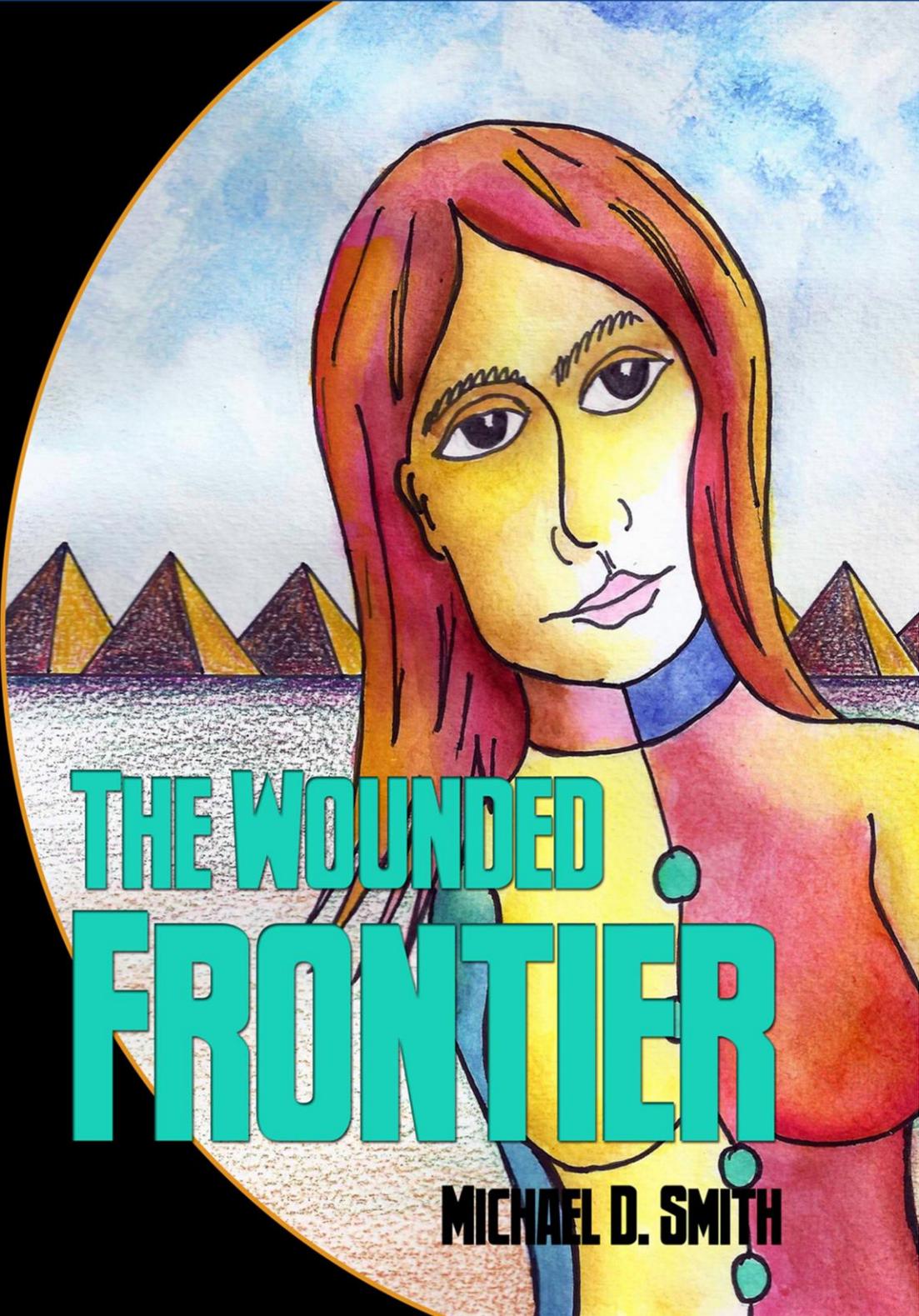


BOOK FIVE OF THE JACK COMMER SERIES



**THE WOUNDED
FRONTIER**

MICHAEL D. SMITH

The Wounded Frontier
Book Five of the Jack Commer Series

Michael D. Smith

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For my wife Nancy

CHAPTER ONE

Leaving Andertwin

Tuesday, July 9, 2075, 1040 hours

At the sound of footsteps Laurie peered from under the console to see the Supreme Commander of the United System Space Force striding into the Control Room.

“Oh! Sorry, sir!” she gasped, struggling to extricate herself.

“As you were, Colonel Lachrer,” Jack Commer grinned. “I can see Joe must’ve broken the *III* again!”

“Well, uh, not really, sir,” she said, noting that Jack was in his dark blue full-dress uniform as were the other *Typhoon IV* crewmembers onboard today, all looking snazzy in contrast to the *III* crew in their loose light blue flight suits. “There were a few problems with the console’s connection to Enhanced Diagnostic I wanted to look at before we head back. I wouldn’t chance an Enhanced at this point until we’ve worked out this glitch.” She ducked back under the console and resumed scanning the circuitry as Jack took a seat in the second row of chairs behind the command console.

“Yeah, we came out in three regular Star Drives,” Joe Commer spoke from the pilot seat. “I really did want to test the Enhanced, though. Looks like we need to take it back in three again.”

Laurie brushed back her long red hair and stuck her head out again. “I’m sorry, sir,” she spoke to her captain, also managing to nod in the direction of his brother behind him, “but if we want to launch at 1045, I don’t think I have time to really chase this bug down. I’m really sorry.”

“That’s fine, Laurie,” Joe said. “I didn’t think we’d have time to figure it all out, either. Andy, let’s start the preflight.” As copilot Donnelley began his checklist, Joe waved at Jack’s wife Amav climbing up the ladder to the Control Room. Her glossy white flight suit jerked Donnelley’s eyes away from his console.

Damn her and her pneumatic boobs, Laurie thought. Every man on this ship was drooling after them. *Doctor Frankston-Commer*. Had she really ever done anything with planetary engineering? Oh, they always sought her input, and she was on every committee. Because she was absolutely perfect, of course. She might be in her sixties, but she looked twenty, with that oval face, that long lustrous brown hair, those dark smoldering eyes and thick sensuous lips. Apparently Amav had inveigled a native Jujl seamstress into making that skintight plasti-leather flight suit after the wardrobe she’d brought to Andertwin was incinerated in the *Typhoon IV* crash. The suit was certainly calculated to accentuate every one of Amav’s faultless curves.

Amav slithered into a seat next to Jack behind the pilot and copilot. The Control Room of the *Typhoon III* was blindingly white. It hurt Laurie’s eyes, but Joe liked the maximum setting.

“I’m ready to get out of this dump,” Amav hissed, face tight.

“Well, we’re almost off.” Jack turned to Laurie as she pulled herself from under the console. “Sorry you couldn’t stay and sightsee Andertwin a while, Colonel. Joe and Andy have been here a couple times. It’s really almost paradise. Amav and I were even thinking of retiring here someday.”

Amav shook her head. “Not anymore. Three weeks is more than enough.”

Jack shrugged. “And thanks for bringing Dar and K’sla over, Joe. Even *they’re* talking about retiring here.”

No one responded. Amav stole an impatient glance out the canopy. Laurie was taken aback at the fresh tension in the Control Room. She still couldn’t make sense of all the craziness that happened here on Andertwin last month, but she knew everyone was stressed by the events that

had led to the new Centaurian Grid.

But it wasn't fair to barely even let them use the bathroom in the guest house. She'd only be able to see Phil Sperry for a couple minutes. Draka, on the other hand, had been soaking up the legendary *Typhoon II* physician/engineer's expertise for three weeks now.

Joe had told her that the crew of the *Typhoon IV* had requested three additional weeks on Andertwin to recuperate, but apparently this was not to the liking of the seemingly twenty-year-old goddess Amav Frankston-Commer. The *Typhoon III* had been scheduled to stay here a few days, but on the way over Joe had told her in confidence that Amav had been insisting on getting off Andertwin for over two weeks. At the end of their first Star Drive had come the call from Jack asking if the *III* couldn't be turned around in two hours and get them home today. Running the turnaround schedule immediately upon arrival hadn't been a problem for Laurie. She was used to that sort of pressure. But it didn't give her any time to work on that Enhanced glitch, or to ask Phil Sperry what he thought of it.

To smooth the awkward silence, she made a show of closing up her diagnostic toolkit. "How's your leg, sir? Draka told me it healed fine."

Jack blinked. "I keep forgetting you're a *doctor*. Want to take a look?"

"Uh, I don't think there's enough time, I mean, if we're going to launch in four minutes."

Jack laughed. "Oh, come on, Laurie, I was pulling *your* leg! Believe me, mine's better than ever. Hard to believe it ever happened, in a way. Blasted clean off, and Greeney puts it back together with Amplified Thought! You'd never know it'd happened. Draka's still amazed."

"Jack, *please*," Amav said, reducing the Control Room to a chilly seventeen degrees and resuming her stare out the canopy. "It was all *too horrible*."

Laurie had spoken with Draka Sortie, her counterpart on the *Typhoon IV*, about whether Jack might need special medical attention on the trip back to Sol, but Greeney Gooney had maintained that all the necessary healing had taken place in the first fifteen seconds of his Amplified Thought repair. Unconcerned about any follow-up needs Jack might have, Greeney had already returned to Sol to take up his new duties as Martian Emperor.

Laurie had also consulted about the rest of the *IV* crew with Draka, who'd been checking them every day for any physical problems that might develop. They'd all been banged up pretty badly when they'd crashed the *IV*.

Meanwhile Amav continued to glare at the Andertwin trees in the late afternoon sun. Laurie had to remind herself that their own morning schedule had nothing to do with Andertwin time. But what on Earth was up with the bitch lady today?

Donnelley turned to Jack. "Is everyone from the *IV* on board, Admiral?" The tall, lean copilot had thinning gray hair and sunken cheeks. Laurie wondered why he hadn't retired years ago. He'd been a test pilot in the thirties, then had gone for command but never attained it. He'd been a copilot for decades now. Andy was certainly competent, but something was lacking in him which Laurie had never been able to pinpoint.

"Yeah, we're all here," Jack said.

"Anyone else you'd like up here? We've got plenty of seats behind us," Joe said, indicating four empty seats along the rear wall of the Control Room next to the auxiliary engineer's station. Laurie was still amazed at the amount of wasted space on the *Typhoon III*. There was room for a ping-pong table between Jack and Amav's guest seats and the console at the rear.

"No, I think they've each claimed a stateroom by now. Between you and me, I think most of 'em are a little ashamed to be getting ferried back like this."

Joe shrugged. "Yeah, I can see why." He motioned to Laurie. "Colonel, will you take the

auxiliary station behind us for the trip home? I want to make sure any adjustments we've made to the Enhanced Diagnostic don't have unintended consequences."

"Uh, yessir," Laurie said, moving behind Jack and Amav to her auxiliary console, her cheeks heating. Did Joe think she'd messed up her diagnostic in front of his brother and sister-in-law? Dammit, Laurie knew her stuff. If Blanton hadn't fooled with the InterRelay last week they wouldn't be having this problem.

All the same, she understood Joe's insistence on perfection. Even after forty-five years of Star Drive, flights longer than fifteen minutes, somewhat over four light-years, could produce anomalous results. The war with the Centaurian Empire had blinded everyone to the raw fact that the existing Star Drive system wasn't much good for distances beyond the 4.3 light-years to Alpha Centauri. They could make further jumps between the other AC stars by taking the distances in fifteen-minute hops, but a sustained flight of more than about eight light-years usually resulted in Star Drive malfunctions, occasionally catastrophic.

Thus, for safety reasons, the flight to and from Andertwin's star, Procyon A, was broken into three separate Star Drives to cover the 11.5 light-years, with system checks and navigational realignment mandated at the stops, which always spooked the crew as they took place literally in the middle of *nowhere*. You always wondered if a given stop might be the one time your Star Drive engine failed to restart.

Laurie had newfound sympathy for the Alpha Centaurians and how they'd struggled with bad Warp Transfer systems for thousands of years. Even though Star Drive was inherently more stable than the Centaurian Warp Transfer, the Centaurian technique consistently achieved longer ranges than did Star Drive, and was able to keep shaky physical contact between far-flung Centaurian star systems. The need for long-range Star Drive had become paramount.

So far only six *Typhoon*-class ships had the Star Drive Enhanced system, and it had only been tested a few times, in no direction further than two light-years. But the *Typhoon V*, the prototype of the next class of ships, had fully integrated Star Drive Enhanced and would theoretically be capable of going anywhere in the galaxy.

Laurie turned to Jack. "I'm sorry we've had this Enhanced problem, Admiral. I certainly wish we could've demonstrated the full Enhanced system to you on the journey home."

"Well, how's it coming along otherwise? Aside from this one glitch, that is?"

"It's going great," Joe cut in. "Laurie worked with the fleet engineers to get ours installed. But when she ran the Advanced Diagnostic a couple weeks ago, she found some bugs that could've wiped out Dimensional InterRelay. So Fleet's revamping InterRelay on all the *Typhoon* ships with Enhanced, and they're even going to port her upgrade to the *V*. Laurie's a damn genius!"

Laurie blinked. "Well, thank you, sir."

"She probably just saved six ships," Jack said. "Hell, would've been seven. You know the *IV* was due for the Enhanced upgrade next week. Anyway, that's great, what you did, Colonel. Maybe you should talk to Phil Sperry. He refined a lot of the AC Warp Transfer stuff and may have some insight."

"Yessir, that sounds like a good idea."

"Yeah, have Laurie talk to the Emperor of the Alpha Centaurians," Joe grinned.

"Well, *everybody's* the emperor now, you know. It's amazing what Phil pulled off with the Grid."

"You all weren't really thinking of experimenting with Enhanced on the way home, were you?" Amav interrupted, meeting Laurie's eyes with unmistakable frost.

“No, no, of course not,” Laurie stammered. “I mean, not unless everything checked out perfectly.”

“Really? You’d really try an untested technology on all your unsuspecting passengers?” Amav waved back at the Control Room hatch Laurie was surprised to see still standing open. Amav had been the last one in, and she had to know it was standard operating procedure to secure that hatch before flight. It looked as if copilot Donnelley was too goggle-eyed to remind her of that fact. Well, Laurie wasn’t going to do it.

Anyway, Amav wasn’t USSF. How could she know what those Space Force guys back there might be willing to face?

“Well, it’s no skin off my back. Three hops are fine with me,” Joe said. “Enhanced doesn’t mean much in terms of actual time saved, it’s just super stable, that’s all. We could go great distances in one big hop instead of dozens of little ones where we have to check all the systems out over and over again.”

“I know the theory, Joe,” Amav snorted. “I just don’t think you should be using it until it’s passed all the tests.”

There was a long silence. What stupid tests did their pneumatic planetary engineer think needed to be passed? Laurie had been working her tail off on Enhanced the last three months.

“Well, whatever,” Jack finally said. “When we finally do get it in gear, wow, what we could do with Enhanced. I mean, what’ve we been doing all these years? Fighting wars and twiddling our thumbs? We need to get out there and *explore*.”

Amav sneered and looked away.

Joe nodded. “I’m still impressed Laurie caught that one bug. Apparently you could’ve done serious damage to an entire solar system without even thinking. We may have to call it the Lachrer Enhancement from now on.”

Laurie turned back to her own console to hide her flushed cheeks.

“Checklist completed. We’re clear for takeoff when you’re ready, Captain,” Donnelley said.

“Thanks, Andy,” Joe said. “You guys ready?”

“Hey, it’s your ship,” Jack said. “Gun it whenever you want.”

“Thank you, el Comandante Supremo. I believe I will.”

Jack grinned. “Damn, I just wish Jonathan James was coming with us.”

Amav shrugged. “He wants to stay. It’s his decision and that’s fine with me.”

Laurie ran Donnelley’s checklist against her own. Everything was green. In fact, one of Donnelley’s checks flagged the Enhanced Diagnostic Console Subsystem A. It was turned off and presented no problem to the ship’s functioning, but the Last Known Dimensional Parameter had registered .083.

No wonder Laurie couldn’t get Graduated Power Interface if the parameter was less than 1.0. Maybe if she--well, too late to try it now, but that was interesting. Damn interesting.

“Yeah, but up to last night he was so keen on talking to Urside,” Jack went on. “He sounded like he really wanted to give Earth a try.”

“Oh, c’mon, Jack, what does Urside really know about *counseling* anyone?” Amav countered.

“Well, I know he’s helped a lot of people. He and Alycia both.”

“What does a damn *artist* know about counseling our son?”

Laurie’s musings on Graduated Power Interface scattered. She didn’t know the Charmouth guy personally, just that he’d been the person who’d inadvertently performed the very first and the very last Heuristic Time Transitions. Thank God all that time travel insanity was over with.

Meanwhile, Urside Charmouth was just one more person for Doctor Planetary Engineer to piss on, she guessed.

Anyway, if Enhanced was drawing on Graduated for its knowledge of which dimension it was encountering--

"I don't know, but I guess he just *listens*," Jack said. "Anyway, JJC was really up for a long vacation on Earth, and I thought Urside might help."

"Maybe Jonathan James just needs to come to terms with all the *crap* he pulled right back where he *did* it! On this godforsaken planet! Please, can we just get *off* this place?"

There was another long silence.

Finally Joe spoke: "Well, we're ready when you are."

"JJC thinks he'll be just fine with Dar and K'sla," Amav said. "I bet he thinks he can wrap them around his little finger. Wait'll he finds out how righteous Dar can really be!"

"Well, Phil and Hedrona will be helping, too," Joe pointed out.

"You stay out of this!" Amav flared. "This is our damn *son*. He doesn't want to change, he's just *faking* it! He thinks he's got Hedrona, and Phil, and *everyone* wrapped around his little finger. He was just *feeding* Jack a line about wanting to go to Earth for counseling. And Jack just swallowed it whole!"

More silence.

"Uh, can we discuss this, you know, like, later?" Jack muttered.

"You're damn right! Just let's please get out of here!"

"Amav, we're *trying*," Joe said. "Are we all ready to leave now?" He punched a square on the console for the ship's intercom. "All hands, prepare for takeoff."

"Don't you patronize me, Joe Commer!" Amav snarled. "If you really knew what *happened* here!"

"Amav, *goddammit!*" Jack hissed, as everyone in the Control Room realized that last comment had gone out shipwide. "I know you're upset, but we really *are* trying to get out of here."

"Don't *you* patronize me, either! You have no idea! No idea at all! What it's like when your own son--oh my God!"

Laurie stared. The Doctor Planetary Engineer was crying.

"Amav, I'm *sorry*."

"Oh, hell, he's *not* my son! He's a *monster!*"

"But, I mean, he *is* our son. We have to *understand* him!"

"I don't want anything to do with that *monster!* Just get me off this goddamn planet!"

"Amav--"

"We *lost* him in '38! He's been *gone* since then! *Dead* to us since then! All this time travel *insanity!* It doesn't matter! Nothing matters!"

"Sure it matters. I admit it's been strange, but Sortie says all his brain functions are okay. Maybe he's just sort of *dazed* by that *crap* he pulled back there. Look, I admit I still can't get my head around all this myself."

"He brainwashed me into practically having *sex* with *Phil Sperry*, and you can't wrap your head around *that?*"

"Amav, *please!*"

Laurie swiveled to the shouting despite all her effort not to. Joe and Andy were doing the same. Everyone's mouth hung open.

"Sex with *Phil Sperry!* Exactly what you always accused me of *wanting* all these years!"

There! Are you satisfied?"

"No! Amav, just--just *stop*. We're on the *Typhoon*, going home, everything's okay."

"All for his goddamn power trip! For wanting to be Emperor! To complete some stupid *initiation rite*. His own *mother*, for God's sake! And that stupid, *awful* novel of his! Oh my God! That's not my son! We *lost* him in '38! And Phil Sperry! Of all the people to *pair* me with! Oh my God!"

"Listen, Amav, I've told you a hundred times, don't be ashamed of what happened back there. You were *brainwashed*. Temporarily. I sure as hell don't think it's a big deal. You can't be accountable when you're brainwashed, can you?"

"Don't fool me, you're still jealous. After all these years!"

"I am *not*! Do I give a flip about Phil Sperry?"

"He *loved* me forty years ago!"

"He has *Hedrona* now, for God's sake!"

"I've always felt *sorry* for him, and then my own son took advantage of that for his goddamn *software*! For his power trip! His stupid Grid! And he was so *smug*! So *evil*!"

"Look, who can make sense of the Grid stuff anyway? Let the damn Centaurians sort it out on their own. We can take care of JJC. Maybe Dar and K'sla will be perfect for him. Or Urside can help. And you and I can settle some stuff out, you know? I mean, straighten everything out and get moving again, you know?"

"Damn you! Damn you!"

Amav was out of her chair and through the Control Room hatch, which she tried in vain to slam as if it were some ordinary bedroom door. She stamped down the rungs and was gone.

"Damn you all!" the entire ship heard her yell from the fuselage. "*Just get me off this goddamn planet, will you please?*"

CHAPTER TWO

The Castle

“Uh ...” Jack muttered, staring at his lap. “Look, everyone, that was, uh--”

That was damn unprofessional, Laurie thought. God, what a zoo.

“I need to call Draka. Make sure she’s settled in Stateroom One.” But Jack made no move to do so.

Laurie checked the Crew Locator module. “Uh, sir, I’m showing her back in Stateroom One. Seat harness fastening just now, sir.”

“Thanks ...” Jack sighed, and Laurie wondered if he’d been sharing her own image of the *out-of-control bitch* yanking open the rear hatch, leaping twelve feet to the Andertwin grass, breaking her ankle and screaming obscenities as she limped into the woods.

“She’s ... been under a lot more strain than I realized,” Jack finally managed.

“Look, it’s okay, Jack,” Joe said. “I’m ready to start the launch sequence, but if you want to get down to Stateroom One, we can wait a bit.”

“N-no ...”

Laurie looked away in disgust from the shaken Supreme Commander.

“Andy, fire up Auxiliary One,” Joe said, “then ease in the hover thrusters.”

“Yeah, thanks, Joe. Just get us off,” Jack whispered.

This wimp was going to command the *Typhoon V*? El Comandante Supremo wouldn’t want any of these ancient *III*-class ships, that was for sure. Laurie was shocked at what he’d allowed here with wifey. If she were captain, she’d put them both off the ship this instant.

Though Jack was over six feet tall, broad-shouldered and handsome in a rugged, uneven way, with a square face and deep-set brown eyes, he’d never impressed Laurie in all the decades she’d known him. Rejuvenation technology had gone well for the seventy-two-year-old Supreme Commander, and Jack looked to be in his mid-thirties, as did his brother Joe. But Joe’s equally dark brown eyes radiated an invigorating mix of humor, passion, and ruthlessness in contrast to Jack’s vaguely worried expression, and though Joe was a couple inches shorter, his huge biceps and pectorals, his taut belly and muscled thighs, projected a physical stamina that inspired everyone who worked with him. Jack seemed to want to weigh his decisions until they were no longer necessary; Joe jumped into the middle of the worst danger with whatever he had to give at the moment.

Joe should have the *V*, and everyone knew it. He was so much more level-headed than his brother. He’d even make an excellent Supreme Commander. And Laurie should be on the *V* as physician/engineer. She’d taken those classes on *V* tech and probably knew more than anyone.

That Frankston-Commer woman was *not* as smart as she thought she was. So damn perfect, just like her darling el Comandante Supremo. Why didn’t Jack just step down? He obviously couldn’t handle the job. Everyone knew he’d been off the rails since ’34.

June 2034, when he’d sent his two brothers to their deaths.

Laurie shook her head. Of course, that was unfair. Jack certainly didn’t order his brother John to destroy the *Typhoon I*, even though for years she’d wanted to believe that Jack had fled the doomed ship with his favorite brother Joe, then directed the *Typhoon* to impact on Mercury, killing the six remaining crewmen including Jim and John Commer.

But that wasn’t how it happened. It had taken her decades to accept that. Joe had only spoken about it to her once, but he’d confirmed that John had the pilot’s seat and did it against Jack’s orders. Maybe to impress Jack, who knew?

Killed himself and the rest of the crew just to impress his brother. Jack should never have left John in command. He should've known how close John was to snapping.

Too long ago. Too long. Forty-one years? Why was she even thinking this? She never thought of John.

Oh my God! Did I really love him that much? To never drop it after all these years?

*

Donnelley touched a square on his console and Laurie heard the engine whir at the rear of the fuselage. The hover thrusters came to life beneath the wings, and within seconds they shot to several thousand feet. As the ship banked, Laurie could see the guest house where the crew of the *IV* had stayed the past three weeks. It was empty now except for the Jujl servants maintaining the house and surrounding orchards. Phil Sperry and Hedrona Bhlon had stayed with the *Typhoon IV* crowd until today, then returned to their own home several miles down the rural road.

Not far from the guest house lay the blackened wreckage of the *Typhoon IV*. It had flattened a stand of trees and was splayed like a murder victim left to rot across the shattered branches. Rivulets of oil and fuel pooled in the dirt, and metallic debris caught glints of the sun across a dozen acres.

What was holding up the salvage crew? It had been weeks now. Could they seriously be worried about the Grid, about being contaminated with it if they set foot anywhere in Alpha Centauri? What about that idiot on SolNet last night, protesting that Greeney Gooney, already home from Andertwin, was somehow *infecting* Sol? God, people were fools.

"Prepare for orbital insertion," Joe spoke into the intercom, and the inertial dampers kicked in as the *Typhoon III* shot through the clouds and accelerated into orbit. Laurie stole a glance at her captain. Joe grinned, back in command of a spaceship. Admiral Joe Commer, Deputy Supreme Commander of the USSF, preferred like his brother to fly his desk from the command seat of a *Typhoon*.

"Auto-checklists green," Donnelley said as the curved blue surface of Andertwin spread out before them. "We're go for an entire orbit if we need it."

"Probably won't need that long," Joe said. "Stations, check in."

"Communications and sensors optimal," Communications Officer Sandra Markham called.

"Navigation checks out," said Navigation Officer Li Bao.

"All turrets operational," said Weapons Officer Rick Ballard.

"All systems go," Laurie spoke from her console.

"See, what did I tell you?" Joe said. "Break orbit in fifteen seconds."

"Star Drive autopilot engaged," Donnelley said, punching a square. "We're go for standard two million miles from planetary surface."

"Got it," Lieutenant Li spoke from Navigation. "Course for Star Drive number one laid in. All systems go."

"*Belay that!*" came the cry over the intercom. "*Belay everything!*"

"What?" Joe grunted.

"Pat, is that *you*?" Jack said. "What the hell?"

"We got to stop her!" *Typhoon IV* Communications Officer Patrick James shouted. "*I know what she's doing!*"

"Hold up on the orbit break, Andy," Joe said, patting Donnelley's arm poised over the

console. "Pat, what on Earth are you doing on my shipwide circuit?"

"It's *K'ufunb*, on the *Castle*! On JJC's *Castle*!"

Joe raised an eyebrow to his brother. "Sorry, Joe," Jack said, "I don't know what's gotten into him."

"*I know what she's doing!* I can feel it! Everybody in the Grid knows it!"

"Sir, I'm tracking a spaceship launch from the planet," came from Markham. "From the mountainous region fifty miles west of our own launch point."

"That's it!" Pat cried. "It's *K'ufunb!* *I know what she's doing!*"

"Excuse me, Commander James," Joe said, "but Communications Officer Markham is the only one authorized aboard the *Typhoon III* to monitor launches, and if by any chance you've patched yourself into our communications systems, you need to get out now."

"Forget it! I'm in the Grid! *I know it all!*"

"*Dammit, Pat!*" Jack said. "We agreed military personnel shouldn't experiment with this Grid business!"

"Forget it, Jack! It's not addictive at all! Not like it used to be! I've done it both ways and I know! I'm the damn Emperor now, just like everyone else!"

"I can't believe you went and *did* that. I'm sorry, Joe!"

"Well, hell, Jack, if anybody would be curious about how the Grid operates, it'd be Pat," Joe said. "You know how he is about hacking into systems."

"Don't worry!" Pat shouted. "I can drop in and out of it at any time! It's just like Phil was saying! It's all voluntary now! But when you're *in* it, *wow!*"

"Okay, Pat, get off my circuit," Joe said. "Sandra, what's up with that ship launch? Who is it?"

"Sir, it's that *Castle* that Admiral Commer's son built. It's *following* us!"

Jack stood up. "My God! Is Jonathan James on it? What on Earth is he up to? *Dammit*, I thought Sperry dismantled that thing!"

"Don't worry, Jack! It's just *K'ufunb!*" Pat called. "All Phil did was lock the engine initiation sequence when we landed her last month. But *K'ufunb* knows how to bypass that."

"How--how do you *know* this?"

Laurie stared. *This* was their Supreme Commander? He was so out of it. Just flailing.

"Sandra, is there any communication from the ship?" Joe called.

"Negative, sir."

"Okay, look, Jack, I just told her to officially call us!" Pat yelled. "I told her it's the *least* she can do!"

"Sir, I have a message from the ship," said Lieutenant Markham. "Identifying itself as the *Castle*."

"Put it on," Joe said. "Control Room only. And yourself, of course."

"Forget it, Joe!" Pat shouted. "I see *everything* through the Grid! I hear *everything!* All of Alpha Centauri does!"

"Pat, stand down! Right now!" Jack shouted.

"I know what she's about to do! *You've got to stop her!*"

"Sandra, cut Pat off!" Joe yelled.

"Roger. Stateroom Four intercom terminated."

"This is *K'ufunb*, Empress of the Alpha Centaurians!" came the voice through the *Typhoon's* translator system. "Hello, hello, hello! Greetings in the name of the Alpha Centaurian Empire! All of Alpha Centauri participates in this decisive moment!"

“It’s true! It’s true!” came a muffled shout through the Control Room hatch from somewhere down the fuselage.

“*Sheesh ...*” Jack muttered.

Had Jack really let one of his crewmembers experiment with the Grid? Sure, Draka had told Laurie it was harmless now, that he’d seen both Phil and Hedrona go into and out of the Grid a dozen times. But Pat here had just openly flouted el Comandante Supremo’s orders and Jack just stood there like a zombie.

“Hello, K’ufunb, I’m Joe Commer, captain of the *Typhoon III*. Is there anything we can do for you?”

Was that the Fkuuh that Draka had been talking about, the caretaker for Jonathan James’s spaceship? Laurie had only seen holograms of the Fkuuh species: the short round aliens had four legs and four arms, and six eyes in a huge orange head that seemed to be ninety percent of the body. As almost all humans remarked, they really did look like pumpkins with tentacles. Fkuuh were considered by other Alpha Centaurians to be dull-witted and barbaric; somehow they always seemed to wind up as servants to upper-class castes like the Tarl or the Zarj.

“Sir Joe!” K’ufunb rasped. “Brother of Jack! I most devoutly wish you would access the Grid yourself so that you would understand the importance of the decision all Alpha Centauri now makes through me!”

“Uh, sorry, I certainly can’t do anything like that. Again, how may we be of assistance?”

Laurie wasn’t even tempted to sample the Grid. When they thought they might be staying on Andertwin a few days, Sandra had asked if she wasn’t curious to try this new voluntary Grid. Everyone said you’d come right out of it whenever you wanted. But Laurie wasn’t interested in any sort of cosmic connection with twenty trillion Alpha Centaurians, and she wasn’t about to chance *not* coming out of it.

“Who’s on the *Castle* with you?” Jack cried. “Is my son up there?”

“Sir Jack! It’s *you!* I greet you in the name of the Alpha Centaurian Empire with special fondness for your role in bringing about the New Grid!”

“I didn’t have a thing to do with it! *Is my son up there?*”

“No, Sir Jack! I’m here alone, a mere scrubwoman of Jonathan James’s *Castle*, but also one of trillions of Empreses of the Alpha Centaurians through the New Grid! I am in charge of the spaceship and thus I am her captain. Sir Jack, I respectfully state that I am about to engage the Warp Transfer on this ship in an irresponsible manner designed to cause a failed Warp Transfer Insertion.”

“*What?*”

“I must go to Clopt, my Emperor husband. I must reunite with Clopt in *Garr/thahg*.”

“*Garr/thahg?* Dammit, K’ufunb, that’s superstitious nonsense! Clopt deliberately *killed* himself with a failed Warp Transfer! There’s no damn *Garr/thahg!*”

“I must go to *Garr/thahg*. This action will take place immediately.”

“Dammit, Sandra, where is that ship?” Joe said.

“242.6 miles directly above us, sir,” Markham reported, “and accelerating.”

“Too close! If she blows her Star Drive, ours may rupture as well! Donnelley!”

“Ready, sir.”

“Go for it! Top-end sublight!”

“No! She’s too close to the planet!” Laurie cried. “She’ll rupture *it!*”

The surface of Andertwin shot away as the *Typhoon* accelerated to one-quarter light speed. In a moment they’d drop out of that to assume the requisite 100,000 miles per hour velocity for

engaging Star Drive.

“No! JJC’s still back on the planet!” Jack screamed. “K’ufunb, listen to me! Clopt went to *Garr/thahg* to *escape* you! He doesn’t *want* you! Please just *stop!*”

“I’ve had three of your weeks to consider his *real* reasons, my lord Jack. Your servant the Emperor Phil considers that my husband Clopt committed what you call *suicide*. But we know it as *Garr/thahg*, the Land of the Dead, where we meet our True Emperor. I now see that his action was an expression of Zarj love. Clopt wishes us to unite in *Garr/thahg*.”

“Weapons!” Joe gasped. “Target the *Castle* and destroy it!”

“I have *Castle* Warp Transfer signature!” Markham called.

“Too late!” Rick Ballard shouted back from Weapons. “Can’t get a lock!”

“*You’re too close to the planet!*” Jack shouted.

“I forgot, sir, in my extraordinary grief I forgot!” K’ufunb cried as a bright line of energy cascaded across the black sky. Then space turned entirely blue.

CHAPTER THREE

A More Vigorous Government

Joe hit the glare filters on the canopy. “She headed the damn thing straight for the sun!”

“Object missed Procyon A by seventy-eight million miles,” Markham reported. “Before ceasing to exist, that is. The star is stable. I’ll run further analysis. More good news: Andertwin made it through fine. Probably have quite a lot of aurora activity for a few years, though.”

“Thank God,” Jack muttered. He turned to his brother’s brown eyes and met waves of shared understanding. Decades of working with Joe had left the two of them almost telepathic with each other. Not as good as Martian telepathy, but close enough for them to have saved each other’s bacon more than a few times.

“Damn, Joe, I’m so sorry!”

“Hell, Jack, it’s not your fault. What the hell happened with that Fkuuh?”

“I have no idea. She *rejected* Clopt when this new Grid started. Then he suicided. God, I had no idea she’d have this mystical *thing* about it.”

“Well, if I understand what Pat was babbling, apparently all of Alpha Centauri *knows* she did that, and why. I mean, through the Grid.”

Jack breathed out. “But she’s *gone*. Just like that!”

“But Jonathan James is okay.” Joe pointed to his console. “Sandra’s sending updates. No reports of damage on Andertwin. We don’t have to head back there unless you want to.”

Jack shuddered. The last thing he wanted was to get Amav riled up again.

“N-no ... we should be okay to get going.”

“Sandra’s also monitoring the aftereffects of the Warp Transfer irrationality. Nothing serious. Laurie, let’s recalibrate Star Drive again, just to make sure we don’t have any spatial vortices in our path.”

“I’m on it,” said the slender redhead behind Jack.

“Sir, I have Captain Athens from the *Jonathan Commer*,” Markham reported.

“I’ll take this one,” Jack said. “Hey, Bobby, you undoubtedly saw what just happened.”

“Yes, sir. We were shielded by TwinLord at the time, but we have some good recording of it. We’re combining it with the telemetry the *III*’s sending us, and we’ll keep monitoring. Procyon A’s okay, so are all the planets. That was JJC’s *Castle*?”

“Yes. One casualty. K’ufunb, Jonathan James’ servant. Apparently she just lost it and knew how to launch the ship via the Grid.”

“Wow. Well, we’ll continue to study the situation from here. And of course I’ll check on Jonathan James from time to time.”

Jack managed a grin. Sometimes Bobby Athens was almost telepathic with him, too.

“Thanks, Bobby. We’re going to check our Star Drive one more time and go ahead and leave. Keep me posted.”

“Sure, Jack.”

After the *Typhoon IV* crashed, Jack had summoned the *Jonathan Commer* to Andertwin. It was due a new captain, so Jack gave his *IV* copilot Bobby a long-overdue promotion and left him in charge of the ship, currently in orbit around Andertwin’s moon. The *Commer* was a *III*-class ship, named after his and Joe’s late father, and was scheduled to stay behind in Alpha Centauri for six months to monitor the new Grid.

Joe hit a square on his console. “Li, I assume you’ve compensated for our escape maneuver and have us pointed correctly at Sol for the first Star Drive? We should’ve clued you in on this

crazy conversation we just had.”

“No problem, sir,” spoke Lieutenant Li from Navigation. Li was an old friend from decades ago. In fact, the day Jack had met him back in the thirties, the young Airman Li had saved his life and Joe’s by shattering the Centaurian spy Geswindoll. Jack shuddered to recall those chaotic days of Heuristic Time Transitions and the realization that years of futile war lay ahead. “The NAV9 Cluster cut in automatically,” Li went on. “I take it the *Castle* had a failed Star Drive?”

“Yeah. Sandra, keep analyzing Guaco-whatever until we leave, make sure it’s stable, and keep transmitting everything to the *Commer*,” Joe said, mocking the idiotic name the AC’s had for Procyon A: *Guacoazezama*. “That was still damn close. Laurie, how’s the SD Diagnostic going? That was way close for us, too.”

“So far everything’s green, sir. Diagnostic will finish in four minutes.”

“It’s *incredible*, Jack!” Patrick James cut in. “All of Alpha Centauri *grieves* for K’ufunb, and for Clopt, but they also *rejoice* for her! For *Garr/thahg!*”

Jack noted that James was bypassing Stateroom Four’s intercom link and calling the Control Room on his own comm. “Okay, Pat, we figured that out ourselves up here. Will you please get off the network? This isn’t even our own ship.”

“It’s incredible to feel twenty trillion entities all sharing the same *ecstasy*, I think you could call it!”

“Sandra, cut the link from Pat’s comm,” Joe ordered.

“Done, sir.”

“Damn,” Jack said. “Sorry again, Joe. I don’t know what’s gotten into him.”

Joe shrugged. “No big deal. He’s just excited about a Grid that doesn’t brainwash you. In a way, you ought to thank him. If he hadn’t been in the Grid and warned us, we might’ve been sucked into that irrationality.”

Jack plopped back down into the seat behind Joe. “Yeah, well maybe.” His comm beeped. “Aw hell, what now?”

I’m sorry came up on his screen.

“Hey, I thought you’d cut Pat’s--” Jack began, then saw:

I just really, really need to get back home. I’m sorry I fell apart and embarrassed you. I just need to get away from Andertwin. I didn’t even realize how much until we were leaving.

Jack sighed. Thank God she’d calmed down. Well, maybe it was true that all this had hurt Amav a lot worse than he’d thought. But how could she be sending this after K’ufunb had suicided?

Then again, not everyone on board was on duty and patched into the Standard Ship Overview Module. Today they had passengers from the *Typhoon IV*. Aside from Pat, no doubt still high on the Grid and apparently plugged into everything going on in the Alpha Centaurian Empire, the others might have been reading mystery novels on their comms, totally unaware of what just happened.

Or someone might have been crying, hysterically angry at a certain Supreme Commander of the USSF.

Everything’s okay, he tapped back. Don’t worry. We’re starting the first Star Drive and we’ll be home in maybe an hour and fifteen minutes with the reorientation stops. Had a little incident here I’ll tell you about later. All okay now. Love you.

He looked up to catch Colonel Lachrer eyeing him. She reddened and swiveled back to her console. “We’re almost out of Diagnostic, Captain,” she called back to Joe. “By the way, I’m

running a simulation that'll compare how this Star Drive performs against a Star Drive Enhanced under the same set of conditions. I think that Subsystem A's Last Known Dimensional Parameter may need some adjusting. So far my simulation shows that if we keep it about 1.5, an Enhanced would be stable."

"Huh," Joe said. "Let me know how it turns out across all three Star Drives. Sounds like you're on to something." He turned back to Jack. "What did I tell you? I've never seen anyone pick up on the physician/engineer stuff as fast as she has. And she just started in *April*."

Jack looked back to Laurie, hunched over her console, and grinned. She was still so shy. Whoever would've thought she'd have come this far?

Like Lt. Li, Laurie Lachrer was another officer they'd first known as an Airman First Class back in the thirties. She'd been a ground technician at the Marsport USSF spaceport, and though she'd been damn competent even as a teenager, and had risen through various supervisory levels to transform every office she'd held, for the subsequent two decades she'd never shown interest in going to higher levels. Since she'd also been their dead brother John's girlfriend, Jack and Joe had stayed in contact with her for some years, but their ineffectual attempts to include her as family had eventually waned and they'd finally just followed her career from afar.

But something in Laurie had changed after the defeat of the Alpha Centaurians in May 2053. Major Laurie Lachrer of USSF Fleet Subsystems had gone to the specialized USSF Medical and Engineering School intending to become one of the elite physician/engineers for the *Typhoon*-class spaceships. To Jack and Joe's astonishment she'd graduated number one in her med school class and in the top three percent of Engineering. That the petite, intense, and quiet red-haired teenager of 2034 would one day become a Harri McNarri or Phil Sperry had been unthinkable, but they both knew that the recently-promoted Colonel Lachrer could eventually outperform both of them. When Joe's physician/engineer had transferred from the *Typhoon III* to another ship in April, Joe had been eager to take on Laurie, even though she hadn't done the usual few years of duty aboard lesser ships.

Laurie was simply amazing. Joe had told him that she was even better than Draka, and that was saying quite a lot. Once again Jack found himself plotting Laurie's rise through the USSF.

*

"Sir, I have a superspace radio transmission from Marsport," Markham called.

"Fine, put it through," Joe said.

"Uh, coded SCUSSF only, sir. I could patch it through to Stateroom One if the Supreme Commander would like to take it there."

"It's okay," Jack said. "We're all cleared here. Just put it through, Sandra."

"Sir, I have Churchill on standby."

"Hello, this is Churchill!"

"Churchill! Hey, how're you doing? This is a surprise," Jack said.

"I'm just fine," said Churchill, or rather, the smooth tenor of the Telepathic Translator. Churchill had long given up any attempt at making his cat mouth work to create anything resembling human speech, but he'd honed his Martian telepathic outradiance to a high degree of verbal complexity over the years, and nobody had any trouble following his thinking. He could certainly understand human speech perfectly, and conversation with the Russian Blue was never a problem unless he needed to talk from a distance by comm or superspace radio. To this end, the Martian Amplified Thought wizard Kner had created the Telepathic Translator which broadcast

Churchill's rigidly-composed thought blocks into human words.

"However," Churchill continued, "I wanted to let you know of a serious shake-up in the Martian government."

"Uh, really?" The Martian government had been a purely ceremonial institution ever since the end of the human-Martian war in '34. When Dar had retired a couple weeks ago, Greeney Gooney had assumed the Emperorship. Greeney had been Provisional Emperor since 2060 anyway, when Dar had indicated he wanted to be the first Martian Emperor to retire rather than die in office, and it was understood by all that the change would be a pleasant little ritual. To speak of a serious shake-up in the Martian government was like speaking of a serious shake-up in Halloween.

"As you know, I was called back from Hellas to assist with G'rea'nyaigu'nye's new Emperorship," Churchill continued. "I was to be his Chief of Staff."

"Right," Jack said, marveling at the Telepathic Translator's ability to pronounce the Emperor's true Martian name, which human colonists had long since mangled to Greeney Gooney. "So how's that going?"

"Well, this is a difficult concept for us Martians, but as of noon today Greeney has been deposed."

"*Deposed?* That's not possible!"

"Well, it's certainly never happened before, at least, not in this way. But Mandy is being very charitable to Greeney. She's even allowed him to live, although one interpretation of a Martian War of Succession is that the deposed Emperor must be shattered immediately. But in this case, Greeney will become Minister of War, and I've agreed to remain as Mandy's Chief of Staff to assure a smooth transition."

Jack was on his feet. "Did you say *Mandy? Mandy Frederick* deposed Greeney? And he's all right with this?"

"Well, I wouldn't characterize him as being *all right*. But the Outradiance of the People confirms Mandy as Empress, and Greeney is determined to make sure that factions don't arise and pollute that outradiance. Mandy is the reincarnation of the ancient Empress Fra'lith, and the people are convinced that it's her destiny to rule."

"But Martians don't *rule* anything. The government is just a formality!"

There was a long pause. "Mandy is convinced that a, shall we say, more *vigorous* government is now necessary."

"Oh my God. But why? Everything was going so smoothly!"

"Well, it has to do with G'rea'nyaigu'nye's enthusiasm for what he calls the New Alpha Centaurian Grid. When he arrived back here to take up the Emperorship, the entire Martian population sensed his enthusiasm, but it must be said that most Martians distrust this concept."

"But I always thought Martians were *fascinated* by this Grid business."

"Well, Greeney certainly is. And many others, such as Kner and myself, if the truth be told. But as I say, new factions have arisen, and the upshot is that Mandy is our new Empress. When will you arrive in Marsport? The Empress and I are eager to see you."

"We're about to set up our first Star Drive back. There was an AC Warp Transfer accident here a few minutes ago. Slowed us down a bit, but we'll be there soon."

"Great! See you soon." Churchill added a meow to end the transmission.

"Well, bye," Jack muttered, sinking back into his chair. "Wow."

Joe met Jack's eyes. "Yeah, really. I know we're not supposed to be political, but--"

"But we are. Don't I know it. God, what else can go wrong today? Is Greeney really out, and

just accepting it like that?”

“Yes, it’s true! I can confirm everything!” came a new voice over the intercom.

“*Draka?* God, how can *you* be listening to this? What’s going *on* today?”