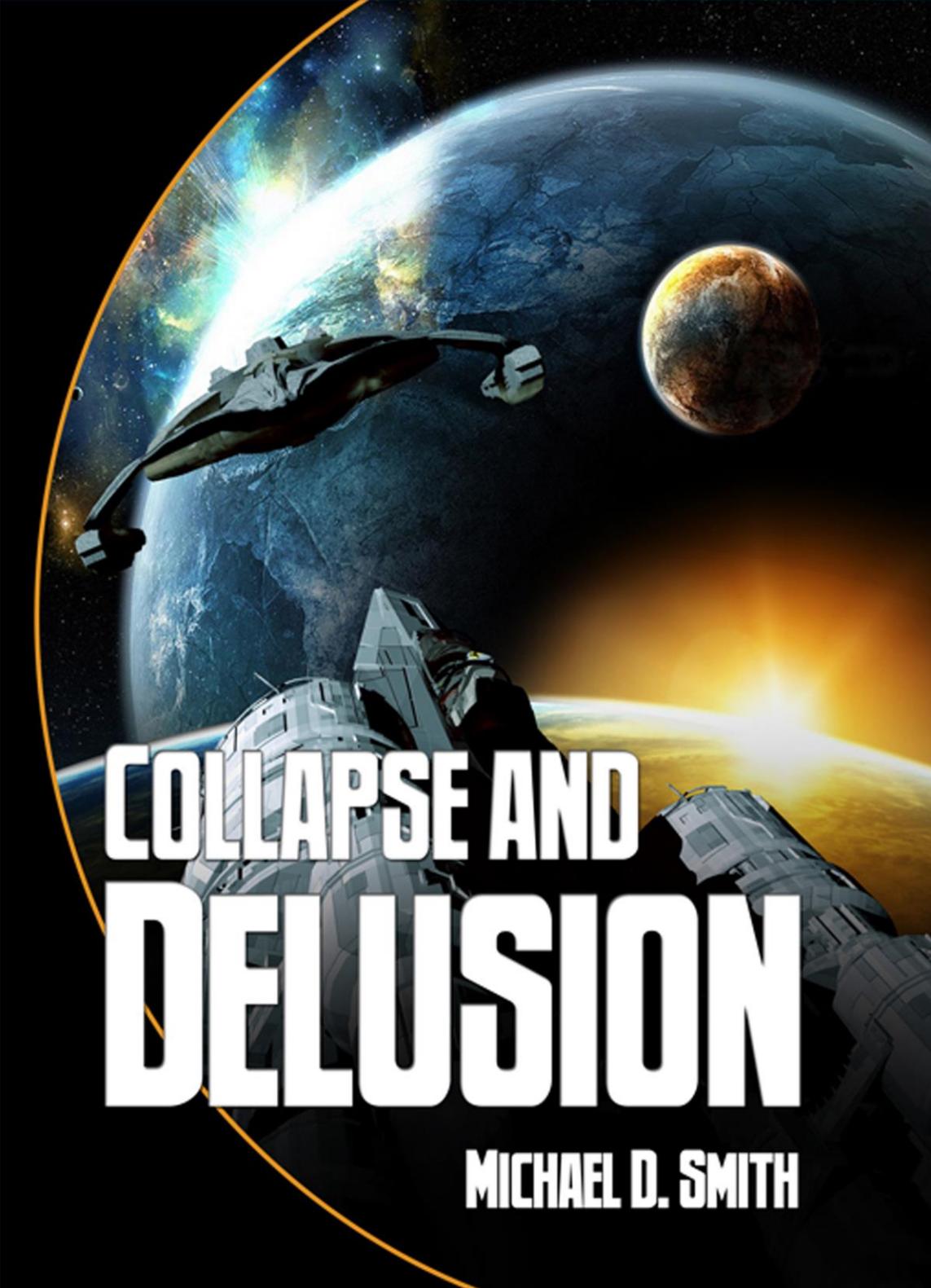


BOOK FOUR OF THE JACK COMMER SERIES



**COLLAPSE AND
DELUSION**

MICHAEL D. SMITH

Collapse and Delusion

Book Four
of the Jack Commer Series

Michael D. Smith

Sortmind Press, 2020
press.sortmind.com

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cover image by Deron Douglas

For my wife Nancy

CHAPTER ONE
A Mix-Up of Many Emotions
September 17, 2038

Thirty people were setting up tables for the reception when Amav heard gasps and found herself stepping back on a man's toes.

"Oh! Joe! It's *you!*"

Her brother-in-law blinked. "Wow! Amav!"

"You're really here! You made it! God, are we happy to see you!"

An older woman with russet hair clasped Joe.

"You must be Ranna!" Dar's astrology certainly hadn't mentioned how lovely Ranna Kikken was. "I'm Amav Commer, Jack's wife. We were all just waiting for you. This is all so strange, even though we knew it would happen!"

Joe shook his head. "Wow, can't believe we really made it!"

"Me either!" Ranna laughed, extending a hand which Amav took in both of hers. It was a firm grip from someone who'd just gone through a sickening, miles-long drop of a passenger shell snapping off an accelerating spaceship. Amav had never done a Heuristic Time Transition, but from what she'd heard it seemed to wipe out whatever previous mood you were in, fully resetting you for your next moment of timespace. Many people said they entered the new time in a state of extreme calm.

Of course, that theory was shot when Amav saw the man in the white tux with his long white hair grappling with Alycia Klave in her transparent light blue wedding dress.

"Oh my *God!*" Urside Charmouth groaned. "The damn rocket was just about to *blow!*"

"You're here! I knew you'd be here!" Alycia cried.

"*Alycia!* You *waited* for me!"

"Of course! Of course!"

Amav supposed everyone expected this slurping and fondling, but there was nervous tittering from four hundred guests as Alycia pulled Urside into a utility closet, babbling: "We need to *talk!* Oh, Urside, we need to *talk!*" She slammed the door behind them.

The noises that followed suggested that very little talking was taking place in this closet. The guests took it all in bemused silence.

"I thought the human groom wasn't supposed to even *see* the bride before the ceremony, much less ..." joked Dar, Emperor of the Martians, in a baby blue tuxedo with his pink fin protruding from a slit in the back.

"Well, she hasn't seen him since February '36," Amav offered.

Joe laughed, squeezing Ranna. "Hey, we're next!"

"Joe! Damn, it *is* you!" Jack Commer said, tall and tanned, striding up in his navy-blue Supreme Commander uniform.

"Jack! God, it's good to see you!"

"Two years, Joe! Two and a half damn years!"

Joe fell into a hug with his older brother. "Wow! Of course, it's been about fifteen minutes for me, more or less. How the hell are you, Jack?" He turned. "Sperry! Dude! Hey, man, did you get Gooney elected mayor?"

Amav was taken aback at the sight of Phil Sperry in civilian clothes. She hadn't seen him in ages. "Oh, that's right," said the gaunt, graying Phil Sperry, taking Joe's hand. "You HTT'd out before the election. Yeah, we got him in. It was a damn landslide. Greeney's right over there. Up

for reelection next year. We're already working on it."

Amav saw Jack's cheek tighten in disapproval. Well, there hadn't been much he could do about it once Phil had resigned from the USSF. And of course there was no controlling Greeney.

"Churchill's here too," Joe said, pointing. "All four of us made it."

Amav saw USSF officer Will Connors pulling a big Russian Blue cat off one of the buffet tables. There were so many Martians in the room that their combined telepathic outradiance merged into a roar of static, but she still picked up a cat protest, not terribly angry, followed by the sensation of something fishy thoroughly savored.

"I'm going to pretend I didn't see that," Amav said. "I only spent six months planning this wedding, and I wasn't about to allow *cats* on the tables."

"So this is *your* doing. And you got the whole Command Suite," Joe said, indicating the vast space on the 130th floor decked out in balloons and bunting, all bathed in pink-yellow evening Martian light.

"Yeah, Jack let me clear away all the cubicles." Floor to ceiling windows showed the slender spires of Marsport and the desert stretching beyond, with dark wispy clouds on the horizon. "Except for the outer hall, that is. That's got to stay out of sight."

At Joe and Ranna's puzzled looks, Amav went on: "It's one of those time travel things. There's another HTT event tied to this wedding besides the four of you guys. The Alycia of February '36 will time-travel to this event. Actually, she's due in a few minutes, I guess, but anyway she goes to the outer hall where the wedding photos are on display. Which still need to be taken, by the way. So Alycia grabs the display tablet, goes back to 2036, then she shows it to Urside, but when he HTT's back to 2028, the thing follows him. So it proves to everybody that he *will* show up with you guys today for his wedding."

"Huh," Joe said.

"Anyway, we've told everyone to stay away from the outer hall and to port their photos of the wedding and the reception over to the comm we have on a table out there. We don't want anyone seeing 2036 Alycia in the hall. She's apparently out there for just a minute. I had to threaten to strangle *our* Alycia for wanting to keep an eye peeled for her past self. Dar says that would be a disaster."

"He also says that after Urside saw it, the display was pulled back to the present," Phil put in. "It probably arrived way before today, because obviously a lot of us have seen it."

"I just *bought* it the day before yesterday," Amav said.

"Yeah, Dar said nobody would see it wink back into existence or whatever it does," Jack said. "Something about conservation of time. I don't have the slightest idea what he's talking about. I've just about given up trying to follow all this Time Transition crap. Thank God it ends in 2075."

"Well, everything's okay now. We've got everyone here who's supposed to be here," Amav said. Ranna, Joe, Urside and Churchill were all safely back from November 2033. Amav hoped Ranna was up for all this time travel madness. Dar's astrology had Ranna Kikken fully explained, didn't it? Did Ranna have the slightest clue she was about to be appointed Chronology Coordinator on Dar's Time Committee?

Amav had been determined not only to celebrate her friend Alycia's wedding with Urside, but also to welcome home her brother-in-law. The USSF Command Floor was the perfect space for the event. She'd assumed Alycia would be lined up at the end of the chairs on the far side of the hall, waiting to be given away by none other than Jack Commer himself, then Urside would materialize in a flash of light and they'd walk down the aisle together. Instead the four

newcomers had just wandered in from the ozone while Amav's workers were still setting up for the reception to follow the ceremony.

"Joe! Forgot to tell you," Jack said. "We're going ahead with the *III* Project. We got the funding to build a pair of 'em. *Typhoon III* and *Typhoon IV*. I'm holding the *III* for you, just as soon as we reactivate your commission and promote you to captain. And you'll direct the whole damn project."

"Really? Really?" Joe babbled. "Damn, Jack, how's the war going anyway?"

Jack frowned. "Nothing as big as DamnStar. Dar's still saying that's the worst we'll get, but a couple months ago we had some bad skirmishes near Drultar. Nothing we couldn't handle once we got Gooney in there, but we need you, Joe."

"And Ranna Kikken. We need Ranna," Dar said, coming up to extend a long pink claw to her. "There are so many HTT messes we still need to undo. The one in 2049 is still completely impenetrable to us, and may well remain so."

Ranna blinked at the high-pitched singsong English coming in above a hundred layers of telepathic radiance surging with images and mathematical equations, emotions and philosophy. Amav could sense her confusion at picking up the thoughts of dozens of Martian wedding guests, if her first sight of five-foot pink fish-creatures with giant fins wasn't the main problem.

But she knew Ranna was probably staggering more because Dar, in his enthusiasm, had just downloaded the entire vexing problem of chronicling and understanding the interrelationships between 8,178 Heuristic Time Transitions, more than a fifth performed as acts of warfare by the Alpha Centaurians, most of the rest being the reckless experimentations of human thrill-seekers who'd used HTT like a recreational drug over the past few decades. Dar went on to radiate that the Time Transitions, though confined between 2013 and 2075, had nevertheless caused endless timeline screwups that apparently Dar, Ranna, the cat Churchill, and a few others were destined to repair as best they could, with the understanding that there would always be some ragged edges taking the form of suffering and tragedy.

"Well, glad to be of service then," Ranna said gingerly.

"Of course, one theory is that '49 can, by definition, *never* be investigated," put in Star General Gooney, striding over with his cocksure walk so foreign to most Martians. He bowed to Ranna, and went on in scarcely intelligible English: "That was, or will be, the node that allowed the Centaurians to flow 2049 technology backward and surprise us at DamnStar in '36."

"Star General Gooney," Amav said quickly. "Also Mayor of Marsport. Greeney, this is Ranna Kikken."

Ranna took his claw. "How do you do? But you--"

"He doesn't radiate," Amav explained, seeing that Ranna had already soaked up several terabytes of data concerning Martian one-way telepathy from the numerous Martians in this room.

"He's developed an Amplified Thought routine that can turn it off," Phil said. "Nobody knows how he maintains it. Dar and some others can do temporary shields, but they don't last very long. Greeney here can turn it off and on at will."

Star General Gooney produced his most charming Martian smile and said: "It's always very comforting to shield myself. I can see how much psychic energy you humans save by retaining what we call your *darkened house*."

Ranna frowned, then finally nodded. "I can see it might be exhausting to just hang all your thoughts out there, but never receive ours."

Gooney shrugged. Once again Amav marveled at how he'd appropriated that human gesture

and used it so eloquently. Meanwhile she picked up Churchill as he weaved in and out of Ranna's legs: *Not an insoluble problem*, the Russian Blue radiated. *Dar had the basic shielding down long ago. The subroutine Closed Dissemination will work if combined with Survival Mode.*

"No, that was just a temporary fix," Gooney said. "Closed Dissemination only works if Survival Mode is greater than the limit of Mass Reality Index."

Forget it! We can amplify Survival Mode to include the entire Tao if need be!

"Still won't work. Individuation Mode would *cancel* Tao and then where would you be? No, I don't think I'll be letting out the code any time soon. I even keep it locked up when I do radiate."

I will get it from you! Churchill laughed, trotting away.

"Nice to meet you, too!" Gooney called after him.

Amav caught Jack's narrowed eyes. She knew Jack hated Gooney going dark. What might Star General Greeney Gooney be *plotting*?

"By the way, sorry I didn't introduce myself properly," Phil said to Ranna. "I'm Phil Sperry. I worked with Joe on both *Typhoons*, then retired to become Gooney's campaign manager."

"Nice to meet you, Phil. Do you know if my sister's here? Jackie Vespertine?"

"Should be. I know she's on the invitation list. We'll circulate you around, don't worry."

"What about Huey?" Joe said.

"Well, he's going exclusively by Polot now. It's weird. He still *looks* human, but he's getting more and more *Jujl* every day, if that makes any sense. He had to decline, though. He wants to keep away from Jackie, mostly for her sake, I guess. They got divorced a couple years ago, as you can imagine. But also, he's working on the HTT stuff twenty hours a day now, so he's pretty exhausted most of the time."

"*Jackie!* There you are!" Ranna said, moving off.

"Wow, I can't believe any of this," Joe said. "We really made it! And I have *Ranna* now."

Amav saw that Urside and Alycia, finally out of their closet, were lining up for photographs both professional and amateur. "Look, Joe, you can meet your nephew, too," she said, pointing to a floating crib bathed in white light and surrounded by cooing women.

"My nephew?"

"Yes. Jonathan James Commer. He's eleven months now."

"You mean, named after John and Jim?" Joe choked. "Wow ..."

"Come over and introduce yourself. Wait'll you see how much he looks like you!"

Joe moved to the crib where crew-cut General Scott poked at the dark-haired child. Scott was looking good these days. Amav was already helping plan his sixty-second birthday party next month and everyone remarked how well he'd recovered from a couple years of illnesses following his retirement as SCUSSF in early '35. His back injury had improved considerably and he shot his small powerful torso across the room with a lurching grace, his laugh booming through his old office suite. It was a sound people hadn't heard much since before the Evacuation. Almost everyone had thought that being Supreme Commander during the Evacuation had been a death sentence for Scott, and they'd secretly expected those mysterious illnesses to do him in. Amav was delighted at his continued recovery.

"Jonathan ... James?" Joe said in wonder, leaning over the crib. "I can't believe it!"

"Listen, we know he's not *your* son," joked tiny Hedrona Bhlon in an extremely low-cut gold dress, "since you've been gone the past couple years."

"Oh, can it," Amav said. "We've heard that enough the past year." Then, in falsetto: "Joe and I are *friends*. Nothing more!"

“Hey, that’s my sister-in-law you’re maligning,” Joe said. “Hey, Johnnie James, hey Johnnie.”

“Well, really, we just call him JJC,” Amav said. “But seriously, he does look just like you. Must be some terrible Commer gene mutation.”

CHAPTER TWO

Why Aren't You in Uniform?

Phil had to admit it. Amav's deep voice, and that crimson dress hugging her thighs, had him wanting her again. That luscious round ass, those delightful full breasts, could still *unhinge* him. What kind of an idiot was he? Hadn't he said he'd never feel this way again? Three years ago. Now they couldn't even be friends anymore. Phil was cut off from her, cut off from everyone. Why would he feel this way? Was he really so lonely?

He had to chill out. It was just a wedding. So he'd had a few drinks and Amav was turning his head. But there had to be twenty or thirty women here who were also turning his head, including Alycia the bride if the truth be known. So what? He couldn't get all worked up about it. It was just sex energy. No big deal. Everybody was looking beautiful for the wedding, honoring Urside and Alycia, after all. He just had to accept it.

What a leap of faith it had been on Amav's part to invite four hundred guests and spend a fortune decorating the Command Suite, all on the bet that Dar's astrology was correct. It was as if Joe, Ranna, Urside, and Churchill arriving on the dot meant that this night was truly destined to be a celebration of male/female union. And the women were definitely stunning. Phil was surprised that even tiny Hedrona Bhlon would dare wear something so low cut. She was so uptight and snippy at Earth Animal Rescue that he'd never really registered that she had quite a decent body. Especially for such an older woman. That gold dress really did something for her.

Phil had never had much to do with Hedrona. He did recall looking down her blouse at a meeting last month between the mayor's office and the EAR Program and thinking, wow, who'd have thought such a tense, irritable woman had such shapely boobs? Phil remembered being surprised that she'd dyed her hair brown and that it looked good on her. Then later someone had told him brown was her natural color and that she'd been coloring it blond since she was a teenager. Probably more of her tight-assed neurosis. Maybe, in all her nonprofit machinations back on Earth, she'd felt a need to be what people called "the little blond bitch." She certainly knew how to intimidate you at a meeting.

In any case it was probably best to just think of all these women as being pretty things and surf over the top of it all. Maintain his balance. Appreciate beauty and all that. Just not let it get to him. Maybe someday he'd have somebody. He couldn't get carried away by this sex business. Ever again.

"You look a little bummed, man. Can I get you a drink?" Joe Commer said, eyeing Phil's empty champagne glass.

"I should be getting *you* a drink. How the hell are you, man?"

"Listen, Phil, are you back in the USSF yet?"

"Uh, no, I retired, you know. And the political situation's such that I think I'm really needed here, with Greeney."

"Look, I may be a newbie here in '38, but from what Jack was telling me, the new *Typhoons* will need every experienced physician/engineer they can get."

"I know, I know. But, hell, Joe, I'm Greeney's chief of staff now. Everybody's pretty freaked at the whole idea of fifteen more years of war, and Gooney's been such a great force for calm here, that, well, we need to keep him going, you know. He's really got more power than the president of the United System Council, if you want to know the truth. I think it's really important for me to stick with him just now."

Joe digested this. "Yeah, but Gooney belongs out in the war zone, and so do you, Phil."

“Look, Joe, you’ve only been here a few minutes, and things have changed. We’ve got Greeney’s political and military duties all laid out. We just Star Drive him wherever we need him. It all works out.”

“Seems to me there’s a danger of getting complacent, man. Dar’s supposed to have figured out everything that’s going to happen between now and ’53, but then again, what if he’s wrong? What if we let our guard down and get walloped by the Centaurians?”

“C’mon, man, that can’t happen. You standing here in September ’38 is proof that HTT is real and that the predictions hold.”

“One thing I’ve picked up in my couple minutes here is how stressed everyone is about the war. Even at this wedding, where everyone’s supposed to be enjoying themselves.”

Phil nodded. “Yeah, you got that right. Everyone here’s feeling it. It’s always right under the surface.”

“I HTT’d out right after DamnStar,” Joe said. “It’s still totally fresh for me. The total shock. But it doesn’t really seem to have changed much in two and a half years. Yeah, Gooney beat the goddamn AC’s back, but what was the goddamn cost, Phil?”

“I know, man, but--”

“And you’re going to sit here in Marsport being a politician, and *soothing* the populace or something when you could be my engineer on the *III*? When we could be out there making *sure* Dar’s predictions come true?”

Phil closed his eyes. “Look, Joe, you just don’t understand yet.”

“I can tell that even Ranna’s already picking up all the stress. Hell, any of us can read it straight out of the Martians here. They’re *broadcasting* it. Ranna didn’t even know this war existed a few minutes ago, but she’s already involved in it. I can feel the Martians interacting with her. I can feel she’s gearing up for working on the HTT problems. So what the hell are you doing counting votes for Greeney Gooney? Jack says we’ve got people dying in skirmishes in AC, and we still have to patrol for these damn suicide ships trying to navigate to Sol. Jack says they still haven’t perfected their stupid Warp Transfer. It still kills ’em half the time! But they keep trying. They just don’t know how to quit. You know we can’t just lie around and wait for May ’53 and say we don’t have to do anything.”

“Dammit, Joe! I do know it! Every single person here knows they’re *called upon* somehow. There’s no way we can back down or gloss this over. But, look, I’ve thought it over and I just think I’m where I need to be, at least for now.”

“Jack was saying he thinks Gooney’s brainwashed you somehow.”

Phil reeled. “Did Jack really say that?”

“Wow, take it easy, Phil. I did say the B-word, didn’t I? Must still hurt, huh?”

“How can you be *saying* all this stuff? Are we drunk?”

“No, I just HTT’d and went through a couple passenger shell disasters. And I found my future wife, all in the space of a few minutes, so I guess I’m free to just pop out with whatever I need to!”

“Your wife? You mean Ranna?”

Joe grinned. “Yeah, I just proposed a minute ago. It’s amazingly solid. I know I really just met her a few minutes ago, but I’ve never met anyone like her. And somehow it seems as if we’ve known each other for *centuries*. We’re *perfect* for each other.”

“Well, congratulations, then.”

“We’re thinking of waiting a few months, but you’re definitely invited. But anyway, listen, Phil, I know about the B-word, believe me. I still feel guilty myself about the *Typhoon II*, but at

least now I know that somehow I've got to move *past* that.”

How could Joe just spout off all this honesty? He had to be drunk. Phil had to be drunk to even listen to this. That they could even *mention* that word. “Look, Joe, I'm glad for you, but I just can't talk about that. Let's just drop the subject, okay?”

Brainwashed in Alpha Centauri. Part of the goddamn Grid. How could anyone get over that? Wasn't that why he'd quit the USSF and gone into politics? Telling everyone he needed a new life?

DamnStar '36 still hurt so much. Had Phil somehow contributed to the disaster, even though he'd come out of the brainwashing the year before? Was there something in his mind the AC's had picked up and used for their '49 technology?

“C'mon, Phil,” Joe pressed, “I'm no counselor type but I can sure as hell see you need to talk to someone about the *Typhoon II*.”

“You know, Joe, I even took a punch at Lee Borman in this bar when he said I was *brainwashed* by Greeney. I just let him have it. He said he didn't feel a thing, but damned if he didn't need a hundred thousand AresCredits in dental work. And the bastard's still my friend somehow!”

“Whoa!” Joe laughed, setting his drink down on a small table and dancing in front of Phil, pumping his fists absurdly. “Are we gonna fight now, Phil, huh, huh? Are we gonna fight?”

Phil finally laughed too. “Oh, God, no! C'mon, Joe, you've only been back here a few minutes and already you're telling me how to run my life!” He chugged his champagne.

“Damn, Phil, all I'm saying is we *need* you!”

Phil looked away.

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“I still don't understand why we're having the reception *before* the wedding,” Joe said, picking up his champagne glass and pointing to the rows of tables stocked with cheeses and meats.

Phil shook his head. “Well, Amav told everyone to keep their paws off the food until after the ceremony. I guess Churchill thought he was exempt. But, since we weren't quite sure when the groom would arrive, well, we had four hundred guests and all that champagne, so ...”

“I can see there was no stopping it once it got started. Are they still taking pictures over there?”

Phil turned. The pre-ceremony photo rituals seemed to be finishing up. The empty chairs twenty rows deep at the far end of the offices waited to be filled. Now that Joe had rammed all his damn new honesty down Phil's throat, Phil could feel the war tension in the room even more clearly. He realized how much he tried to block it out every day, to no avail. Even Martians, each with their hundreds of years of accumulated wisdom and armed with the programming for Dar's future history, were reeling with anxiety. Anyone could pick it up out of their outradiance.

“So ...” Joe said, taking in the same unease. “Fifteen more years of this, huh?”

Phil sighed. “You know, Huey posted something on SolNet recently that really summed it all up. Of course, he's writing as Polot, and he really *is* fully Polot now, but even from his Jujl perspective, he nailed it. Everyone's been talking about it. It's called ‘The Bridge to 2053.’”

“Yeah, Jack was just telling me about that,” Joe said. “I'll have to call it up on my comm in a bit.”

“Yeah, somehow it perfectly sums up how pissed off we all are at having this

foreknowledge. That we have to just *suffer* through the next fifteen years.”

“Dar’s astrology,” Joe said. “Jack said that’s what people call it.”

Phil nodded. Polot’s article had ruefully acknowledged something nobody else had put into words: that everyone’s exasperated mockery of the demented Alpha Centaurians for fighting on, knowing that they’d be defeated no matter what on May 14, 2053, applied to humans and Martians as well. Neither side could give an inch, neither could relax. Though no battle would be as devastating as DamnStar, each one would offer the possibility of a serious reversal of fortune if not combated with the utmost vigor. Knowledge of the future, whether it was of victory or defeat, simply didn’t matter. Both sides were fated to fight and die. The AC’s were Sol’s spiritual brothers in a sense. Polot had even pulled in that Nietzsche quote:

Honor your enemy, for he makes you strong.

And who knew how the soldiers and spacemen of the near future, in their teens today, would face the Battle of Plar in ’47, knowing they were destined to suffer the one space battle the USSF would *lose*? Would they get a taste of what the so-called “insane” Alpha Centaurians had lived with since 2036 when they first discovered that their empire would end precisely on May 14, 2053? That despite every launched meson bomb, every ship they so desperately boarded, every thousand humans or Martians they blasted and hacked to pieces in hand-to-hand combat, they would *lose*, and their entire way of life would be *eradicated*?

“It’s been really hard to get used to,” Phil said. “About all that keeps us from really going off the deep end isn’t really 2053 and the end of the war. It’s 2075, when we know that this whole goddamn HTT loop finally closes. No more time-traveling. What a relief *that’ll* be.”

“I guess I’m kind of looking forward to that time myself. ’Course I’ll be an old fart then.”

“Not necessarily. There’ve been a lot of medical breakthroughs the last couple years.

Apparently rejuvenation therapy is the next big thing. People living hundreds of years and all. Hopefully we’ll all look like teenagers.”

Joe grinned. “Sheesh. So Dar’s figured it all out? We have a real history of the war? Do they pull off any more of this future technology crap?”

“It’s not in the cards, as far as Dar knows. DamnStar was an insane shock, that the AC’s could get that far into our system with 2049 tech. But apparently they aren’t ever going to be able to mount that sort of attack again, and meanwhile we’ll still be outpacing them in technology. Dar’s still insisting that the Empire collapses on May 14, 2053.”

“So what role do we play in all this? You and me and Jack and everyone?”

“Hell, Joe, I knew you’d come to that. Everyone asks Dar sooner or later if we’re mentioned in any of his predictions. But the weird thing is that it’s like anyone close to Dar is somehow *blocked* from his calculations. The most he might get about you or Jack or Amav might be a scrap of a mention on SolNet from ’43 or ’52 or whatever. And sometimes some major public figure crops up. The most explicit one we saw was when Greeney beat back the AC’s at Drultar this summer. The entire thing was predicted a few months before it happened. We were all surprised by the level of detail in the prediction. And it all came exactly true.”

“Wow. So what about you, man? Does Dar say if I get you back on the *Typhoon III*?”

Phil grimaced. “No. Have to admit I did ask what might be in store for me. That was sometime this spring. And Dar does this little mental calculation, and you can feel it unwinding. The only thing on me was my name coming up in some press release about a meeting between Earth Animal Rescue and the mayor’s office last month. That was it.”

Okay, so it had freaked Phil at the time. Everyone wanted some reassurance they’d live through the war. But Dar’s astrology had only taken Phil up to August, and like an idiot he’d

panicked, thinking he was going to buy the farm in August. But here he was in September and he was still standing.

“Hmm,” Joe said. “So maybe you *do* become my engineer after all.”

Phil shrugged. “*You* have a mention in ’51, I think. All you have to do is ask Dar, and he’ll calculate it and radiate it right at you.”

Was he seriously worried there was nothing else on him? Even if he did serve with Joe on the *Typhoon III*, that didn’t mean he’d be alive in ’51, because Joe could live and Phil could die in the same space battle.

Across the way Hedrona Bhlon chatted with a USSF officer, sipping a clear tumbler of wine as she adjusted a gold shoulder strap slipping off her shoulder. The officer, twenty years younger than she, was clearly entranced. Yes, Hedrona did have a lovely pair. Now Phil realized that Dar’s astrological scrap on him happened to be for the same EAR meeting where he’d been looking down her blouse. He smiled at the picture. Wasn’t that an odd coincidence? Then he shivered at the thought of his own demise possibly occurring right now, September 17, 2038.

What a superstitious idiot he was. He’d never been jumpy like this before. What on earth was wrong with him?

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“So Greeney can be mayor here, and then just warp out to Drultar?” Joe said. “How does he stand the Star Drive?”

Phil shrugged. “It’s amazing. The same way he developed his telepathic shielding, I guess. He just found a way around the Star Drive anxiety. Some Martians handle it better than others, but almost all of ’em have some sort of trouble. Greeney just breezes through it. He’s been trying to teach the technique to other Martians, but they don’t seem to get it.”

“That is one unusual dude. Saved our asses at DamnStar, that’s for sure. Rounding up the entire Fourth Fleet with Amplified Thought! Is that why he got elected mayor?”

“Probably. Of course, we ran into that little public relations problem. Did Jack tell you about it?”

“No, man, we haven’t had time to catch up on everything yet.”

“Well, it has to do with the origin of Greeney’s name.”

“Yeah, sure we had to shorten the damn thing.”

Of course, nobody could pronounce it. Phil could hear *G’rea’nyaigu’nye* in the Martian outradiance right now, but simply couldn’t make his mouth form the syllables.

“Well, it goes back to the two kinds of Martian families,” Phil went on. “The ones with short names like Dar being the practical, no-nonsense types, and the ones with long unpronounceable ones being the ancient nobility.”

“Right, so we’ve always got nicknames for those guys.”

“But the deal was, the first person to call him Greeney Gooney was none other than Sam Hergs.”

“Wow, how did *that* happen?” But all Joe had to do was concentrate. Phil watched him sort through the chaotic Martian telepathic flux in the room, then frown. “And we never *knew* that?”

Phil shrugged. “I guess nobody ever really hunted for that concept until Gooney was running for mayor. Or maybe we assumed that since all Martian warriors got amnesty when they became citizens, we just weren’t about to pry too closely into any individual Martian’s mind.”

“He worked for *Hergs*? He ran the two twerps who killed General Douglas? He was a

terrorist?”

“Shhh!” Phil said as heads turned. “I can tell you we had fun spinning *that* one during the campaign. ‘You’ve changed. He’s changed. The war changed us all. A leader who understands.’ That sort of stuff. Damned if he still didn’t win seventy-nine percent of the human vote, and all the Martian.”

“Well, I guess war is war. He’s on our side now, thank God.”

“I think that about sums up everyone’s attitude. He saved us at DamnStar and now he’s our mayor. We’re going to run him again next year. I know Jack’s pissed at him being both a politician *and* a Star General, but there *is* that loophole for Martians in the USSF.”

Joe laughed. “That bastard’s going to be Emperor one day!”

Phil felt a slender finger poking him. He turned. It was Alycia in her transparent blue dress. “Hey, can you guys maybe move a little? You’re standing right where Urside and I are trying to get married.”

“Whoa, I forgot why we were here!” Phil laughed, managing to ratchet his head back up to her eyes. “By all means, let’s get the show underway!”

Yes, the bride was sexy-lovely. Urside was so lucky! Who gave a flip about all this political crap anyway?

CHAPTER THREE

Dar's Astrology

Night was falling. The 130th floor of the USSF building was immense, and everyone had a clear view out hundreds of feet of glass at Marsport and the vast purpling Martian desert. People drifted towards the miles of exotic meats, cheeses, and cakes arranged on five rows of buffet tables, each eighty feet long. The decibel levels grew with wine and laughter.

Amav had to get those photos out to the hall. What if she didn't send them in time? Could the past Alycia go back with a blank display tablet? That could change everything. When should she cut off the pictures?

Damn this time travel crap!

The flushed Alycia and the giggling Urside were surrounded by a fresh batch of photographers documenting the newly married couple.

"Hey, guys, c'mon, wrap it up!" Amav called. "Everyone send your stuff to my comm here! I need to copy everything out to the hall! I'm cutting off *now!* Nothing after this will go!"

Drunken guests complied, shrugging at the obviously uptight wedding planner who'd been yelling this the past few minutes and who had to be too stupid to know they could all send their own photos to the hall's tablet. But they didn't know that Amav had a USSF AI program on her comm that could analyze a hundred thousand photos and videos in a couple seconds and transmit them in one superbly organized presentation to the hall tablet. She didn't know if the coming HTT required the photos to be organized or not, but she had a feeling that her own mania for organization was part of the process.

Amav had made sure to position the hall tablet in Display Mode as the only object on a long table in the outer hall. She also didn't know if the HTT required locking the hall doors but she'd done so, temporarily inconveniencing any number of folks who needed to process their excessive champagne consumption further down that hall.

Amav sent the photos. She fought the urge to peek into the hall herself. She hoped Jack remembered to turn off the security cameras out there. Would it make a difference?

She turned back to the newlyweds. It was done. Urside had shown up and he and Alycia were married. It had all happened so fast. But Amav could relax now. She wasn't even worried about the past Alycia arriving. It had to be happening about now.

The crowd congregated at the reception tables. Hedrona had pushed Jonathan James' floating crib to the far end of the hall where a dozen women hovered amid much less noise. Amav's child was in good hands. He did look like Joe. He'd been an angel tonight.

Amav saw Jack offering his congratulations to the newlyweds, then gathering a group of military personnel and other leaders including General Scott, Dar, Joe, and Greeney Gooney. Amav wanted to march over there and break it up, but she knew war talk would be inevitable anywhere USSF personnel gathered. And now that Joe was back and the *Typhoon III* project could ramp up, there'd be even more of it.

Phil Sperry hovered near, and Amav felt for him. Now an outsider from the USSF, he couldn't really enter the discussion, even though he was chief of staff to Greeney, who stood there speaking as Star General. She could feel Phil's tension as he struggled to neither go forward nor retreat.

Should she speak with him? Or would that make him more nervous? It was so frustrating and unfair that they couldn't talk anymore. Had Phil ever gotten over her? Was that the problem? All that stuff he'd written about her on the *Typhoon II*?

Jack had not forgotten. He was still furious with Phil three years later. Why couldn't he understand that Phil had been brainwashed, that he'd been lonely and afraid and would blast out all sorts of awkward feelings? Amav could never have returned what he wanted, and she'd declared that over and over to Jack, but he was still irrationally jealous. She and Phil had been good friends before the *Typhoon II*, and now there was nothing. Didn't Phil understand she'd *insisted* he be here tonight?

Amav had convinced Jack that offering the Command Suite for this wedding, and inviting many of the people he'd had run-ins with over the years, might be a way of healing rifts in the face of war needs. Still, it was obvious he and Phil weren't about to become buddies anytime soon. Jack felt that Phil had betrayed the USSF by resigning his commission and falling under the charismatic Star General Gooney's spell, slacking off a soldier's duty for civilian fun and games. Of course, the entire USSF was reeling at losing the greatest physician/engineer the USSF had ever known.

One day Jack had stormed home fuming about the *insults* Phil had just delivered. Amav hadn't believed him until she'd seen that evening's AresNet reports. There was Phil, shouting in front of USSF headquarters that Jack was a *racist* for trying to quash Greeney's mayoralty campaign on the grounds that USSF officers couldn't run for political office. Ranting that the Martian military was officially a guest of the USSF and didn't have to follow *fascist USSF rules* and that the USSF was just as much a brainwashing institution as the entire AC Grid.

That went far beyond the bounds of even an angry argument. Jack and Phil hadn't spoken for over a year, and Jack continued to blame Phil for every bureaucratic foul-up involving the brilliant Star General Gooney, accusing Phil of illegally meddling in USSF business when political and military duties overlapped, as they often did. While all Martian military forces now reported to Jack as head of the USSF, there were loopholes that, when radiated telepathically by twenty Martian officers in a meeting, were hard to untangle. In Jack's eyes, Phil was to blame for all of them.

Why couldn't Amav and Phil just talk again? Openly and deeply, as they used to? Could she resolve the conflict between him and her husband? Or would Phil again get the wrong idea? He was so terribly lonely. Why didn't he find someone? Didn't he ever really understand how much she and Jack loved each other? Why would he pursue *her*?

"So I'll be switching SCUSSF to the *III*," Jack was saying. "Anyone can see the *II*'s had its day. But it'll still serve as a training ship for new pilots. Don't worry, Joe, you'll still be the *III*'s pilot and captain. I'll just have my little flagship office aboard and sure, I'll give you some trouble now and then."

Joe grinned. "I can't wait. I have so much to catch up on *Typhoon* technology."

Jack turned to Greeney Gooney. "Of course, Gooney, I want you to command the *IV*. Or else use it for *your* flagship. Or both. Whatever suits you."

Amav felt a surprising hint of Martian emotion leak from Greeney. Then the telepathic shield came down hard. But Greeney smiled that crooked Martian smile. Here was Jack Commer offering him one of the two most powerful weapons ever created, and granting him coequal status with himself.

"I would certainly be most honored," Greeney sang back. "I will naturally do my best to fulfill your gracious trust in me."

"Well, we need you for the war effort, Greeney," Jack said. "And you're the best, no doubt about it. These new *Typhoons* are the most advanced tech we have, and we need you and Joe flying 'em."

“Thank you, Admiral. I am quite pleasantly surprised!”

Amav looked over to Phil, who was grinning.

“G’rea’nyaigu’nye will make a fine commander of the *IV*,” Dar announced. “This Martian youngster, all of 230 years old, has superb integrity and infinite ability. His quick reaction to the destruction of DamnStar and his routing of the AC invasion fleet are well known to all. And his two years as mayor of Marsport have been a period of unprecedented success and development. We are confident of his ability to serve the United System well in the future.” Everyone could obviously read what Dar was thinking. The entire history of Greeney Gooney was already known to everyone.

Of course, this history included all Greeney’s unauthorized hacks into the Amplified Thought Archives, and his uncanny ability to perform many of the highest-level AT functions by himself, rather than with assistance from a pair of other Martians. And then there was his mysterious unreadable mind, which made so many nervous, including almost all his fellow Martians.

But it was polite not to acknowledge any of that.

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“This is a very important day,” Dar went on. “As you know, I don’t normally offer speculation about the coming events between now and 2075, when the events of Heuristic Time Transition finally come to a close. But I must tell you that I’ve known for a long time, and recent calculations have been confirming, that this day, September 17, 2038, is a major nexus of HTT forces.”

Everyone leaned to hear. Here was the HTT encyclopedist ready to spill details everyone normally had to beg him for.

“Not only has the main HTT team fully assembled on this date, that is, myself, Mandy Frederick over there, Churchill and Ranna to my right, and Polot of Zorex who unfortunately cannot be here tonight, but Alycia and Urside are now reunited, which in itself is a major contribution to our understanding of HTT, as Urside was its first practitioner and his trips to Mars to see Alycia sparked our understanding of the phenomenon. Furthermore, we have Joe Commer back with us, and this date marks the beginning of much important work he and Jack will accomplish over the next several decades. And while not all my calculations are finished yet, and the true meaning of September 17th resists rigorous analysis, I can definitely see that this date marks the beginning of even more responsibility for our young Star General G’rea’nyaigu’nye here, and even for Jack and Amav’s infant son, Jonathan James Commer.”

“Oh,” Amav gasped. She turned to the crib at the far wall. She didn’t want to think about her son as being important in any way. That could only mean danger in this era of war and uncertainty.

“The actual details are still hazy,” Dar went on, oblivious to Amav’s distress. He may have thought he was making her and Jack proud of their son’s future, but he was doing exactly the opposite. “But someday in the future young Jonathan James will work closely with G’rea’nyaigu’nye. I can definitely see a tie in their respective karmas, and there may be an HTT event coming shortly in which we can research this connection further.”

As much as Amav loved Dar, she was always exasperated by his predictions. Yes, he’d mapped out some actual battles between 2036 and 2053, and he’d been right every time. He’d made some HTT trips to various points between now and 2075, hoping to clean up *time messes*.

But everyone knew the total number of HTT trips was fixed, and so far Dar had cataloged over ninety-five percent of the 8,178 time travel episodes by humans, Martians, and Alpha Centaurians between May 29, 2013 and May 29, 2075. But of the 1,755 Alpha Centaurian time intrusions--and Amav, like everyone else, had memorized all these numbers and was to some extent obsessed with them--over two hundred remained unaccounted for. Dar tended to gloss over this uncertainty, always saying that "further research is needed."

Many of his pronouncements sounded suspiciously like the "Your Lucky Stars Today!" feeds on SolNet, and Amav suspected not a few members of the wedding party thought Dar was pandering to the human custom of spreading nonsensical good cheer at the occasion.

No wonder people nervously joked about "Dar's astrology." Amav wondered if everyone wasn't waiting for the day when it all failed spectacularly. People wanted to consult this Amplified Thought-indexed, HTT-certified astrology, but deep down they worried that his suppositions would prove inexact. They'd dismiss an unsettling prediction as "not necessarily destined," or think, "If we try hard, we'll be able to prevent that." Some future histories had been retrieved by Dar and Mandy, and Amav could see that the full team would gather more, but the ones plotted so far were full of gaps, digitally ragged, and rarely mentioned individuals. Which after all was what everyone wanted to know about.

Greeney Gooney disengaged from the military personnel and walked straight for Amav. "You are uneasy?" he said.

Amav didn't know Greeney well despite dozens of meetings and social events as wife of the Supreme Commander of the USSF. But Greeney, like Dar, was determined to learn how to read human body language and facial expressions. It was ludicrous to watch Martians, helplessly radiating their innermost thoughts to all, trying to decipher what they called "the darkened human house." Now Amav realized she had the same problem with Gooney. She expected to be able to fully read a small pink creature with a back fin. But she couldn't, and now he was reading *her*.

"I guess so," she said. "I guess I was thinking about, you know, Polot's article and all these future predictions, and not being able to do anything about it."

"Yes, we all have that to deal with now. It's hard enough not being able to change your actions over the *last* fifteen years. But in the *next* fifteen as well? That's just too much!"

"That's it exactly! All this time travel stuff, and the war, and predictions of the future, and how I have to *act* through it all. Sometimes I just want to curl up in a ball somewhere and forget all this."

To Amav's surprise Greeney dropped his AT shielding and let his radiance flow. She was shocked that he would endanger his cherished privacy in front of four hundred wedding guests, but then saw he was releasing his thoughts in a narrow beam aimed only at her.

We Martians experienced something similar thousands of years ago. When we connected all Martians in a net of telepathic outradiance, we soon saw that concerns for the results of past actions, and concern for these actions causing suffering in the future, could spread karmic panic throughout the net much more efficiently. For a brief period, the entire planet was convulsed in a tangle of fear and anxiety.

I do not know exactly how we came out of that. But every Martian lives with that legacy. It even briefly appeared again when we all fell under the sway of the Emperor Hergs five human years ago. But that was a mere influenza as compared to the cancer of what had gone on before.

"Are you saying you all *relaxed* somehow?" Amav said.

Greeney shrugged and went dark again. "I just don't know, friend Amav. I suppose the

species decided it wanted to survive. Not to be insane.”

“Or maybe you *did* curl up in a ball and forget about it all.”

Greeney shot her another dose of radiance.

Well, we curled up in a ball and forgot about it all. But with our eyes open.