



Alien Emergencies: A Sector General Omnibus

By James White

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The second three volumes of James White's Sector General SF saga, in a single omnibus edition.

Sector General: A vast hospital complex in the depths of outer space. The thousands who work there, human and alien both, have a single mission: To care for all patients, of all species. At Sector General, anything can happen-and frequently does.

James White's tales of Sector General are lively, humorous, and humane, at times shot through with a healer's anger at violence and destruction. These are endlessly inventive dramas of civility and spirituality, tempered with White's gently wicked wit and his keen eye for the remarkable in the everyday.

Now, in a single omnibus, the second three volumes of the series-Ambulance Ship, Sector General, and Star Healer-return to print in complete and corrected editions, including a sequence ("Spacebird") omitted from previous American editions of *Ambulance Ship*. The volume is introduced by Hugo-winning SF writer and critic David Langford.

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Editorial Review

Review

“A remarkable achievement...The argument developed in the series has lost none of its force.” —Brian Stableford

“Neat, humorous, and humane.” —*The Ultimate Guide to SF on the Sector General series*

“Dry wit and a glimpse into alien psychology . . . Highly recommended!”—*Library Journal*

“Sector General is one of the few places in SF that one would really, really like to exist.”—David Langford

About the Author

James White lived in Northern Ireland. He was a popular writer of science fiction for over forty years. He died in 1999.

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PART 1

SPACEBIRD

The Monitor Corps scoutship *Torrance* was engaged on a mission which was both highly important and deadily dull. Like the other units of its flotilla it had been assigned a relatively tiny volume of space in Sector Nine--one of the many three-dimensional blanks which still appeared in the Federation's charts--to fill in the types and positions of the stars which it contained and the numbers of planets circling them.

Because a ten-man scoutship did not have the facilities for handling a first contact situation, they were forbidden to land or even make a close approach to these planets. They would identify the technologically advanced worlds, if any, by analyzing the radio frequency and other forms of radiation emanating from them. As Major Madden, the vessel's captain, had told them at the start of the mission, they were simply going to count lights in the sky and that was all.

Naturally, Fate could not resist a temptation like *that*...

“Radar, sir,” said a voice from the controlroom speaker. “We have a blip on the close-approach screen. Distance six miles, closing slowly, non-collision course.”

“Lock on the telescope,” said the Captain, “and let's see it.”

“Yes, sir. Repeater screen Two.”

On Corps scoutships discipline was strict only when circumstances warranted it, and normally those circumstances did not arise during a mapping mission. As a result the noises coming from the speaker resembled a debate rather than a series of station reports.

“It looks like a...a bird, sir, with its wings spread.”

“A plucked bird.”

“Has anyone calculated the chances against materializing this close to an object in interstellar space?”

“I think it's an asteroid, or molten material which congealed by accident into that shape.”

“Two lights years from the nearest sun?”

“Quiet, please,” said the Captain. “Lock on an analyzer and report.”

There was a short pause, then: “Estimated size, roughly one-third that of this ship. It’s non-reflective, non-metallic, non-mineral and--”

“You’re doing a fine job of telling me what it isn’t,” said the Captain dryly.

“It is organic, sir, and...”

“Yes?”

“And alive.”

For a few seconds the controlroom speaker and the Captain held their breath, then Madden said firmly, “Power Room, maneuvering thrust in five minutes. Astrogation, match courses and close to five hundred yards. Ordnance, stand by. Surgeon-Lieutenant Brenner will prepare for EVA.”

The debate was over.

During the ensuing four hours Lieutenant Brenner examined the creature, initially at a safe distance and later as closely as his suit would allow. He was sure that the analyzer had been a little too optimistic over what was most likely a not quite frigid corpse. Certainly the thing was no threat because it could not move even if it had wanted to. The covering of what looked like large, flat barnacles and the rock-hard cement which held them together saw to that.

Later, when he was ending his report to the Captain, he said, “To sum up, sir, it is suffering from a pretty weird skin condition which got out of control and caused it to be dumped--certainly it didn’t fly out here. This implies a race with space-travel who are subject to a disease which scares them so badly that they dump the sufferers into space while they are still alive.

“As you know,” he continued, “I don’t have the qualifications to treat e-t diseases, and the being is too large to fit into our hold. But we could enlarge our hyperspace envelope and tow it to Sector General.

“That would make a nice break in the mapping routine,” he added hopefully, “and I’ve never been to that place. I’m told that not all the nurses there have six legs.”

The Captain was silent for a moment, then he nodded.

“I have,” he said. “Some of them have more.”

* * *

Framed in the rescue tender’s aft vision screen the tremendous structure that was Sector Twelve General Hospital hung in space like a gigantic cylindrical Christmas tree. Its thousands of viewports were constantly ablaze with light in the dazzling variety of color and intensity necessary for the visual equipment of its patients and staff, while inside its three hundred and eighty-four levels was reproduced the environments of all the intelligent life-forms known to the Galactic Federation--a biological spectrum ranging from the ultra-frigid methane-breathers through the more normal oxygen- and chlorine-breathing types up to the exotic beings who existed by the direct conversion of hard radiation.

In addition to the patients, whose numbers and physiological classifications were a constant variable, there was a medical and maintenance staff comprising sixty-odd differing life-forms with sixty different sets of mannerisms, body odors and ways of looking at life.

The staff of Sector General prided themselves that no case was too big, too small or too hopeless, and their reputation and facilities were second to none. They were an extremely able, dedicated, but not always serious bunch, and Senior Physician Conway could not rid himself of the idea that on this occasion someone was playing a complicated joke on him.

“Now that I see it,” he said dryly, “I still can’t believe it.”

Pathologist Murchison, who occupied the position beside him, stared at the image of *Torrance* and its tow without comment. On the controlroom ceiling, where it clung with six fragile, sucker-tipped legs, Doctor Prilicla trembled slightly and said, “It could prove to be an interesting and exciting professional challenge, friend Conway.”

The musical trills and clicks of the Cinruskin’s speech were received by Conway’s translator pack, relayed to the translation computer at the center of the hospital and transmitted back to his earpiece as flat,

emotionless English. As expected, the reply was pleasant, polite and extremely non-controversial. Prilicla was insectile, exo-skeletal, six-legged and with a pair of iridescent and not quite atrophied wings and possessing a highly-developed empathic faculty. Only on Cinruss with its one-eighth gravity and dense atmosphere could a race of insects have grown to such dimensions and in time developed intelligence and an advanced civilization. But in Sector General Prilicla was in deadly danger for most of its working day. It had to wear gravity nullifiers everywhere outside its own quarters because the gravity pull which most of its colleagues considered normal would instantly have crushed it flat, and when Prilicla held a conversation with anyone it kept well out of reach of any thoughtless movement of an arm or tentacle which could easily cave in its fragile body or snap off a leg.

Not that anyone would have wanted to hurt Prilicla--it was too well-liked for that. The Cinrusskin's empathic faculty forced it to be kind and considerate to *everyone* in order to make the emotional radiation of the people around it as pleasant for itself as possible.

Except when its professional duty exposed it to pain and violent emotion in a patient, and that situation might arise within the next few minutes.

Turning suddenly to Prilicla, Conway said, "Wear your light-weight suit but stay well clear of the being until we tell you that there is no danger of movement, involuntary or otherwise, from it. We shall wear heavy duty suits, mostly because they have more hooks on which to hang our diagnostic equipment, and I shall ask *Torrance's* medic to do the same."

Half an hour later Lieutenant Brenner, Murchison and Conway were hanging beside the form of the enormous bird while Prilicla, wearing a transparent plastic bubble through which projected its bony mandibles, drifted beside the lock of their tender.

"No detectable emotional radiation, friend Conway," reported the empath.

"I'm not surprised," said Murchison.

"It could be dead," said the Lieutenant defensively. "But when we found it the body temperature was measurably above the norm for an object warmed only by a two light-years distant sun."

"There was no criticism intended, Doctor," said Murchison soothingly. "I was simply agreeing with our empathic friend. But did you, before or during the trip here, carry out any examinations, observations or tests on this patient, or reach any tentative conclusions as a result of such tests? And don't be shy, Lieutenant--we may be the acknowledged experts in xenological medicine and physiology here, but we got that way by listening and looking, not by gratuitous displays of our expertise. You were curious, naturally, and...?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Brenner, his voice registering surprise that there was an Earth-human female inside the bulky suit. "I assumed that, lacking information on its planet of origin, you might want to know if there were any safe atmospheric compositions in which it could be examined--I was assuming that, being a bird, it needed an atmosphere to fly in and that it had been dumped in space because of its diseased condition..."

Listening, Conway could not help admiring the smooth way in which Murchison was getting the Corps medic to tell them about the things he had done wrong. As an e-t pathologist she was used to non-specialists interfering and complicating her job, and it was necessary that she discover as much as possible about the being's original condition before the changes or additional damage caused by inexpert examination--no matter how well-intentioned--had been introduced. She was finding out all t...

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Charline Fendley:

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