times and laid on his side, the runners behind jumping over while two tripped over him, a young boy and a girl, themselves falling hard as he had done.

A moment later, Jack stood up and limped to the boy lying on the concrete as the last of the running cadets passed them by. He was small compared to the other kids, his face of darker complexion with jet-black hair. “Are you okay?” Jack asked while he nursed his sore right knee and offered his hand.

He helped the boy stand, and they approached the girl who sat up with both her hands holding her left ankle, her long red hair in disarray as she looked up at them. Jack looked at her ankle and saw her slowing moving her foot, an indication that it was not broken and most likely just twisted.

Jack Ryder – The Rundorth Faction

After picking up their bags, the two young cadets helped her up, and with one on each side of her, the three of them slowly limped toward the building now only 50 yards away. After a moment of silence, Jack finally spoke. “Uh, hi. I’m Jack. I’m so very sorry about this.”

The girl didn’t answer, but the short boy on the other side of her scowled. “I saw what he did.” He muttered angrily. “He knocked you down! He did! My name is Marty, by the way.”

They limped together a few more steps in silence, and the girl finally spoke in a soft, almost whispering voice. “I’m Kathy, but my friends call me Kat.”

They smiled to each other and they neared the waiting group of cadets with Major Stone standing there, arms crossed, and a hard look on his face. Standing behind the Major in the crowd was the tall blond boy, his pale face wearing a smirk, but it was the tall building behind them that caught their attention. It stood four stories high, much more impressive now than at a distance as its architecture was old with many windows adorning its sides. It looked more like a grand hotel than the training center of an elite Ranger Academy. Off to the side were the two smaller buildings, most likely used for storage.

“What’s your excuse, Cadets?” The Major barked as they stopped in front of him. A couple of the cadets in the back snickered.

“No excuse, sir.” Jack answered. Marty began to protest, but a sharp nudge from Jack silenced him. “I tripped, causing Marty and Kat to fall. I take full responsibility.”

The Major looked down at Jack. “What’s your name, Cadet?”

“Ryder. Jack Ryder, sir.” Jack wasn’t sure, but for a second he thought he seen the look of recognition in the majors eyes as he spoke his name, as though the major knew of him.

“Report to medical and get cleaned up, cadets.” The major ordered. He motioned toward the large building entrance. “Wait for me in medical.”

The major barked orders for the rest of the cadets to line up once again and the three hurt cadets limped to the wide set of stairs sloping up to the double door entrance. To both sides of the steps was a fountain spraying cool water from its base, and following the steps up were various potted plants ending at the top. Above the main door was a sign that said ‘Hotel Atlantis’.

Jack Ryder – The Rundorth Faction

Climbing up to the top of the steps, a sensor detected their presence as they approached the main door. It automatically opened, and the view of a large burgundy carpeted lobby greeted them. It wasn't at all what Jack expected. Another large staircase leading up to the second floor was directly across the lobby, and to the right was what looked like a restaurant with several people eating while some were lounging on a couch reading. An elevator opened and two young women walked out into the lobby and stopped by one of many paintings and sculptures that were displayed everywhere. Not one was garbed in uniform but dressed in casual loose clothing. Not at all like a Ranger Academy.

To their left was a long curved table, and behind the table was someone not human at all. He, or it, stood like a human and wore a black collared suit, but its neck tapered to a small head that was not much head at all, but a slug-like shape with a mouth and two green eyes at the end of stalks that protruded from its head. Above him was a sign that said 'Welcome'. He was busy writing in a journal with a larger than normal hand when his eyes looked up to the three tussled cadets. With his other hand, he motioned for the cadets to come closer.

"Ah, I see you've had a scrape! Yep, yep. A scrape it was." The strange greeter said, still motioning them to come closer. "Come here now. Yep, yep. Zebbie I am. I won't bite. Now let me see. Ah, new you are. Yep! Welcome to Hotel Atlantis, the finest place to stay this side of the Noshtua sector, it is. Check in here first you must. Step up."

The three cadets stepped up to the dark brown decorated table. After another glance around to make sure his eyes wasn't deceiving him, Jack spoke to the strange greeter. "We are here for the Ranger Academy. We were told to report to medical."

"Hotel Atlantis it is!" Exclaimed the slug-like being. "Place your palm on this pad, take your badge, and off you go you will! Yep!" The three took turns letting the computer scan their palm. The badge they pinned onto their shirt was not the ranger star, but an oval shaped cadet badge. The star must be earned. Zebbie pointed to an elevator. "Off to Medical you go."

The three walked silently to the clear, oval shaped elevator door, and it detected them and opened automatically with a grating sound. The inside was tube shaped with a circular floor and ceiling and the

Jack Ryder – The Rundorth Faction

rounded walls were clear as glass. The three just stood there still in the lobby not yet stepping inside.

“I think we should wait for the Major here.” Kat said after a long silence. She was finally able to put weight on her foot with little pain.

“The Major said go to medical.” Jack reminded her. “I think that’s called an order.”

He stepped in and the two followed. The clear glass door closed behind them and a panel on the wall beeped, then a mechanical voice blurted from it: “*Destination.*”

“Medical.” Marty answered. His fascination with the mechanical voice was apparent.

They were startled as the elevator moved not up, but down. The elevator slid downward moving past the floor of the lobby. The lobby passed over them, and rising up from below was the scene of the top of several patrol ships and many more smaller two-man vessels that sat in a great underground hangar. Maintenance crews in ranger stylized coveralls and several small maintenance robots could be seen working on various ships while the arcing blue light of welding danced against the walls at the far corner.

A large patrol ship near the elevator loomed into view below them and the three cadets with eyes wide open watched as a mechanic sat at its front strut, a tool not seen before in his hand. The mechanic watched them in the elevator as it lowered and waived to them, but the surprised state of the cadets held back a response.

They stood in the descending elevator and watched the hangar rise above their heads to reveal a lower level. A curved passageway came into view with many doors attached and the doors were labeled as squad rooms with a squad emblem in the center of each.

This level quickly moved up above them as well when the following lower level greeted them and the elevator came to a stop. As the elevator door opened, the mechanical voice suddenly activated with a beep causing the three to jump. “*Medical. Science Level.*”

Across the elevator was an open window and next to that a door labeled ‘Medical’ with a passageway to the right leading to various science rooms and labs. With nobody at the window, they stepped out of the elevator and entered the medical room.

Jack couldn’t believe his eyes as a familiar face was inside waiting for them. His Angel, the woman with long blond hair whom he first saw that fateful day aboard the freighter ISF Parallax quickly

Jack Ryder – The Rundorth Faction

approached him and gave him a hug. “Jack! It’s so good to see you again! When I heard you were here today, I had to say hi.”

Embarrassed, Jack gave her a hug back. “Hi, Angel! I finally made it!” Marty and Kat stood to the side, a bit bewildered at Jack’s reception. Seeing this, Jack explained: “This is Angel, one of a squad of rangers who rescued me aboard my freighter after it was attacked by pirates.”

“No way!” Marty said in disbelief. Kat looked at Jack with newfound admiration.

“He just calls me Angel.” She explained. “My real name is Angie, but you can also call me Angel if you like. Everyone else now does.” The two cadets nodded. “Jack here, actually, was quite the hero then. He single handedly killed a Viperbot, and it was a nasty one at that.”

“No way!” Marty said again, still in disbelief. Kat’s admiration for Jack elevated a good notch.

“And who may you two be?” Angel asked.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Jack exclaimed. “This is Marty and Kat.”

“Nice to meet you.” Angel replied. “Looks like you got scraped up on the flightline. Let me get the three of you cleaned up.” She grabbed a few basic medical supplies from some cabinets and in short order had the cadets cleaned up and bandaged.

Shortly after, Major Stone entered. “Major Stone.” She acknowledged with a smile. “These three cadets are put back together in one piece and ready for duty. They are all yours.”

“Cadets, wait for me at the elevator.” The Major ordered. After the last of the three left, he turned toward Angel. “Is that the same Jack Ryder?”

Angel nodded. “That’s him.”

Chapter 2



The Reception

The three cadets stood outside the elevator quite a long time, and eventually Major Stone left medical and took them one more level down. They followed him down a passage to a large darkened auditorium lined with many seats in which his group already sat, and in front of them was a long table where seven senior rangers sat facing them.

Each were different in their own way. The senior ranger at the far end was bald with a peculiar large nose. The lady next to him was heavyset and as tough looking as Major Stone. Then there were the two aliens sitting there. One was Zebbie himself from the main

Jack Ryder – The Rundorth Faction

lobby, and the other a large man-sized amphibious looking creature somewhat like the frogs on earth.

One of them was speaking as the cadets walked in with bags in hand, but then he stopped talking and looked up at them. The eyes of everyone in the auditorium followed the speaker's gaze and settled on the three who quickly found an open seat in a failed attempt to hide.

“As I was saying...” The speaker continued after clearing his throat. “We are the Academy Administrators. You are here for two years of study as a Ranger Cadet, after which time you will advance to the regular Ranger Corps. Your duty here is to learn all that you can, because it is the knowledge and skills that you will acquire here that will save your life when you enter the real world. Colonel Askins?”

Colonel Askins, the bald, large nosed senior ranger, pointed to a huge screen in front of the auditorium and it came alive with an image of their planet as though there was a camera in orbit. The camera moved smoothly into the atmosphere and followed the same course that Jack recognized as the transport vessel they arrived on.

Their valley quickly came into view and the ‘hotel’ above suddenly filled the screen. “This is Hotel Atlantis.” He said raising an arm toward the screen. He clicked a button on a small controller in his hand and a schematic of the top hotel and lower levels was shown. “Below ground are the levels containing not only the Academy, but also the headquarters for the rangers assigned to this sector. You may only enter the first four levels containing the hanger, squad rooms, science, and this fourth level at which you now are: the Academy. All levels below this are restricted.”

“Two years is a long time.” He continued. “You will each be assigned living quarters in Hotel Atlantis above, where you will live while not on duty. Dress casual there if you like unless it's an academy function, such as tonight's reception at the hotels main hall. If you have any questions, the porter at the main lobby can answer them. Major Morton?”

“Ahem.” The frog-like ranger cleared his throat. Jack blinked his eyes and rubbed them. This has got to be a dream, he thought. He watched as Major Morton continued with its voice low and deep like a tuba. “At the conclusion of this indoctrination you will see a one hour film, and then report to supply for uniform fitting. After that, you will be assigned a room and you will be free to explore Hotel Atlantis until the reception. I look forward to seeing you there.”

Jack Ryder – The Rundorth Faction

The indoctrination went on. The senior rangers took turns speaking, each a different subject matter and to the point. The academy curriculum was covered in detail. It will be all academics to begin with, and all will be taught the basics on all subjects, but each must pick a subject within three months to specialize in for advanced training. Gradually, more advanced ranger training will be introduced based on one's progress.

After what seemed like a long time, the administrators concluded the indoctrination and stood up. After they exited through side doors the auditorium darkened even more than its original darkened state and the large screen came alive once again. It began with a short history of the Interstellar Rangers. Its conception, technological advances, and past events and battles squeezed into a twenty-minute segment followed by explanations of the various ranger uniforms and equipment. A brief introduction to Hotel Atlantis was shown and it covered the different recreational activities available to cadets. Jack was grateful to learn that one of the smaller buildings outside was actually a livestock building housing different animals, including a number of tongas.

The auditorium lights lit up brightly as the film ended causing most of the twenty cadets to shut and shield their eyes. Major Stone was suddenly standing there in front of the screen. "Fall out and report to supply for fitting!"

The group poured out of the auditorium and each had their turn getting fitted into a cadet's uniform. The uniform was much like a single-piece flight suit, yet the fabric was white with a light bluish tint and stylized with red trim with the oval cadet badge attached to the left breast. There were plenty of pockets to put things in, yet they were instructed not to do so as each pocket had a purpose.

The group of cadets finally got their rooms assigned and after Marty and Kat agreed to meet him at the reception, Jack headed to his room at the top floor of the hotel. Stepping in, the first thing that caught his eye was the bed across the room, and tired as he was he tossed his bag on the floor and plopped on the bed. He'll explore his room later, he thought, after a short catnap.

Jack woke up to the sound of banging on his door. The room was dark, but the blue glow of a full moon outside his window provided just enough light for him to reach the door. Opening it, he

Jack Ryder – The Rundorth Faction

found Marty and Kat standing there, both with an impatient look on their face.

“Well?” Marty asked. “Are you coming to the reception, or not?”

“It started?” Jack asked as he entered the hall and followed the two toward the stairs.

Kat reached the stairs first and after waiting for the two boys to catch up, she stood between them and wrapped her arms around theirs. “My don’t we look snazzy in these new uniforms.” She said. “Shall we?”

The three made their way down the three flights of steps and the lobby opened up to them. Soft, atmospheric music played amongst the murmur of over sixty people in the room, all in idle conversation or going somewhere. Rangers, senior cadets from last year, and this years junior cadets all mingled and roaming about. All the varied uniformed bodies packed in the same hall was a sight to see.

Jacks eyes locked onto a buffet in the restaurant at the far end of the lobby and after realizing he hasn’t eaten all day, he headed that direction with Marty and Kat following his lead. On his way he noticed a senior cadet looking at him, his gaze following him across the room.

The three navigated their way through the crowd and grabbed a plate and began filling it from the buffet. Jack picked at a few items that he didn’t recognize, and after dropping it in his plate he saw another senior cadet staring at him from across the room. With tongs in hand he looked toward the corner of his eye and saw other senior cadets looking at him, their eyes moving away as his met theirs.

He finished filling his plate and quickly found an empty booth and began to eat. “What’s the hurry?” Kat said as she slid into the booth across from Jack. “A meal is to be enjoyed. Slow down or you’ll get sick.”

Marty slid next to Kat and nodded. “That happened to a friend of mine once. Not only did he get sick, he ate so much he exploded.” Marty chuckled to himself.

“They’re staring at me.” Jack whispered.

“Say what?” Marty asked as he poked a slab of meat with his fork. “I bet this is Tonga.”

“They are staring at me.” Jack said again as he darted his eyes toward the crowd.

“Who?”

“The senior cadets! They keep looking at me!”

Jack Ryder – The Rundorth Faction

Sure enough, the two saw what Jack was referring to. Several senior cadets were looking at Jack while some would look away only to turn their gaze back toward his direction. Kat buried her head into her hands. “Oh, no.” She moaned.

That pulled the two boys attention from the staring and made them concentrate on Kat. “What?” Jack asked.

“Well,” She began. “I was in the powder room and a senior cadet came in. She was really nice and everything and we chatted for a while. Girl talk you know. Anyway, I told her about what Angel said about your fight with the viperbot and...”

“And now everyone knows.” Marty interjected. “Oh great.”

The thought of his story originating from the ladies room made Jack cringe. “Kat!” He half shouted.

“Are you Jack Ryder?” A voice questioned. Jack turned to his side to see a senior cadet standing there. “Yes, you are Jack Ryder. Aren’t you.” He continued. “I’ve seen the footage. Is it true?”

“Footage?” Jack asked as other senior cadets gathered around his booth. This is beyond a chat in the powder room, Jack thought.

“It’s required viewing in Squad Tactics, how you single-handedly took out a viperbot and saved a squad by holding off a hoard of pirates in the corridors of a disabled freighter until reinforcements arrived. Is it true?”

More cadets stopped at his booth including some junior cadets from his group. Jack didn’t remember much about anything on the freighter that day, but he did remember the viperbot ordeal and began to tell of his experience. “Well, the room was dark but lit with red emergency lights. I was in a simulation chamber.” He recanted. “This robot came in and, and I grabbed a tool that I found. It was a tool extender. As the robot came in, I hit it and knocked its arm off. I hit it again and it hit the wall and died.” Jack swallowed knowing he didn’t tell his story very good.

“What happened after that?” A different senior cadet asked.

“Well,” He continued. “I climbed up the ladder to look around and...” Jack stopped as the image of the dark armor suited man came into his mind, the large black-gloved hand pinning him against the wall and of being dragged and tossed about like a rag doll. His last recollection was the face of his golden haired angel.

“That’s enough, cadets.” A deep, familiar tuba-like voice said from behind the crowd. “Give the young cadet some air and move on.” The crowd slowly dispersed revealing Major Morton, the frog-

Jack Ryder – The Rundorth Faction

like ranger, standing there and looking at Jack and his two friends. “The tale of a hero can be an attention grabber, even if the hero was only thirteen years old.” Morton said, his large webbed feet slapping on the burgundy carpet as he came closer to the startled cadets.

“I don’t remember anything.” Jack acknowledged, confused and bewildered at the attention he’s been getting. “Nothing at all.”

Morton’s two large bulbed eyes blinked and looked at Marty and Kat, who just sat there with mouths open and nothing to say. “If you two cadets don’t mind, I’d like a word with your friend Mr. Ryder.” Marty and Kat just looked at him. “Mr. Ryder, if you will follow me. It will be just a moment.”

Jack nodded and slid out of the booth, his plate still full and his stomach still empty, and followed the Major to a red velvet curtain on the wall. The Major stepped through the curtain and Jack followed him into a small room with a large window that opened up to the night sky outside. A gentle, cool breeze caressed his skin, and the cool blue moon lit up the valley outside. The forested mountains were darkened and silhouetted far in the distance. They just stood there for a moment until the Major spoke.

“I understand you don’t remember the Parallax incident.” Morton said, his dark green skin contrasting his own bluish white ranger uniform.

Jack nodded.

“You may have been in a state of shock, but the events that transpired aboard that freighter made its way into our training program. Having you here is an odd circumstance, so that particular lesson has been omitted from future training.” Morton handed Jack a disk. “Just in case you are curious.”

“I don’t think I want to know.” Jack said as he gave back the disk. “I’ve spent the last three years trying to forget.”

Morton looked at him a moment and slid the disk back into his pocket. “Well, I’ll keep it for you if you ever want to see it.” He then laid his hand on Jack’s shoulder. “Jack, what ghosts you harbor are your own and only you can defeat them. But here at the academy, your ghosts are also known to others, and it will affect how they treat and react to you. These next two years will be a battle all its own.”

After a minute of silent contemplation, Jack noticed the music inside change to a fast paced tune he never heard before and looking past the curtain he saw several cadets dancing. His two friends were still at the table and he noticed Kat gesturing for him to come.

Jack Ryder – The Rundorth Faction

“Go on, cadet.” The frog-like ranger said. “The night is still young.”

Jack jumped back in the lobby hall and Kat was quickly there to greet him. My, has she broken out of her shell, he thought. He didn't know how to dance, but thanks to Kat, he learned something that night called a polka.

Chapter 3



Of Music And Dreams

The next few months brought with it nothing but academics. Long hours spent watching film, reading books, listening to lectures, and taking aggravating tests confirmed Jack's weakness. He never was very good at math and science or any other subject that required a deep understanding of numbers. He struggled through the courses as Marty and Kat and mostly everyone else sailed through them easily. Kat excelled in sciences while Marty found an early interest in technology and robotics.

The one academic course that did interest Jack, however, was Particle Wave Theory. Celestial bodies emit invisible waves of particles. These particles can be stored into a ship's 'batteries', and

Jack Ryder – The Rundorth Faction

when released it creates a particle field that surrounds a vessel. This self-induced field interacts with natural celestial particles and for a short time a vessel can ‘surf’ through space at faster-than-light speeds. Once a ship expends their particle wave batteries, the batteries must be recharged over time to repeat the process. Gravity generators and antigravity modules use the same technology.

Jack’s favorite courses were those taught by Major Stone, as they required little use of numbers. One such course was an introduction to the Rangers Pack. The group of twenty junior cadets gathered outside on the soft grass as Major Stone stood in front of them with a senior cadet at his side. Every one of them wore such a pack including a related metal band with some buttons clamped on their left forearm. This thing must weigh fifty pounds, Jack thought as he shifted the pack’s heavy weight on his back.

“What you have on your back...” Major Stone began as he pointed to the pack mounted on the back of the senior cadet. “Is the Mark Seven Ranger Pack. This pack performs several functions. One is the antigravity module that will provide lift and movement through air and space.” The senior cadet touched the metallic band on his left forearm and with a slight hum and fluttering noise he was lifted a couple yards above ground.

“The small size of the module’s particle wave battery only gives you a couple of hours of lift before requiring recharging depending on your weight, so use this feature sparingly. It will require twenty-four hours to fully recharge. Control of the module is through the control panel worn on your left forearm. You knuckleheads are wearing packs programmed with limited height and speed so you won’t break your thick skulls!”

“Next is the air supply.” The major continued. “A Ranger must perform in many hostile environments. You don’t need me to tell you how important breathing is. A retractable line extends from the top of the pack and connects to your helmet when suited up. Your air should last eight hours depending on physical exertion. Finally, there is a storage compartment with survival supplies. You’ll find food, water, a cord, glowsticks, and a variety of other items necessary for survival. See the back of your storage compartment door for a complete list and learn it.”

A cadet raised his hand. “Major, just how fast does this thing go?” He asked. Jack turned to look at the questioner and saw it was Markus Dorn, that same tall blond haired guy who knocked him

Jack Ryder – The Rundorth Faction

down that first day. He hasn't had any more problems with him, but Jack stayed distrustful.

“Well, that depends on a variety of factors.” The Major replied. “But that’s a question best answered in advanced training. Today, you will all practice hovering and slow formation maneuvers only. Everyone, form into teams of four and spread apart into a diamond formation.”

Jacks team was already formed as Marty and Kat were already standing next to him. A forth young boy, Karl Nesko who Marty has previously befriended, joined them as well.

It was already decided that Jack take the front leader position in their team, and as they walked away from the group to form their four-man diamond, Markus Dorn came out of nowhere and once again bumped into him, with Jacks heavy pack leaning over causing him to lose his balance and stumble. Markus grabbed Jacks arm preventing him from falling. “Oops! Sorry about that!” He then pulled Jack up by the arm and began dusting him off even though Jack didn't hit the ground. “Hey, are you okay?”

Puzzled, Jack regained his composure and answered. “Why, yes. Markus. Thank you.” He's not so bad after all, Jack thought as Markus walked off toward his own team.

A moment later, Markus turned toward him with that nasty smirk back on his face. “Hey hero! Let me know how fast you went, if you make it back!”

“What did he mean by that?” Marty asked.

Jack shrugged. “I dunno.”

“Cadets, you are to follow my instructions to the letter!” Major Stone barked. “On your left arm is your packs control panel. Next to the small display screen is a red power button. Press that button now.”

Jack pressed the button. The pack came alive with a hum and familiar fluttering sound. Amazingly, the weight of the pack was gone.

“Note that upon initial power-up, your pack starts in idle mode with just enough lift to take its weight off your back. Next to the power button is the green launch button. Push that button now.”

Jack looked around him and saw the other cadets lift above the ground and hover three yards high with some exclaiming shouts of wonderment. Looking at his own controller, he located the launch button and pressed it.

Jack Ryder – The Rundorth Faction

Jack didn't at all expect what happened next. His head jerked back while he was suddenly propelled forward at a high rate of speed, his feet dragging on the ground kicking up sod and dirt as he quickly flew past a surprised and angry Major Stone. The pack picked up speed lifting him above the ground three yards up and flew uncontrollably across the valley, the rim of trees at the mountainside getting closer as he headed toward it. Panicked, Jack fumbled at his controller for some kind of stop button, but the tree line came closer like a wall of wood threatening to smash him.

Instinctively, Jack arched his back and the pack obeyed and changed course, shooting straight up into the sky taking Jack with it higher and higher up. Looking down between his feet, he saw Major Stone in his own pack soaring behind trying to catch up, but the Major's heavier weight slowed him down and the distance between the two increased as Jack climbed higher into the sky.

Eventually, after the mountains were just small hills below and partially blocked by haze with Jack at an altitude that was cold and thin, the pack leveled off and shot toward the horizon. The view was beautiful, with mountaintops poking up through the clouds below and the dark green carpet of trees scattered here and there. Lakes and canyons came into view, partially obscured by mist and the haze of distance and he flew on.

He didn't know how high he was but he knew the air was too thin for he began having difficulty breathing. Remembering the air supply in the pack, he reached behind his head and extracted the air hose, but the tip was a coupling designed for helmet attachment. With no helmet, regulator or valve, it was useless. Not good, he thought.

That's when his hand brushed against a small circular device attached to the side of his pack. Markus must have planted some kind of bug! Grabbing it and yanking it off, he suddenly dropped like a rock toward the hard ground below.

The forested peaks drew near as he fell. He clawed at the controller once again to no avail and remembered that the pack was previously programmed to fly no higher than three yards above the ground. The problem now, was the rapidly approaching treetops that stood a lot higher than that.

As the thought of ripping through the trees at a high rate of speed crossed his mind, he felt his pack come alive with a hum and slight fluttering sound and he suddenly had hope. It engaged into an

Jack Ryder – The Rundorth Faction

automatic emergency controlled decent mode as hidden pack sensors detected the rapidly approaching trees and the pack began to counteract the fall. The fall began to slow down, but it was too late. He crashed into the trees with limbs grabbing and scratching at him and flipping him over as he fell. His pack slammed into a larger limb bouncing him to the side and he fell through more foliage that stabbed and clawed at him.

With a jolt Jack finally stopped, dangling high up with the pack wedged into a forked limb and he just hung there for a good while. Hurt and bleeding, he opened his hand and was astonished that he still held the bug that Markus had planted on his pack. After painfully sliding the bug into a pocket, he tugged at his pack harness and it released him, and he fell the remainder of the way down, his ripped and bruised body landing on the soft moss covered ground.

He laid there for what seemed like hours, his body numb and not able to move. Night has fallen and he was surrounded by darkness while the sounds of the forest grew louder. He heard a screech in the distance, an unknown forest dweller perhaps catching his scent.

The rustling of leaves followed and he realized that something was coming closer. The fear of being eaten alive grew within him but his body couldn't respond. Get up, he thought. Get up! He couldn't move, but he was able to crack his eyes open to try to see the creature that approached him.

Through blurry eyes all he could see is a pair of bare humanoid feet coming out of the dark, the skin thick and leathery with a dull brownish green color. He winced and shut his eyes again as several pairs of arms carefully lifted him, and he noticed a gentleness in the way he was carried as he was taken deeper into the forest and he finally succumbed to sleep...

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About The Author



Jim Hurst grew up in the small town of Merced, California. After 4 years as a Fine Arts major at Merced Junior College and California State College, Turlock, he discovered what "starving artist" really meant and joined the Navy as a F-14 Aviation Electrician (VF-211 NAS Miramar).

It was toward the end of his second naval enlistment in which he first saw Wet-On-Wet oil painting on PBS Television, and after years of painting and experimentation he developed a technique that merged Old World underpainting and New World Wet-On-Wet overpainting, and it led to a series of 'how-to' paint self-published books dubbed *Merged Centuries Oil Painting*.

Recently, Jim's mother gave him a chest containing old drawings and homemade comics he created as a youth that he has not seen in over 30 years, and it was from these drawings that the inspiration for his first novel Jack Ryder – The Rundorth Faction was born.