

BOOK TWO OF THE JACK COMMER SERIES

JACK COMMER SUPREME COMMANDER



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Jack Commer, Supreme Commander

Book Two of the Jack Commer Series

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For my wife Nancy

CHAPTER ONE

Jack's Anxiety

Thursday, February 1, 2035, 2336 hours

Jack studied his console and nodded wearily at Joe to his right. "Check."

"Check," his brother muttered from the copilot seat, the window by his head blazing with jagged, multicolored streaks of light. "Drive pressure indicator?"

"Check."

"Check. Okay, that's it for *this* list." Joe clicked his USSF Comm and squinted at the next page, face slack and ashen, mirroring Jack's own exhaustion. "Great, we don't have to do this next page until the Eight-Minute Check."

"Good, we're done with Six. We can use the break." Jack spoke into the intercom: "Connors, we'll be out of Star Drive in eight minutes forty seconds. Be ready to pick up our position."

"Roger," came Will Connors' reply over the intercom. "NAV4 Cluster's set to go the instant we're out of Drive. All preliminary programs--check."

"Check ..." Jack sighed.

"Check," Joe said automatically.

"Damn." Jack punched the intercom again. "All stations, status check."

"Jack, they just reported *in* a half minute ago."

"I just want to make sure." Jack scanned his own comm. "We need to be ready when Eight comes up."

"No, I think you're just too burned out to know what you're doing anymore, and you can't keep still." Joe lay down his comm and closed his eyes. "Me, I'm gonna sit back and enjoy my minute-and-a-half break."

"Radio and radar all clear, everything okay!" Patrick James screeched over the intercom.

"Check ..." Jack muttered. He shut his eyes as well. He considered turning down the harsh white glare of the Control Room lights, but he knew the chaotic stream of starlight outside, jerking in thousands of colors, would make his headache worse. He drifted, and was awakened by:

"Navigation! This is Connors! Everything ready like I just said a second ago!"

"Borman here. Dorsal turret *perfect*."

"Idiot," Jack snorted. They'd all been on board *Typhoon II* for almost twenty hours, and every time Jack had spoken to Borman, the gunner said every instrument in his turret was "perfect." People who thought that everything was perfect were asking for trouble.

"Ventral turret ... office of the physician/engineer ... and chief librarian ... all check out," came Phil Sperry's drawl from the rear of the ship. Jack could picture Sperry upside down in his turret, in his reverse gravity field, a few feet from the Star Drive reactor. "Yep, it's all *perfect*, Admiral."

Jack grinned. "Check." To his right, his brother appeared to be asleep.

"Pod," came the deep female voice from the intercom. "Everything checks out here, Jack. The Martians have calmed down, but not as much as I'd hoped. I thought the freak-out would pass once they'd had a few minutes of the Drive, but Dar says it's wrecking their Thought Fields."

"Well, nothing we can do about it now. Tell 'em to hold on." Jack regretted overriding Amav's suggestion that each Martian be strapped down in his own quarters. Instead he'd listened

to Dar, who'd thought it best if the Martians could sit quietly and meditate in the central recreation room of the saucer-shaped Pod slung beneath the *Typhoon*. All had gone well until the first seconds of Star Drive, when the Martians had begun shrieking, ripping up pillows, and lunging for each other and Amav. She'd exhausted forty tranquilizer darts before Dar, Kner, and Fulr had shown the least sign of settling down. For the last five minutes she'd been alternately counseling them, babying them, and firing drugs into their chests.

Jack shifted uneasily and checked his watch. Thirty seconds to go before the Eight-Minute Check. He didn't like the idea of a Pod attached to his sleek ship in the first place. It was like carting around a fashionable Marsport condominium, with its huge central recreation room, sixteen personal compartments for use by the three Martians and seven humans on the flight, as well as negotiation rooms where, everyone hoped, treaties would be hammered out with the Alpha Centaurians. The saucer had a kitchen, food to last a year, showers, and exercise machines. It also had sixty-four Xon bombs in the lower compartment. These, added to the normal complement of four Xons in the *Typhoon II's* nose, along with the powerful pair of PlanetBlasters mounted on the back and belly of the craft, gave Jack the capability of destroying several solar systems in the course of an eight-hour work day. If negotiations failed.

"Jack!" Amav cried. "I'm running out of darts! Do you think you could spare one of the turret men to come help me with the Martians?"

"Negative! Listen, Amav, I'm sorry if it's hard down there, but we're busy up here ourselves."

"I'll be right over," Sperry called in. His red light came on the Crew Locator Console, indicating movement from his last assigned position. Jack traced the orange dots moving down to the Pod.

"*Dammit*, Phil," Jack hissed. With his old-fashioned chivalrousness, Phil had been easy prey for Amav's silly pleadings throughout this project. She needed help with this, she needed help with that. Jack had been trying to wean her away from dependence on the other crewmembers, but Phil kept offering to do her duties. Why was she making such a fuss over three hyper Martians?

"Hey, Jack, it's okay," Phil spoke over the intercom. "I'll just be gone a second. We can't do anything in the turrets during Star Drive anyway. And we can't let those Martians run amok."

"Yeah, right," Jack snarled. Sperry had been dropping hints for the last few weeks about how hard Jack had been pushing Amav. Now he was implying Jack wasn't concerned for her safety.

"I swear, Dar, I don't want to shoot any more darts at you!" came the cry from below. "But if I have to, I will!"

"You would shoot darts at *me*? The Emperor of the Martians?" came the hysterical shriek.

"Just sit down, Dar, and behave!"

"No! I won't! I won't! I absolutely *refuse*!"

Ka-chuk! Ka-chuk! Ka-chuk!

"Jack, I've got Dar on the floor now, but I'm out of darts! And Kner's starting to froth at the mouth again!"

"C'mon, Amav, cut the dramatics!" Jack shouted. "Just lock 'em in there and get the hell out!"

"Amav!" Sperry cried. "What's going on?"

"I need darts! Thousands of them! These Martians are going berserk!"

"There's a roll of 'em in the auxiliary medical locker," Sperry said. "Some force field

handcuffs'll come in handy as well."

"Oh, thanks, Phil, we just need to hold them a while longer. I'm afraid they'll claw each other to death if we leave them alone!"

"Dammit, dammit, *dammit!*" Jack slapped at the intercom buttons. "All this useless chatter! Wake up, Joe, for God's sake, we've missed the Eight-Minute Check!"

"Hey, Jack, cool it. I've been awake all this time. I'm starting on Eight right now."

Jack snatched up Joe's comm. "Aw, come on, let's cut the crap! Any fool can see everything's okay. I'll be damned if I'll sit here for five minutes checking off these goddamn instruments all over again. Let's just forget this mindless junk!" He mashed the delete button for the checklist and tossed the comm back at Joe. "Okay?"

"Whew."

"Don't act so damn superior."

"Jack, I know we're all tired. But just remember that's all it is. So we've all been up for twenty hours. So what?"

"It was just such poor timing to launch at 2300, and only get into Star Drive just now!"

"Well, you're head of the USSF, brother. Why didn't you change the time?"

"Hell, those damn technicians *forced* me into it."

"C'mon, Jack."

"And if we hadn't had to do that damn interview at 1900!"

Joe shrugged. "Good publicity, I guess. We were already running so far behind that another hour didn't really hurt."

"The hell with it. Forget the whole stupid thing. I hate Star Drive, Joe, I just hate it! I mean, look at all that crap!" He indicated the jagged streaks of light flashing past.

"Look, I know what you mean. I'd rather be seeing normal stars myself. But it's your first Star Drive, after all. Give it time."

"It's your first Star Drive too!" Jack shot back. "And you say *you're* enjoying it?"

Joe shifted in his seat. "Well, I suppose it affects us a little bit like the Martians, but that's no reason to hate the concept of Star Drive. I mean, it's opened up the galaxy to us, after all."

"It's opened up the stinking Alpha Centaurian war, you mean. That's all it's been good for! I'm sick of it! Star Drive is *junk!* Who needs it? We're not ready for the whole galaxy is what I think!"

"Jack, what in the world is the matter with you?"

Jack shook his head. "Hey, Joe, I'm sorry. I really don't know."

"It's the Star Drive. We're all affected by it. You just need to take it easy. You've been worrying yourself sick about this mission for months."

"Well ... maybe."

"And you're probably just a little out of shape for this flight. We all are. We haven't had a real flight in six months. No wonder we're out of shape."

"Yeah, maybe that's a part of it." Shuttling the *Typhoon II* between Earth and Mars, and assisting the Martians with their Amplified Thought program for restoring the earth, certainly didn't count as real spaceflight. In a way Jack had never recovered from the Hergs war eight months ago. Never allowed himself to. The entire crew of *Typhoon I* lost. Their two younger brothers dead.

And all along he'd been thinking he'd been on top of it all.

"Yeah ..." he repeated. "All the stuff that's been going on. Like this USSF thing. Maybe that's been the main thing."

“The whole Supreme Commander business?”

Jack nodded. His promotion to Supreme Commander of the United System Space Force four weeks ago had been dismaying, not only to Jack, but to the entire *Typhoon* crew and thousands of officers who'd been passed over. The only way Jack could deal with it was to joke about being “Admiral Commer” and about how much power he had. His decision to remain in command of the *Typhoon II* and manage the entire USSF bureaucracy via superspace radio during this negotiation mission in Alpha Centauri had further strained his sanity. Jack now held full authority to launch military operations in the name of the United System anywhere in this part of the galaxy, now that Star Drive could theoretically take them to hundreds of neighboring stars. Sure, there was the United System Council that nominally controlled the USSF, but in practice the Council left all military decisions up to the SCUSSF, the Supreme Commander of the USSF. Jack Commer had just become the most powerful human being who'd ever lived.

“Yeah,” Jack sighed. “It's all this USSF stuff. You should see how much paperwork I've got in my locker. I can't believe Scott handed me three dozen notebooks filled with *paper*.”

“Well, he really never used his comm for anything but a glorified telephone,” Joe grinned. “Yeah, I saw you loading all that crap of his in there.”

“And this Star Drive business just seems like more bureaucracy, Joe. You don't feel the ship, for God's sake! You just see these idiotic *lights*.”

“Those are *stars* being distorted by the effects of the Drive.”

“I know what they are! They're *junk*. There's no piloting, Joe. Just tell Connors to plot a course, and bam, fifteen minutes later we're in Alpha Centauri.”

“Well, there'll be time for piloting when we come out of the Drive.”

“But that's also what I'm afraid of. We come out of Drive, and what are we? That's right, we're sitting ducks, going the same speed when we engaged the drive, 4,000 miles per hour. That's *pitiful*. A whole fleet of Centaurians could be on top of us before we get up to speed. If we could do the Drive at one-fifth light, that'd be one thing. But we're really running a risk here, and I don't like it.”

Joe turned to his comm. “Coming up on the Ten-Minute Check.”

“Forget it. Let's just blow that off, okay? We can see full well we don't need a check.”

“Jack, the rules--”

“Forget the rules! I *am* the rules! We've run that check a thousand times today, and it's silly to just do it over and over when we can see exactly what's going on in this ship from the command console.” He waved at his instruments. “Everything's okay!”

“Everything's *perfect*,” Joe mocked.

Jack grimaced. “Okay, okay, I get the point, run the damn list.”

“No, I agree it's stupid. But let's do Fourteen just to make sure, okay?”

“All right. We'll do a Fourteen. I just need to get away from this sense of *bureaucracy* for a while.”

“And I guess it doesn't help anything to have your wife along on the trip.”

Jack straightened up. “No, that has nothing to do with how I'm feeling.”

“C'mon, Jack, you've been all over poor Amav ever since we got on board today. You've been at her for weeks now. Everyone's noticed it.”

“Joe, that's none of your business. Everything between Amav and me is fine. Just fine.”

“Just *perfect*,” Joe repeated. But his brown eyes were filled with concern.

Jack expelled some air. “Yeah, just perfect. I guess. I don't suppose you'd want your latest girlfriend on board. What's her name? Laurel?”

Joe's face darkened. Jack knew Joe only got to see his current flame every three or four weeks on the New Luna run. Laurel was a colonist on Earth's new artificial moon, and Jack had never seen Joe as wrapped up in a woman before. Finally Joe said: "Laurel's wonderful. But I don't think I'd want her on board the *Typhoon*. We'd just drive each other crazy. I wouldn't want to mix work and pleasure like that."

Jack looked at the floor. When he and Amav had married in July, this whole mission had seemed like a metaphor for an open, powerful relationship that Jack would never have believed possible. And now? "Well, you know, I never told anyone this, because I knew if Scott had found out, he might've blocked my promotion. He would've *crucified* me if he'd found out that the real reason I kept delaying this mission was so Amav could finish up her Ph.D. in December."

"You mean," Joe said, "that's the reason for all those delays about the design of the Pod, and how it'd interface with the *Typhoon*, and all those programming updates?"

"C'mon, you know all that was worked out by September. It was just a few simple modifications to an existing design. We could've launched mid-October with no sweat. But Amav couldn't have come. Or she could've, I guess, but God knows when she would've finished her degree." His motives for letting Amav finish her Ph.D. hadn't been entirely selfish. A listing on his ship's roster of "Dr. Amav Frankston-Commer, Planetary Engineer," might look good to the Alpha Centaurians, who'd seen scores of their agricultural worlds laid waste by USSF starships and might clutch at expert help in repairing them.

Joe leaned back and scrutinized his brother. "Jack, that is *awful*. That's like a *sin* against the USSF. You should be ashamed of yourself."

"Really?" Jack blurted. "You really think so? But I didn't mean any harm, really! I mean, really, if you'd only *understand*, Joe."

"I do understand. I understand that you've jeopardized the most important negotiation mission in the history of humanity just so wifey could tag along."

"I ... I ..." Jack looked away. Tears welled up. "God, you're right. Why don't you place me under arrest, then?"

But Joe was cackling in his chair, swiveling wildly. "God! You really fell for it! You really fell for it!"

"Fell ... for what?"

"Fell for it! Hell, Jack, do I care why you held up the flight? Does anybody? Did Scott even? Hell, no! We all knew it would be convenient if the flight was held up till Amav got done. We even thought it would be best if you held it up until after Scott named you SCUSSF. So did Scott, if you really want to know. He told me that if you couldn't start by August, then you should probably wait until you became USSF head in January."

"God, you really think no one cares?"

"Of course no one cares! Jack, you're Supreme Commander! It's entirely up to you when any spaceship in the fleet is launched. Especially your own flagship! The technicians who programmed the 2300 launch would've easily postponed it a few hours to let us get some sleep! If you'd just *ordered* them to!"

"Really? You think? Well, of course they would! You know, Joe, we've been on the *Typhoon* project for what? Seven years now? And I never flinched once from command. Well, between you and me, once or twice, but I can't understand why this USSF thing is *throwing* me so much."

"You're just not used to it all yet. Give it time, and you'll be the best USSF head there ever

will be. I know it.”

“Well, thanks.”

“And look, Jack, it’s not just the USSF thing. Everyone can see it. It’s Amav. Everyone can tell. The two of you don’t belong on the same ship, and you know it.”

“Okay, okay. I guess you’re right. That damned Pod! She *insisted* we have that Pod attached to the ship! It’s so ugly!”

“She was responsible for that? I thought the Council Negotiation Committee wanted the Pod.”

“Hell, no, she knew the Martians would need a lot of space if we dragged ’em along. And she knew she’d need quarters if we dragged *her* along. And she kept saying we had to have a regular place for negotiations with the Centaurians. Well, she was right, I guess, at least about those Martians. I mean, they’re *wimps*, you know?”

“Jack, really,” Joe said in mock consternation.

“Hell, you know it’s true.” Of course, they all loved their Martian friends. It was just that the Martians were so hypersensitive that it was often impossible to speak a single sentence without somehow offending them. And the rigors of space travel, and especially Star Drive, were tearing up the Martians’ fragile central nervous systems.

“And Amav,” Jack went on, “I mean, she’s *everywhere*. I never escape her. And look at what’s coming up. Sure, it’s just a fifteen-minute journey to Alpha Centauri, but it could be *months* of negotiations with the Centaurians. We’ll all be on this ship for *months*. I’m exhausted as it is.”

“It’s been a strain for you, I know. I can see you need a vacation. You’ve been supervising this project and getting the whole USSF bureaucracy in your lap the last few weeks. And I know Amav was on overdrive to finish her degree up the past few months.”

“Vacations,” Jack spat. “They just delude you.”

“Are you kidding? You told me you had the time of your life in July!”

Jack shrugged. That conversation with Joe back in August had been their last serious talk. For six months the brothers had been bantering and superficial. “Well, I meant it then. We spent that whole month in Alaska making plans for solving the whole war in Alpha Centauri in one stroke. But somehow we were totally relaxed the whole time. And I thought, this vacation is a vision of what life could be like. And then, when we got back to work ...” Jack couldn’t bring himself to discuss the mindless arguments, the way Amav manipulated Jack to get her way, the compromises she made to his command. This whole mission definitely had Amav’s stamp on it. *She’d* designed the whole damn thing. *She* was running the show. Jack Commer, Supreme Commander--what a farce.

Jack checked his console. “Dammit, Sperry’s still not back to his turret! And now *Borman’s* out of place! Where’s he going? Can’t we maintain *any* discipline here?”

CHAPTER TWO

Borman

There was a knock on the Control Room hatch, which swung open before Jack or Joe could respond. Lee Borman stood there, a chunky, crew-cut little guy with a toothy smile. "Hello, gents. What happened to the Eight-Minute Check? Or the Ten-Minute Check for that matter," he added, glancing at his watch.

"All right, back to your station, Lee," Jack snapped. "We're blowing off checks until Fourteen."

Borman lounged in the entrance, one hand to the top of the hatch. "Hey, Admiral, that's against the regs."

"Lieutenant, to your turret immediately!"

"Hey, wow, Jack, I mean, *Monsieur Admiral*," Borman said, rolling his eyes.

"He doesn't mean it," Joe offered. "He's tired. We all are."

"But *I* mean it!" Jack shouted, coming out of his chair. "Borman, you pinhead, outa here! Right now! Or so help me God!"

"Whoa, man, remember me, baby? Lee Borman, man, I mean, *Admiral*."

"And you can cut the damn Admiral jokes!"

"Hey, Admiral, like I'm real serious, man," Borman smirked.

By this time Joe was also on his feet. "What's gotten into you, Lee? Get back to your post. Are you crazy?"

"I'm not leaving." Borman folded his arms and braced himself firmly in the hatchway. "Admiral Commer's gone nuts, I see." He flashed Jack a mindless grin. "Buddy, you really *have* been a pain recently."

"Outa my control room! Right now!"

"See, the guy's snapped," Borman said to Joe. "It's my thinking that he needs a little talking to, and he'll be perfectly fine."

"Lieutenant, are you drunk?" Joe said. "Have you been drinking?"

"Why, hell, no, Commander Commer," Borman grinned. "Why do you say that?"

"Because, Lieutenant Borman, you smell of booze, that's why! Jack, I recommend we confine him to the Pod. We can't have this!"

Jack had been staring into Borman's bloodshot eyes for several giddy seconds, and his mind was a whirlpool. He couldn't believe the first-name, close-friends basis of the *Typhoon II* had unraveled like this. Then again, Borman had started it. All this stuff about his turret being perfect, his increasing insolence, and his constant denigrating of Jack's new command. "Borman, go ... go home," Jack said, waving loosely at the back of the ship. He could see down the fifty-foot, brightly-lighted cylinder with the escape craft parked on the floor. The small compartments for sensor, navigation, dorsal weapon turret and other instrumentation ranged down the upper starboard quarter of the cylinder, and Jack saw Patrick James' and Will Connors' legs outside their doors. Abruptly Jack jerked Borman inside and slammed the Control Room hatch. It wouldn't do to have the rest listening to this.

Borman stumbled forward, caught off guard, and sprawled beside Joe's chair.

"Drunk," Jack said in disgust. He'd expected Borman to simply pass out, and so was surprised when Borman staggered to his feet and swung a vicious punch. It came nowhere close, and now Joe had Borman in a hammerlock.

"All right, all right, lemme go. I was just kiddin'," Borman sneered.

“Lee, what the hell has gotten into you?” Jack burst out. “I can’t believe this!”

“Borman, you’re under arrest,” Joe said, struggling to keep Borman in place. But Borman wasn’t seriously resisting.

“Belay that. Borman, you are *not* under arrest. Joe, let him go.”

“But, Jack--”

“Forget it. We can’t waste time on this. All right, Lee, I want a simple explanation of your behavior and I want it right now. I’m sorry if I was irritable and I’m sorry if it set you off. But you do realize that as captain of this ship I have the right to be irritable with anyone on board.”

“Except wifey, I presume,” Borman said, getting to his feet and making exaggerated motions of dusting himself off.

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“C’mon, Jack, everyone knows you’re uptight about Amav being on board. The whole ship’s suffering as a result. It’s *hell* working with you, man. And ever since you became Monsieur Hotshot Admiral SCUSSF, you’ve been *really* intolerable.”

“Jack, we just cannot have this! On board the *Typhoon*, in wartime!” Joe cried, hand on his shattergun. Jack waved him away. God, that it had come to this flare-up, over nothing. This was the most ill-conceived mission Jack had ever done. But he forced himself to go through the motions of acting like a ship’s captain. Somebody had to clean this mess up. Might as well be Jack.

“Borman, I’m going to overlook this transgression this time,” Jack said. “In the future, I will expect you to treat myself, my position, and everyone on board this ship with the dignity that our mission requires.”

“Aw, forget it, dude!” Borman hooted. “We all just wanna go back to the nice, informal way we had it before. Before all this *crap* started.”

“That will not be possible, Lieutenant,” Jack said coldly. “We are in a new era.”

“We are in a new era,” Borman said in a singsong.

Jack exhaled. Joe had abandoned the discussion to check his console. It reminded Jack that this little flap had best be gotten over with in a hurry.

And yet the sight of Borman, swaying back and forth, obviously plastered, made Jack want to delve right into the complicated mess at full throttle. “I assume, Lieutenant, that your little revolt here has something to do with my refusal to allow the turrets full freedom of shooting?”

“Aw, Jack, you are such a tight little twit.”

Joe twisted around and glared. But he wasn’t about to speak for Jack again.

Jack sighed. Borman, who’d been a sensational turret gunner in Alpha Centauri, had been itching for PlanetBlaster action for months. During his four-month stint in 2033, Borman had shot down a record 4,068 enemy spacecraft and had made the cover of *Mars Magazine*. On the little three-man fighters, neither the pilot nor the navigator had any say about when and what to fire at. The turret man in effect commanded the ship, using his medium-barrel PlanetBlaster to burn whatever he felt necessary. So it grated on Borman when Jack had ordered that the *Typhoon*’s oversized PlanetBlasters, the most powerful lasers humanity had developed, be kept strictly under Jack’s control. Not only had this been Jack’s rule aboard the *Typhoon I*, but the *Typhoon II* was now officially engaged on a peace mission. Sperry, the other turret man, hadn’t cared. He’d done a three-month training hitch in AC a year ago, and though he’d destroyed 555 enemy craft, he never developed Borman’s bloodlust. And here was Borman itching to burn entire enemy fleets with one sizzle of his giant dorsal turret gun, or evaporate planetary oceans in seconds and watch the crust beneath melt like a giant pizza.

"I don't care about your damn order," Borman said. "I know if I see an AC I'll probably just whip the gun around in total reflex action, man. Vaporize the wimps. That's how I survived before. I didn't wait for some pansy pilot to make my decisions for me."

"Lieutenant Borman, if I seriously thought you were to disobey my PlanetBlaster order I would not hesitate to use my shattergun on you this second." He probed for fear in Borman's eyes, got the barest flicker. If only Borman, or any of the *Typhoon II* crew, knew of yet another innovation the *Typhoon II* possessed over the destroyed *Typhoon I*: the anti-personnel lasers mounted in all compartments, in the turrets, even in the Control Room. A touch of Jack's USSF Comm could fry Will Connors right now if he so desired. Or Borman here, though Jack would have to hit the floor quickly to avoid being charred himself. The paranoid designers of the *Typhoon II* had worried about mutiny. Well, Jack thought grimly, maybe they were right. God, could it really be that the Star Drive was doing this to them? Changing them into surly animals?

"Commer," Borman growled. "You must think you're a real he-man. You think because you've got such a hot broad that you're a real stud."

"Jack, I really recommend we lock this guy up right now," Joe said, turning. "We're about a minute from Fourteen now, and we can't afford this."

"Shut up, wimp. This is between Jocko and me."

"After this mission, Borman, you and me--neural stunners, plutonium knives, shatterguns, you name it. I'll take you on anywhere, anytime," Joe said beneath his breath, turning back to his work.

"Jerk," Borman muttered. "I just want you idiots to know that I came up here because, see, I know how to help Jack with his masculine inferiority complexes. I could cure him, and fast, and we wouldn't have to worry about this Amav chick screwing up the mission."

"Borman, that is my *wife* you're referring to!" Jack snarled.

"C'mon, Jack, everyone knows how badly she's blown this mission. And how you can't take it."

"How? How in blazes does everyone know that?"

"You jerk! Everyone can hear it!" Borman pointed to Jack's command station. Jack stared in dismay. The intercom to the rest of the ship was on. Everyone had heard everything. He ran to the switch. At least the Pod intercom had been switched off, but the rest of the crew in the *Typhoon* proper had heard his whole conversation with Joe. Amav. Deceiving Scott. The Ph.D. Everything. He whirled to the plastered turret gunner. "Borman, you are hereby under arrest!" To his consternation Jack found his shattergun in hand, drawing a bead on Borman's thick ugly red nose. This time Borman raised his eyebrows.

"Say, Jack," Joe said. "I'm getting a low reading on Power Thruster Six. It's not too bad, but the heat--"

"Forget it!" Jack said. "This guy's under arrest! I won't have him insulting Amav like that!"

"But can't you see, Jack, that's your whole *problem*, man," Borman began babbling, eyes locked onto the shattergun. "You've always been so *repressed* around women that you've let this Amav take over your sense of *self-esteem*. If you'd only *actualize* your *potential*, Jack, and learn to recognize those parts of yourself which--"

"So you've sobered up pretty fast, Lieutenant," Jack mocked. "Back to your self-help clichés, I see." Unbelievably, Borman had recently gotten a publisher's contract for a self-help book for men called *The Sexual Conquest of Your Inner Mount Everest*. To the entire crew's chagrin, he'd printed paper copies for everyone. Jack had read part of one chapter entitled "Finding your F-Spot" and had thrown the thick manuscript away.

That a chunky fighter veteran of the Alpha Centauri conflict was writing self-help books on the subject of male sexuality was beyond the comprehension of any of the crew, and it had only come out haltingly, over a period of months, that the other five members of *Typhoon II* admitted that they'd thrown their manuscripts away unread. But Borman had become more and more egotistical about his book as the mission got closer to launch date. He'd even given copies to Amav and the three Martians. Amav never said a word. Dar had briefly commented: "You humans are one million years behind us."

"Okay, Jack, just--okay," Borman swallowed. "We all have our hang-ups. I know I did, once. But I *learned*, Jack. I went *inside* myself, I took the *dare*, and I climbed my *own* Mount Everest! I'm here today to tell you that if you'd only climb *yours*--"

"Getting sorta nervous, Lee baby?" Jack sneered. "You're kinda thinking that old Jack boy's just crazy enough to turn you into a pile of broken glass? Huh? Huh? Well, Lee baby, maybe I am that crazy. Maybe I am." It was so exciting to hold a gun on the criminal Borman. To feel his finger caressing the trigger with mounting pressure. For once everyone would know exactly how Jack could express himself. Fully and finally express himself. God, it felt so good, such a sweet release of all the hate and tension and anger and fear--

"Jack! You can't!" Borman cried, looking down the barrel of the shattergun. "Jack! For God's sake! We're *friends*, old buddy!"

At last Jack had the look in Borman's eyes that he wanted. "I'd like to remind you of one thing, Lee baby. I know you climbed Everest back in '25, way before the Final War. But you stand there, thinking I won't pull this trigger and rid my ship of a traitor during wartime, and you forget ... how that war ended."

"Jack, that Thruster Six pressure drop doesn't look so good. And where the hell's Sperry?" Joe said. "Sperry! Get out of the Pod! Thruster Six is critical!"

"Joe! Buddy! This guy's insane!" Borman moaned. "Help me!"

"We're past Fourteen. Pressure on Six down to 12.3."

"Joe!" Borman screamed.

"You forget how the Final War ended! Don't you?" Jack hissed.

"No! No! I didn't forget! I do know! I admit I'm drunk! Yeah, I got drunk! I couldn't handle the Star Drive, Jack! I couldn't! I'm sorry!"

"You forgot how the war ended when you wrote the stupid title of your stupid book! Didn't you, traitor? Answer me--traitor!"

"I--I was trying to answer the *absence* of ... oh God!"

"I dropped the Xon bomb on the Central Asians! I dug the damn crater a hundred miles deep! There's no Mount Everest anymore, Lee baby! No Himalayas, no India, no Persia, not much of China! It's all gone, baby! And why? Why? I'll tell you why! Because Jack Commer was crazy enough to go through with it! It was the only way, Lee baby. Scott gave me the order, and I swallowed long and hard, but we had to do it. Had to drop the Xon. Had to do it, Lee baby, you hear me?"

"Yeah, God, yeah ... Jack, *please!*"

"And so you do realize, Lee baby, that I'm crazy enough to follow through on my threats?"

"Jack--*please!*"

"I'm crazy enough to blow Everest to blazes! I'm crazy enough to shatter you all over the floor! I've never liked you, Borman! Never!"

The Control Room hatch snapped open. Sperry stood there, six-five, his dark hair flying in all directions, his deep-set eyes wild.

“Sperry! Number Six!” Joe grunted.

“Get back! Get back!” Jack screamed, waving his shattergun.

“He’s gonna execute me!” Borman whimpered.

“I know! I heard it all back in the ship!” Sperry cried. “Jack, just get back!”

“You can’t order me around, mister!” Jack shouted.

“Pressure 6.9 and dropping!” Joe called.

“Are we gonna black-hole? Are we gonna black-hole?” came a shout from down the fuselage.

“Jack! Get a hold of yourself! It’s Star Drive!” Sperry shouted. “It’s just tension and moodiness! Let’s laugh it off, Jack! For God’s sake, Joe, hit the thruster *reverse feed!*”

“Dammit, Phil, why aren’t you down at your post?” Joe yelled back. “We’re twenty seconds from coming out of Star Drive and Number Six is *toast!*”

“Amav had trouble with the damned Martians! I had to deal with them!”

“That’s insane, Sperry! Insane! Dereliction of duty! Dereliction of duty!” Jack screamed. “You’re under arrest! You and everybody else aboard this ship! I won’t have you knowing *anything* about Amav!”

He raised his shattergun at Sperry. But from the corner of his eye Jack saw a metal plate bursting loose from an assembly at the rear of the ship. It tumbled end over end down the fuselage toward them. A muffled explosion followed.

CHAPTER THREE

Star Drive at 14:46

Despite the shock of Jack waving the shattergun in his face, Phil knew instantly what had happened.

The stars were pinpoints of light again. "The Drive! Joe, what's the pressure?"

"Zero. All thrusters out," Joe replied. "Number Six took down the other nine."

"My God! Sperry! Are we leaking air?" Jack cried, pointing to a cloud of gray gas in the fuselage.

"Jack, put that thing away!" Phil shouted, pointing to Jack's gun.

"No! *Borman's* here! My God! The air!"

"It's just gas to put out any fires! If we were leaking air, we'd have lost all of it by now!"

Jack straightened and holstered his shattergun. He looked out the windows. "So we're out of Drive," he said in disgust.

"Moving 4,000 miles per hour," Joe said. "Same as we started."

"Out of Star Drive," came Connors' call from the Navigation Room. "I'm plotting our location now."

"Dammit!" Jack spat. "Sperry, why the hell did your damn engine have to screw up like this?"

Phil turned and made his way down the corridor to the engine. He'd had enough nonsense for one day. Jack was in another of his damn moods. Maybe was just the Star Drive anxiety that hit everyone on board. Now that they were out of the Drive, Phil felt a lot better himself. You always forgot how bad it was. Phil had done it seven times before, but he'd never really gotten used to it.

The vacuums had already sucked up the fire-extinguishing gas, but as far as Phil could see there'd been no fire, just that huge plate blown off. Phil crouched in front of the Star Drive assembly and tried to think. Probably Number Six's pressure had backed up in the main power blower unit, and when that burst, the hyper accelerator piston had been flung through the resonance chamber, taking out the other primary thrusters and ripping off the chamber's cover plate. Phil was glad he'd come out of the Pod hatchway thirty seconds before the engine blew, as the heavy cover plate would've killed anyone it struck. As the entire crew descended on him, he noticed, with all the others, that the plate was embedded in the twisted remains of the escape craft's engines. "Damn ..."

"At least it didn't punch through the side of the ship, Phil," Joe said. "Besides, an escape craft isn't of much use in interstellar space."

"Connors, you find out where we are yet?" Jack demanded.

"Uh, no, Jack," said the slender, fair-haired Connors. "I've got the computer working on it."

"Well, get back up there and stick with it. If there are any problems, I want you on top of them instantly."

"Well, the computer's constantly checking it."

"Move it! You, too, James. Start monitoring any communications in this area. But we're not making any distress calls, got that?"

Those two moved to their stations. "Everyone wants to gawk like a buncha stupid jerks," Jack complained, glancing at everyone he deemed unauthorized viewers of the mishap. But besides Phil, only Borman and Joe were left. Phil could feel Jack's impatience burning onto his back as he inspected the half-melted gears in the resonance chamber. He'd heard Jack's fight

with Borman over the intercom, and it hadn't been exactly Phil's idea of how top command operated. As far as he was concerned, Jack, Joe, and Lee were all unwanted at the engine.

"Yeah, it was Number Six all right," he said. "It backed up into the main blower. I would say the weakest point in the whole Star Drive design."

"The whole thing was stupid from the beginning," Jack said. "The *Typhoon* was always supposed to be a sublight *fighter-bomber*, not a damn Star Drive freighter! We could've *ferried* her over last July with no problem."

Phil was silent, poking with a screwdriver at various hot pieces of metal.

"Dammit, Sperry, did you hear me?"

Phil turned around. "Yeah, I heard you, man."

"I don't like the tone of your voice, Major."

Phil stood up. He was four inches taller than Jack. "Admiral, I don't like your tone, either. Would you please calm down? Can we all please go back to a first-name basis?"

"You're just like Borman here! A laggard, and undisciplined!"

"Dammit, Jack, would you grow up? You're a space captain, for God's sake! And you're head of the USSF! So why are you acting like a child?"

"I'm not acting like a child, damn you!"

Everyone went silent. Phil exchanged a glance with Borman, who shrugged. Joe inspected the floor. Sure, nobody had liked Lee's habit of getting sloshed the past few weeks, but Jack was definitely carrying things way too far, threatening Lee with a shattergun, then waving it at Phil himself.

"Would you mind explaining to me, Major Sperry," Jack snarled, "why your Thruster Six decided to blow, and why you were not at your station to tend to it?"

"Dammit, Jack! You blew off the Eight-Minute Check, the Ten-Minute Check, and the Fourteen-Minute Check! If you'd done your job properly we could've caught this in plenty of time! Plenty of time! I can't do a damn thing about the thruster pressures unless I have the data from the checks! Dammit to hell, Jack!"

"You were in the Pod, ignoring my orders to stay with your engine! You were helping Amav!"

"She needed it! We had to lash those Martians down to the coffee tables!"

"The hell she needed help! Because of your actions, Sperry, we're marooned in deep space!"

"We're *not* marooned. It was just Star Drive that blew. The Augmented Nuke is fine. We still have one-fifth light capability. Our internal systems--air pressure, artificial gravity--are fine. We've got full electrical power. We're okay."

"Joe, prepare court-martial papers for Major Sperry here. And for Lieutenant Borman as well."

"Jack, you can't just court-martial the guy," Joe said. "Even if he wasn't at his post, it was really just an honest mistake. He was doing what he thought--"

"He was doing what he thought with my *wife*! I told him to leave her be!"

"Hoo-boy," Phil said. "Jack, you are really--"

Jack's hand was again on his shattergun.

"God, I thought it was just the Star Drive making him edgy," Borman commented. "But he really *is* nutso."

"Joe, are those court-martial papers ready yet?"

"*Jack ...*" Joe pleaded.

"Then consider yourself confined to the Pod. Draw up court-martial papers for yourself as

well.”

Connors and Patrick James clambered down the ladder from the catwalk and stood by them again. “Here’s our position,” Connors said, handing Jack his own comm.

“No radio signals detected,” James added. “We’re in the middle of nowhere.”

“*Dammit ...*” Jack muttered. He distractedly scanned Connors’ USSF Comm, then handed it to Joe.

At that moment Amav appeared along with the three Martians. Dar, the tallest, with the largest back fin, gave Phil a wide crinkly smile.

“Dar! I see you’re feeling better!” Phil said. Of course, all seven humans could easily read the minds of Dar, Kner, and Fulr. The jagged patterns of suicidal anguish had been replaced with the serene mathematical beauty of Martian thought. As he stared into Dar’s unlidged, two-inch-wide eyes, Phil was filled with empathy for the terror the Martians had undergone in Star Drive. He also understood their embarrassment upon recovery. Phil pulled back to survey all three Martian minds. The effect was that of hearing three radio stations at the same time, all playing eighteenth-century chamber music, but different works, different composers. But you could tune into one or the other as you wished.

Phil still couldn’t believe he was standing here drawing on the mental resources of beings over a thousand years old. How could he allow himself to be dragged under by Jack’s petty anger?

And there was Amav. God, she was lovely. Tall, slender, just turned twenty-two, with that long dark hair, those luscious brown eyes, that perfect figure in a tight red jumpsuit. Why did Jack scorn her? Why did he act as if she were a burden? How could she be a burden? Every minute Phil had spent in her company the past few months had been ecstasy.

It had only been a month and a half since Phil realized he loved her. It had been at Jack’s promotion party at Marsport USSF headquarters, and it had also been Amav’s birthday. She sipped wine with Phil as the late afternoon Martian sunlight had filtered through the window and gone clear through her transparent blouse. God, how he’d ached for that perfect womanly body.

And after the party, when he was alone, heading for his car in the parking lot, he’d turned to catch the sun reflecting off the crimson sides of the United System Building. The beauty of that light was still fresh in his mind, the late afternoon sunlight on that rocky, empty, silent alien world. Their new home, Mars. And he’d told himself: *I love Amav.*

And dammit, ever since December 8th he’d struggled to deny that he was in love with this beautiful, sexy, delightful woman. As Jack stood in front of the Star Drive engine, clearly exasperated at the arrival of the entire crew, Phil gave Amav a little nod and received her little smile.

Could she possibly feel the same way? How could that be? She’d just married Jack in July. Incredible whirlwind romance, so everyone had said. And when those two were hitting it off, they seemed damn good together. And Jack had been a good friend for years. He was their leader, after all. How could Phil doubt his friendship, even if Jack was in this pissy mood?

He had to admit it. It was Jack that Amav loved. It was just that she was so friendly and open with everyone. Well, except maybe Borman. Somehow those two had irritated each other from the beginning. But in any case, it had to be that Phil was simply misinterpreting her natural good will.

Phil inspected the Star Drive. He’d been in love before, a couple of times, in his thirty years, but never like this. But hell, he wasn’t supposed to be saying it was really love. Then what was it? Mere sexual desire? He stole another glance at Amav’s breasts, her legs, her eyes. No, it

wasn't just sex. Phil closed his eyes.

"The question is, where the hell are we?" Jack said. "This pile of crap here doesn't tell me much, Will." He snatched Connors' USSF Comm back from Joe and flipped it into Will's face. Will barely caught it. Phil was relieved that Jack at least had gone back to first names.

Will picked up on this gratefully as well, his former irritated, sardonic manner morphing into puppy-like devotion to Jack.

It was damn uncanny how Jack could turn that quality on and off in people. Hell, Phil could feel Jack doing it to him right now.

"Well, Jack," Will said, "it looks like we're about four months out of the Centaurian system."

"Four *months*?"

"God, man, are you kidding?" Borman put in.

"Quiet, Lee," Phil said gently, hoping to preserve the newfound civility.

"Four months at one-fifth light," Connors said, scanning his comm. "One hundred twenty-two days. Assuming that we can't get the Star Drive repaired. And I assume we can't," he added, looking over the shattered drive unit.

Phil shrugged. "You assume right. This thing is *totaled*."

"Four *months*?" Amav said. "Will, are you sure you calculated it right?"

"I can't believe this!" Jack fumed.

Will turned to Amav. "Well, you do know that Alpha Centauri is 4.3 light years from Sol."

"Well, sure."

"Which is 25.278 *trillion* miles," Will explained.

"*Oh*."

"I knew that," Jack snapped. "You'd think your average planetary engineer would, too."

"I do know it!" Amav protested. "It's just that we don't normally think in those terms."

"In any case, Star Drive allows us to make that in fifteen minutes," Will went on. "You could think of it as a little over 101 trillion miles per hour, but of course Star Drive's not actually traveling in normal space."

"Skip the lectures, Will," Jack said. "She doesn't need to understand any of that."

Amav opened her mouth, then shut it. Will punched more commands into his comm and eagerly continued: "If we traveled the entire distance to Alpha Centauri at our normal one-fifth light speed, it would take 21.5 years. So each minute we're in Star Drive is actually worth 1.4333 years at normal cruising speed."

"Crap! Crap!" Jack said.

"Star Drive failed at 14:46 into the journey. We needed just fourteen seconds to complete it."

"*Dammit!*" Jack fumed. "Fourteen *seconds*? Sperry, couldn't this piece of crap have held another *fourteen seconds*?"

But everyone ignored Jack, waiting for Will to spell it out. "The upshot is that, even with just fourteen seconds left, we still have 393.2 *billion* miles to go to Alpha Centauri. And that's 122.15 days at one-fifth light. Four months."

"Dammit to hell," Jack muttered, holding out his hand for the comm, which Will meekly turned over. Jack scanned it for a few seconds, finally entering some figures of his own. "*Dammit*," he repeated, flipping it back to Will. "We were just too tired to be launching that late. We've all been on this ship twenty damn hours. Nobody can think straight. Then the damn Star Drive hit." He smacked a fist into his palm. "If the goddamn *media* hadn't held us up!"

“Hell, that came in the middle of the Arkonsky Relay glitch,” Joe said. “We were all sitting around twiddling our thumbs by that point anyway.”

“Huey Vespertine!” Jack spat. “That traitorous slob! Why did I ever agree to that? He *shamed* us during the Hergs war, and now *this*.”

“Why’d you let him? It was almost as much a disaster as when he interviewed us on the *Andromeda* last year.”

“Hell, I guess I was trying to make amends, get some good publicity, I don’t know.”

Phil, involved with USSF technicians on the Star Drive’s Arkonsky force field problem, had missed all but the last couple minutes of the corpulent Vespertine’s AresNet interview, by which time Jack was screaming on AresNet that his old Naval Academy buddy, who’d been slickly prophesying doom for the *Typhoon*’s peacekeeping mission to Alpha Centauri, was a vile traitor who should be *exterminated*. Jack’s contrite apology, extorted by Huey live to the entire United System, hadn’t helped matters. The Supreme Commander of the USSF should *not* have excused himself by saying “It’s been a long day, and I guess we’re all a little stressed.”

“Hell, half the interview was Huey ruminating about what a piece that new wife of his is,” Borman said. “I’d sure like to see a 3-D holo of the lady. Preferably the way Mr. Vespertine likes to see her.” He jerked at Amav’s glare. “Uh, sorry.”

Joe shrugged. “She sure keeps herself out of the media. But I can’t figure out why Huey still has to slobber on and on about her on every newscast. Hell, they’ve been married half a year, you’d think the thrill had worn off by now.”

“Joe!” Amav mocked. “Maybe they’re really in love!”

Love. Phil sighed. Amav knew about love, and passion, and keeping it alive through marriage. Could a traitor like Huey Vespertine have something to teach them all about passion? Or did Amav have something to teach *Phil* about passion?

“Sperry,” Jack barked, “is the Star Drive really unrepairable?”

Phil shook his head. “Sorry, Jack. I could repair the unit myself, if I had parts. The thrusters are okay, but I’d need a new main blower, a new hyper piston, and a new resonance chamber, not to mention the cover plate and a host of minor parts.”

“Don’t we stock those?”

“We should have, Jack. I’m sorry. Nobody thought this would happen.”

Jack frowned, but to Phil’s relief didn’t burst into fresh diatribes. “Okay. Let me think. Four months. Can we handle that? Do we have food?” As Phil nodded, Jack paced. “Okay. We need to get to Station One. We should’ve been there five minutes ago, according to the superspace message we radioed there at the Six-Minute Check. I only hope they don’t conclude we’ve been shot down and launch some new offensive.”

“It could’ve been worse,” Connors said. “Let’s say Star Drive had gone out, say, ten minutes in, or two-thirds of the way.” He punched at his comm. “At one-fifth light speed, this would’ve left 7.1659 *years* to--”

“Okay, okay, Will, we get the damn point. That sort of speculation won’t do any good.”

“Thank God it came near the end,” Amav said. “Maybe we can get the Star Drive repaired at Station One.”

“Yeah, but what do we do if we finally get there and discover it’s been blown to nothing? Then we’re up the creek.” Jack kept pacing. “Hell, we’ve got to do it, I guess.”

“Four damn months,” Borman muttered. “Cooped up like goddamn *animals*.”

“We’ll deal with it,” Jack snapped. “We have to.” He looked up and down the craft, at the smashed escape ship, at the blown Star Drive. Phil thought he detected a new cockiness in Jack’s

eyes. Yeah, Jack had probably felt a fifteen-minute Star Drive to another solar system was just a boring commuter trip. Now he had his sublight power and control again. Now he knew he could maneuver, he could see the stars, he could shepherd his ship through danger.

“Okay, first we need to send a superspace message to Station One,” Jack said, then frowned.

Phil didn’t have to elaborate for Amav’s benefit, but Patrick James went ahead: “Superspace radio uses Star Drive, Jack.”

“Yeah.” Jack blew out some air. “Phil, any possibility of repairing just the superspace radio?”

Phil shook his head. “I’m sorry, Jack. We have to be *in* superspace to send a superspace message. Unless we have one of those huge superspace modules like back at USSF HQ.”

“Okay. Okay. First of all, we’ll do a thorough inspection of the ship. And we’ll test the Augmented Nuke before we open it up any faster. That explosion may have damaged something, never can tell. Phil, I want you to make sure the Star Drive is completely dismantled before we do another thing. I want the force field shut *down*.”

“No problem, Jack. The computer’s already done that for us. If it hadn’t, the loss of pressure would’ve black-holed us instantly.”

“Then we’d *really* be nowhere,” Patrick James put in.

Jack grimaced. “Pat, I want you to be on special lookout for Centaurian spacecraft. I know we’re a few months out of their territory, but you can’t be too sure.”

Pat took a sharp breath. So did Connors. Phil shared that feeling.

Only Will, Pat, Lee, and Phil had actually fought in Alpha Centauri, and Lee probably had to be discounted, as he’d turned the whole experience into a scoring game. But did anyone think Phil enjoyed his own turret experience? That he enjoyed taking life? Hell, here he was, an M.D., trained to use world-wrecking PlanetBlasters.

James and Connors shared that horror. Connors was the only person here who’d flown one-man fighters in combat, the only true fighter pilot among them. He’d been good, no doubt about it, 2,500 kills over a year’s time. He looked a lot older than his twenty-seven years. The last month of his combat tour, which he’d spent marooned on an asteroid after he’d been shot down, had added to those years on his face, and was probably the reason he was now the *Typhoon’s* navigation officer rather than a pilot.

Patrick James had also been through Alpha Centauri, though he wasn’t a gunner like Borman or Phil. But as a computer technician James had proven his courage, and probably more importantly, his ability to hold his mind together, as he repaired complex systems under soul-shattering combat conditions.

Jack and Joe had never been to Alpha Centauri. They’d been damn brave in the Hergs war, but they were going to be shocked at the scale of combat in Alpha Centauri. Sure, when they dropped the Xon and ended the Final War, they’d killed more human beings than anybody in history. But that was just push-button combat. Still, Phil marveled that either of them had held together in the face of what they’d been ordered to do.

“Phil,” Jack said, crouching down beside Phil at the engine, “do we still have cloaking technology?”

Phil consulted a panel. “Sure do. Of course, if we use it all the way in it’ll slow us down some.”

“We’ll use it as the need arises. All right, men, back to your posts.”

“Uh ... Jack?” Borman stepped up after Joe, Pat, and Will left, ducking his head at Amav and the Martians as if wished them away as well. But nobody took the hint.

“Yeah, what is it, Lee?”

“God, Jack, I’m sorry for how I acted back there. I didn’t really get, you know, drunk. I just had a sip or two, and all of a sudden the damn Star Drive hit.”

Then Jack’s charisma unfolded. It was always a dizzying experience, it broke down your resistance, and you forgot the tyrannical Jack. You only knew you’d follow this honest, experienced man anywhere. Jack looked Borman sternly in the eye, then grinned. “What the hell, Lee, we were both out of our gourds! I had no idea Star Drive could hit you like that!”

“Well, the more times you do it, it gets a little easier to take,” Borman said, warming, in his dull way, to Jack’s fire. “This was my ninth time, so I had some warning.”

“Hell, Lee, look, I’ve heard that lots of people’s nerves get a little unsteady during Star Drive. It’s nothing to be ashamed about. Just don’t try the booze again. Ask Sperry here for a couple tabs of DreamGlaze.”

“Well, sure, Jack, I, uh, I sure am sorry.”

Jack clapped an arm around Borman. “Don’t worry about it, Lee. Like you were saying in your book, we men have got to stop acting so macho. If our nerves get unsteady during Star Drive, it’s no crime! We can admit it! Next time I’m gonna get a few tabs of DreamGlaze myself. I had no idea the Drive packed that much wallop!”

Borman grinned. “Well, I guess I’ll be gettin’ to my turret now.”

“Right. If Phil here needs some help, you can probably be of assistance. Phil, call Lee here if you need any help.”

“Right,” said Phil. He was happy. They were a family again. He didn’t even mind when Jack moved off with his arm around Amav, hairy hand slapping her tight round bottom. Then Phil noticed that part of this feeling of universal benevolence came from the Dar symphony at full volume, uncluttered by other stations now that Kner and Fulr had returned to the Pod. The rest of the crew was off checking the first items on the Standard Inspection List. Dar was regal in his golden Martian Elder’s Robe. “Hello,” Dar beamed straight into Phil’s head.