

BOOK THREE OF THE JACK COMMER SERIES

NONPROFIT CHRONOWAR

MICHAEL D. SMITH



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of the Jack Commer Series

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For my wife Nancy

CHAPTER ONE
The Committee
Friday, May 5, 2028

Joe Commer lurched into hard wood, legs buckling.

“Jackie! God, *Jackie!*” He clutched at the angled wood and it was like sliding off a roof. Why was he falling? Was he going to throw up? No, that was shameful, this woman was *giving* herself to him, he had to steady himself, had to get *control*.

He fought for air. His mouth fell open. His fingers dug into polished wood. Why was he on his feet? How did he get so heavy? Had Jackie fallen off the bed? He had to be out of his mind.

Joe focused on a vast auditorium of expectant, puzzled faces. Midday sun surged through tall arched windows. Beyond, expanses of empty prairie. Blue sky.

“*Oh my God!*” His heart shot to six hundred beats a minute. “*What’s going on?*”

“How’d that clown get in here?”

“I don’t know! I just looked up, and he was *there!*”

“Are you--are you talking about *me?*” Joe said. He grasped the sides of a *lectern*. He stood at a *lectern*. He could hardly move. His fingers were weak. His legs were wobbly chunks of cement.

“Excuse me, sir, you’ll have to take your seat in the audience,” said a young man in a green polo shirt striding up the stairs to the wide podium, where Joe stood in front of hundreds of people.

“*No!*” Joe shouted, waving him off. “Where’s *Jackie?*”

“Where’d he get that silly red costume?” someone snickered.

“Uh, sir? We’re set to start with our first speaker,” Polo Shirt said.

“*I’m in USSF uniform!*” Joe cried. “I swear to God a second ago I was completely naked!”

This got a laugh from the audience. How could there be an *audience?* Joe raised a fist. “Get back! Or so help me God! I must be *insane!* She was *with* me! God, if you only knew how impossible I always thought that would be!” More laughter. An entire auditorium *laughing*. Joe caught sight of a sign at the far end of the hall: CTESOPE. “Oh, my God, this can’t be true! This can’t be happening!”

“Sir ...” pleaded Polo Shirt.

“Because if this is what I think it is--”

“He’s drunk!” someone cried.

“Ranna, we may need to call the police,” Polo Shirt quavered.

“Nonsense!” a voluptuous woman with brick-red hair called up from below as she passed out papers. “Just get a couple guys up there and toss him out. He doesn’t even have a name badge. How’d he get in here?”

“I don’t know, Ranna!”

Joe sized up Polo Shirt. Maybe the same age as Joe. Redhaired like the woman, but strawberry blond, and slender and fragile. No threat to Joe, who at thirty-one was in peak physical condition. But where were these jerks this Ranna woman seemed to think would take care of him? Instinctively he felt for the pistol in his holster: standard-issue Martian shattergun. Polo Shirt blanched.

“Look, it’s okay!” Joe said. “I don’t know how it got there either! I don’t know what’s going on! I had to turn in my gun when I quit the USSF. But somehow I’m wearing the uniform again!”

“Sir, it really is time to take your seat,” the Ranna woman said. Joe met her brown eyes. She was older than he’d first thought, a mature woman, in command. Joe instinctively distrusted her. “Urside, just come on down,” she ordered. “He’ll leave in a second.”

“Ranna, he’s got a *gun*,” Urside squeaked. The audience gasped.

“Hey, look! It’s all right!” Joe said. “It’s okay! I won’t shatter anybody!” He drew the weapon. “See? It’s just a Martian shattergun. No big deal.”

“God, someone call the police,” Ranna whispered as the first few rows of people began spilling out of their chairs.

“No, I can explain! I can see you’re freaked out! But look at me! A second ago I was--” At this point Joe decided he didn’t need to share the story of how he and Jackie had finally come to bed. He peered at the CTESOPÉ sign. “God, maybe it’s true. Maybe I really *did* it.” He turned to Polo Shirt on his way down the stairs. “Don’t be afraid. Your name’s Urside?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“I think I have an explanation. Maybe. This auditorium--is this the 2028 CTESOPÉ conference? Really? Could it be? Am I pronouncing it correctly? Suh-TESS-ope?”

“Of course this is the CTESOPÉ conference!” Ranna snapped. “And you’re wrecking our schedule! Dr. Norsen is supposed to talk about the animal disturbances.”

“The animal disturbances! I was reading about them! And would that explain why this cat is up here with me?” Joe pointed to a Russian Blue jumping onto the lectern and trotting across a manuscript titled *Animal Disturbances and Their Effect upon the TropoEcoMind*. Blue cat eyes peered deeply into Joe.

“Churchill, get down from there! He has nothing to do with anything! Why are you here, why are you armed, and why are you disturbing our conference?”

“You! You’re the organizer of CTESOPÉ! I read about that!” Churchill folded his paws and settled atop *Animal Disturbances*. Joe scanned the audience. There were numerous cats in people’s laps. Outside the arched windows a dozen more prowled in the grass.

“Can’t you ... won’t you please leave?” Ranna said.

“I’ve contacted the cops,” Urside said, looking up from punching something into a phone.

Joe drew in another long breath. “Okay, everyone, I think I know what happened. I can’t believe it, but I must have *time-traveled*.” He met Churchill’s icy blue eyes. “That explains how heavy I feel. Because I’m back in Earth gravity. God, you can’t believe how fast you get used to one-third G on Mars!”

“No! That’s crazy!” Urside shouted.

“No, I was reading about the CTESOPÉ conference just last night, and somehow this afternoon must’ve triggered it. I mean, I’ve heard that one of the ways is these *huge emotional surges*. I don’t know how it happened!” Again he met Ranna’s eyes. Once more, that sense of scary mature female command.

“Please get off my stage,” she said. “We have a conference to do here.”

“When Glasgow came up with that theory last September, I mean, nobody took it seriously, but there’ve been all these weird *reports*. Man, I can’t believe I did it! Glasgow even called it Heuristic Time Transition. He named it after von Goertner’s stupid book! Can you believe it? Everyone thought he was nuts!”

“Look, we’ll talk to the police,” Ranna said. “We’ll make sure they don’t arrest you.”

“Well, let’s get one thing straight, lady. Nobody’s gonna give *me* any trouble. I could turn a whole army of cops into teeny piles of broken glass with this Martian shattergun.”

More gasps from the audience.

“Oh God, when will they *get* here?” someone moaned.

“Oh, don’t worry! Look, it was just a silly joke! Trying to break the ice and all! All I’m trying to say was that all this is so trivial that the book I was reading doesn’t even mention any weird problems with the CTESOPE conference. I’d never even heard of this conference until I was reading this book.”

“He’s crazy!”

“No, forget it! I think the book would have mentioned if I’d shattered a bunch of cops at the 2028 CTESOPE conference, don’t you? So basically, nothing much happened. *Is* happening, I guess.”

“What damn book?” Ranna shouted.

“Ranna--Kikken, have I got that right? Your picture was in the book! You look exactly like her!”

“Dammit, you’re wrecking my conference!”

“No, all the book said was that the conference did go on for a few days and was totally inconclusive, like everything else in 2028.”

“*What damn book?*”

“Well, it’s called *The Reamers*, which is a silly title, but basically it’s analyzing all the fears of humanity in the first three decades of the twentieth-first century. Talking about all the events that were *reaming* everybody’s mind. ‘Course, I shouldn’t laugh, it was only eight years ago, but God, it feels like a hundred! Everybody feels that way!”

Atop the lectern, Churchill calmly licked his leg in front of the assembled conference attendees. Why was this cat accepting him? Was it trying to calm him? Because by all rights Joe should be hysterically raving. But here he was chatting about time travel to 2028 as if it were an everyday matter.

“Would it interest you to know,” he went on, “that the Committee to End Suffering on Planet Earth actually continued up through 2031, but this first conference was the only one you ever had?”

“Get out!” Ranna snarled. “We’ll be having this conference every year until we fix all the *crap* on this planet! And leave my cat alone!”

“I’m not doing anything to your cat!”

“You’ve hypnotized him or something! C’mon, Churchill, get down from there!”

Joe laughed. The cat regarded him lazily but didn’t move. “I think it’s time for CTESOPE to hear some stuff. So what if I screw up the timeline?”

“No!” the skinny Urside screamed. “You can’t *mean* that!”

“Urside, stay out of this,” Ranna commanded.

“No! *I know what he’s doing!*”

Joe briefly met Urside’s shocked deep-set blue eyes. Okay, he had to get some control here. He’d battled the Central Asians, he’d evacuated the earth, he’d fought Martians and Alpha Centaurians, he damn well could get a grip on Heuristic Time Transition. He leaned toward the mike and flipped a switch.

“This thing on?”

SCREEEEEEEEEE

Hundreds of hands jammed over hundreds of ears, but Churchill gazed back lazily, rubbing his neck against the mike as he continued washing himself.

SCRUHHH SCRUHHH SCRUHHH

“Wow, this thing has its own volume control,” Joe said, dialing the mike back down from

ten to three. “That better? Wow, can’t believe there are still *analog dials* hanging around in 2028. Haven’t seen one in ages!” He laughed at a new thought. “Hope I didn’t come to this conference myself! *That’d* be weird!”

“Ranna, you didn’t really hire this man as a clown or something?” said a horse-faced woman in a dark blue executive power suit.

“Absolutely not.” Ranna glared at Joe. “We’ll just have to wait for the police to drag him off.”

“They won’t be here for at least half an hour. This place is so isolated!”

“And, meanwhile, this bozo can ruin my conference! Won’t anybody just take him away?”

“I tried to, but he’s got that gun!” Urside said.

“Whoa, let’s not get all out of control,” Joe said. “First of all, I *can’t* be here. And obviously I have no memory of being here eight years ago, so we’re all okay.”

“I can’t believe it!” Ranna cried. “I spent *six months* organizing this thing!”

“Look, maybe I should introduce myself.”

Silence from the audience. A muted *scruhh ... scruhh ... scruhh* from Churchill. “Okay, my name’s Joe Commer. And I guess you’re wondering why I’m wearing this, uh, I guess you could call it, like, a NASA uniform.”

More silence. Then a hoot from the rear: “Forget it! That’s no NASA uniform! Try again!”

“Huh. Yeah, you’re right. But hell, NASA wasn’t much of a space agency anyway. Not until people finally got their act together and founded the USSF. Well, I guess I was trying not to mess the timeline up too much, but since you’re on to me, sure, this isn’t any stinkin’ NASA uniform, this is a United System Space Force uniform, circa September 2035. We went crimson for some reason. Hell, I wore it less than a month before I quit.”

“If I don’t get some able-bodied, courageous men to get up there and remove him,” Ranna declared, “I’m going up there myself!”

Well, there was a woman with balls. Not many people wanted to think about arguing with a Martian shattergun. Upon closer inspection, Ranna Kikken was a fine-looking female with generous breasts tight in a russet ribbed sweater that almost matched the color of her wild hair. One of those rare brown-eyed, redheaded women. But of course she was just another nonprofit lady running a civic organization.

Row upon row of these unfortunate nonprofit ladies arrayed themselves behind Ranna, outnumbering the men here five to one. Right this second in the backs of their passionate narrow minds these women were organizing library book sales, setting up charitable foundations, and mustering docents for the latest museum opening. They were sincere, frustrated, time-harassed, intelligent, and blocked. Later these smug cows would pose in bulging, low-cut gowns in the Opera Guild Sunday Supplement rotogravure section still being published, on paper, in 2036.

The audience rumbled. Joe whistled through the microphone.

Silence. Churchill cocked an ear at Joe, then settled down and closed his eyes. Joe stroked the cat’s soft gray fur. His duties in the USSF had included an occasional speaking engagement. How was this really any different? “Okay, gang, looks like Joe Commer is your first speaker, for better or worse. So listen up. The very fact that I’m here means the timeline isn’t going to get messed up. So I guess we’re safe for now.”

“What’s he *talking* about?” a lady whined.

“Heuristic Time Transition,” Joe said. “I still can’t believe it, but, God, it must be true, or I wouldn’t be here, would I? I mean, zapped straight to here from--” Okay, Joe would have to figure out later about *Jackie on the bed*. “Well, we have to deal with actual reality right now,

don't we? I mean, even though for Glasgow it's just a physics experiment, everyone says it's been explaining a lot of people's reports since I don't know when. Like I say, any sane person thinks he's nuts, but, hell, maybe he was right all along."

"No, that can't be real!" Urside cried.

"Hold on there. It *is* real. Did I mention I'm from 2036? January 26, 2036, to be exact?"

"Aaah, forget it," said the same heckler who'd taunted him about NASA. "This is a serious conference about human suffering, and you're just providing more of it!"

"No, it's not really about suffering. Unless it's about how afraid you all are." More silence. "Well, I'm more or less quoting *The Reamers*, but any fool can see how the last few years, and this year especially, have shaken you all up pretty bad. I can't say I was immune from it either, but hell, I was just out of the Naval Academy, and somehow I didn't get so worked up about it. Jack had graduated two years before me and he'd already made up his mind to get into space, and when the USSF came along, well, we both were thinking that, hell, if the solar system is gonna break down on us like this, we're gonna be in on the *fix*."

"Get to the point!"

"The point is just this: you have this conference, you think you're doing something to get to the bottom of all the insanity, when in reality you're all damn hysterical about what's gonna happen to your poor little nonprofit asses."

"Dammit!" Ranna Kikken flared. "Where are the cops?" She paced up and down in front of the first row. "For your information, I formed the Committee to End Suffering to *eradicate* all the dishonesty, all the cruelty and delusion on this planet! Of course everyone's concerned about the recent events. But we can only deal with what we can deal with. Which is why I wanted Dr. Norsen to start off with his analysis of the animal disturbances, but nooo, we have to listen to your crazy science fiction *drivel!*"

"Civilization's breaking down," Joe said quietly, petting Churchill. "Deep down, you all sense you aren't gonna make it. Nothing's been working right for some time. You're all afraid you're doomed. Well, let me tell you something just a few years in your future. You're right. You *are* doomed."

More silence. It was spooky, to be in such control of an audience. Any protest they made was futile and they knew it. Joe would go on speaking until he was ready to stop. Oddly, this sense of confidence seemed to center around Churchill napping on the lectern. Joe had a momentary panic that he'd fall apart if the cat jumped away.

"What's the point of this?" someone shouted. "It's just more suffering!"

"The point is, your confidence was already shaky before this strange year got underway. Before February 6th. And now you *know* you won't recover. There are forces at play now, out-of-control forces."

He felt their rising hysteria. It hadn't touched him so much in '28. He'd been a strong, resilient, space-minded young man, one of four space-minded Commer brothers. He remembered 2028, the year that brought the first disasters but, more importantly, the USSF itself, much differently than these people living it now. "I'm here, really, to talk about the asteroids, I guess."

"Oh, God ..." Urside gasped from the front row by Ranna. Everyone sagged.

"Freaks you out, doesn't it? Freaked everyone out much worse than the feeling that our entire civilization was doomed. Because of course now some nameless evil was involved. Maybe because of the dates. Weird coincidence, or deliberate evil? Actually, I can let you in on a secret: the dates *were* a weird coincidence. The, uh, *entities*, I guess you could call them, don't have our concept of time. They'd never think to try to scare humans by playing on our calendar

superstitions.”

Joe cleared his throat. “So, February 6, 2028. Just three months ago for you all. Minor planet Ceres suddenly drops out of orbit, and accelerates directly into the sun! All within a few hours. Nobody can believe it. The astronomers and physicists are baffled, to say the least. How can Ceres, the largest asteroid in the solar system, come to a *complete halt* in its orbit and start accelerating into the sun? A lot more than just simple gravity’s involved. There’s no way Ceres would’ve fallen in on its own in just nine hours. There was *deliberate acceleration*.”

“Okay, what’s the point?” Ranna snapped. “They haven’t figured out about the asteroids yet, but I’m sure they will.”

“Do you have the slightest idea how much *energy* it takes to bring a six-hundred-mile-wide planetoid to a dead stop in its orbit? Or to accelerate it down? *The Reamers* quoted one astronomer explaining this as a quantum possibility or some such crap, a one-in-a-googol event. He sure shut up on March 6, 2028, when Vesta, the second-largest asteroid in the solar system, stopped dead, and shot down into the sun as well.”

The faces were gray with shock. Joe did recall feeling sick when he’d heard about the second asteroid. Jack’s advice had been to treat the whole thing logically, to study his physics and prepare to move out into the solar system to study the phenomenon up close. Somehow Joe succeeded in following Jack’s example. He spent weeks grimly keeping a mounting panic at bay about what would happen if the earth itself should come to a dead stop in its orbit.

“Then April 6, 2028. Pallas, the third-largest asteroid in the solar system, shoots straight into the sun!”

The audience was doubled up in mourning for those big balls of rock they’d never given a thought to but which, once lost, represented their own imminent extinction.

“We know, look, we know,” Ranna said. “We can only hope ...”

“That your precious CTESOPe can do something?” Joe mocked the nonprofit lady, ashamed of his cruelty, unable to resist it.

“Dammit, I didn’t know about any asteroids, none of us did, I just wanted a Committee to End Suffering, was that so bad? Who the hell are you anyway, to wreck everything like this?”

“Today’s May 5th. Tomorrow’s May 6th. Anybody want to tell me the name of the fourth-largest asteroid in the solar system?”

More silence. Finally the polo-shirted Urside said: “Hygiea. They’re saying it’ll be Hygiea. On the sixth.”

“That’s correct. On the sixth, Hygiea goes into the sun.”

“*Ohhhh ...*” came from the audience.

“But that’s just superstition!” Ranna protested. “What’re they gonna do, drop every asteroid in the solar system into the sun on the sixth of every month?”

Joe smiled. “Interesting. Interesting to see you confirm that by May 2028 there really was a thought that there was a *they* behind it. I was freaked out, I remember, but I don’t recall feeling it was *them*, whoever *they* were. I just thought it was a physical breakdown of the solar system. I just couldn’t buy the alien intervention theories. I’m not really sure I should say anything about them. Timeline concerns, I guess. Or, hell, I don’t know. Maybe I will tell you.”

“You’re drunk! Messed up on something!” someone shouted. “There are enough two-bit prophets running around these days!”

“Well, tomorrow you should know I was telling the truth,” Joe said. “You may be even more convinced on June 6th.”

Audience gasp.

“When *nothing* happens. No more asteroids go into the sun. Apparently they’d finished their first experiments with Amplified Thought by that time.”

“Get off my stage, leave Churchill alone, take your little shattergun and your stupid red flight suit and get the hell out!” Ranna screamed. “*Where are the cops?*”

CHAPTER TWO

Are You Ready for This, Nonprofit Ladies?

“*Ranna* ...” Urside whispered, daring to pat her russet arm. He couldn’t bear to see her upset. He wondered if Mandy had bothered to come here today. Then again, she probably wouldn’t want to be in the same room with him after the fight they’d had yesterday.

“Damn him! Damn him!” Ranna sputtered.

But what was a fight with Mandy compared to what this time traveler was doing on stage? Would that man actually unravel everything? Was there any word he could utter that would collapse the universe? And in these doomed final moments, shouldn’t Urside put his arms around Ranna Kikken and tell her how much he loved her?

Okay, he was a puppy. A thirty-two-year-old puppy in love with a forty-seven-year-old woman. It was total insanity. Why had he confessed all that to Mandy? Now she hated him. And Ranna had never wanted a thing to do with him anyway.

Everything was disintegrating. Half the world was sure that Hygiea would be the next lottery winner. Every astronomer on the planet had had Hygiea in his or her telescope for the last week, looking for the slightest sign of orbital slowdown. The nearest spacecraft, the unmanned *Emerald 4*, had been diverted to get as close as possible, but wouldn’t be within twenty million miles by tomorrow.

“Get off my stage!” Ranna shouted, turning to Urside, brown eyes furious. “Damn it, get up there and drag him out of here!”

“He’s got that gun!” Urside protested. “I already went up once! We have to wait for the cops!” But should he charge the stage for real this time? Would the time traveler shoot him? Would that be the breakdown point for the timeline? Or--chilling but somehow welcoming thought--would Urside’s death *cure* the timeline?

Because hadn’t he probably wrecked it himself?

“Then, Robbert, *you* get up there!” Ranna fumed.

The old bastard to her left shrugged. “Well,” Robbert Geswindoll drawled, “it looks as if we have to wait for the police to handle this, my dear, don’t you think? He does have that gun. I do think it’s best not to rile him.”

“Dammit!”

“But we don’t need to worry, love, the Celestions will protect us,” the geezer went on.

“Oh, great, the *Celestions*. I can’t believe this!”

Urside grimaced. Geswindoll was the street person who’d showed up last month. Somehow he’d become Ranna’s pet project, though it was painfully obvious he was an alcoholic on a bender. Dammit, this wasn’t some commune or spiritual retreat, but Ranna thought the ancient derelict would be an asset to CTESOPE. “Maybe we’ll have some readings of his poems,” she’d said.

Why did she laugh at his off-color jokes? He was a hairy bearded garbage dump, tottering about like a stick figure in that filthy plaid coat that stank like a wet dog. Why was he always at Ranna’s side these past few days?

“Now calm down, Ms. Kikken,” the crimson-suited man on stage spoke through the microphone. “Looks like fate’s appointed me your first speaker, and then we’ll let Dr. Norsen come forward with his theories about the animals. Meanwhile, I’ve still got some future history to rattle off for you all.”

“He can’t do this!” Urside protested. “He’ll spoil everything!”

“From here in 2028,” Joe Commer went on, “major pollution and social insanity grow exponentially despite all you do-gooders. You thought the previous couple decades were bad, but you’re really just starting the Nightmare Era now. But one good thing came out of that. When the remnants of NASA turned into the USSF in ’28, we started to have some capability of fighting back.”

“We’re fighting back now!” Ranna cried. “With CTESOPE!”

Commer waved this away. “You’re *cringing* with CTESOPE. You’re hoping this futile little gesture will save you. But it won’t.”

“Damn you! You son of a bitch!”

“Ranna, perhaps if you didn’t lower yourself to his level,” a woman leaned in from the second row. Urside hadn’t noticed Hedrona Bhlon behind them. The tiny, tight-faced blonde, hair tied to the back of her skull, cold blue eyes glittering as always with shrewd ambition, incongruously wore a sexy black low-cut cocktail dress, boobs dangling every which way.

“Damn it, Hedrona!” Ranna snarled, barely turning to register her. “Stay out of this! For once, just stay out of this!”

The Operations Manager of the Cat Farm blinked, shrugged innocently, then settled back in her chair. “Just trying to be of help.”

“God, my conference is *ruined!*”

Urside bit his lip, unwilling to chance any further Ranna rage. How Hedrona had managed to avoid being fired was a mystery to all. Ranna railed about Hedrona to everyone, but they all knew and appreciated, probably even Ranna herself appreciated, Hedrona’s genius for guiding her noxious bomb loads in just under the radar. The Cat Farm had been a financial mess before she’d been hired a year and a half ago. Now it was one of the most successful nonprofit organizations in the country.

“Listen up, people,” Commer said. “You luck out for a year. No more asteroids get dumped in the sun. But next year, on June 12th, Pluto is *hurled* from the solar system.” Commer swept his arm towards the arched windows where thirty cats had come to gaze in at the ruckus.

“Dammit, he’s just trying to scare us,” Ranna muttered.

“Just think. Again, can you imagine the *energy* it takes to accelerate a planet to its own escape velocity from the sun? Scientists calculated that Pluto accelerated precisely that amount. Could any rational person have any way to grasp that? No, nobody could. Deep down everyone was completely freaked out.”

Urside gasped along with the rest of the audience. The others thought Commer was building on the current disasters to make crackpot prophesies, but Urside knew Commer was a fellow time traveler. What he said had to be true. And if one planet could be destroyed, couldn’t any planet? Including the one they were standing on?

“I pretended I wasn’t scared, but by now I was, I guess,” Commer went on. “I enrolled in some post-graduate physics, all the hard sciences I could. But get this: later in ’29, in October, the planet Neptune just blows up! Imagine that! Now we were really freaked. And then a month later Uranus starts dropping into the sun! Accelerating just like those asteroids! A lot of the planet flaked away just like a comet, but we all watch this huge mass shoot right past the earth! Man, everything was disrupted! Our orbit, the moon’s orbit, everything. We had incredible environmental disasters! We lost a billion people out of eight and a half billion right there!”

Silence from everyone. “Oh, God,” Urside moaned. “It’s *true* ...”

“So you can imagine the USSF started getting almost every available federal dollar. All four of us Commer brothers were in by that time. Later the USSF changed from United States Space

Force to United *System* Space Force, because the world just *had* to unite into the United System.”

More silence. “Okay, I’m getting off the subject. But you people have got some more shocks ahead of you. The worst disaster of all comes in July 2031. Saturn and Jupiter blow up simultaneously! Jupiter was in the night sky and was visible. Saturn was almost 180 degrees on the other side of the sun, but our probes discovered it immediately. Both of them gone! Can you believe it? All that’s left are some of their largest moons floating in what we now call the Jovian Fragment Field and the Saturnian Fragment Field.”

“God ...” Urside gasped amid general groans. “*God ...*”

“Again, the energy involved to do that just can’t be comprehended. By this time we were certain we were faced with some mysterious force we had no defense against.

“Yeah, we’d founded the USSF and believe me, all sorts of scientific research was accelerated. Before long we had the Xon bomb, which could rip half a planet open, and believe it or not, one of the fondest dreams of scientists for the past century came true: in 2030 we invent Star Drive! We can get to Alpha Centauri in fifteen minutes! Can you believe that?”

“Wow!” Urside said.

“So what do we do with that first visit to Alpha Centauri in ’32? Well, I’ll tell you: Admiral Cromwell busts in there, finds intelligent life, and decides to test-fire our first experimental Xon bombs at it! God knows why! Within an hour we’re in a full-scale war with the Centaurians!”

There was no way Urside could drag his lips back together. Even Ranna had stopped fidgeting. Head bowed, she sank into her seat and let the revelations from the future deluge her.

“2033. Even while we’re deep in a space war in Alpha Centauri, we can’t keep peace at home. The Central Asian Powers are out of control by ’31. They’ve been stockpiling H-bombs in factories under the Himalayas, and all of a sudden they’re blackmailing us with ’em, knowing we can’t knock ’em out with regular nukes. By now the USSF had developed a Super Xon bomb that was thousands of times more powerful than our first design. And once CAP knew we had it, they had to have it too.

“Now we tested our Super Xon in deep space and just measured the results, but CAP decides to test theirs on the moon! Half the planet watches the moon erupt! Only about three-quarters of it was left. And it finally blew up totally a couple months later, once we were into the Evacuation.”

“Can this be true?” Ranna moaned, long sexy fingers in her unruly red hair. Urside stared back at the most sensuous feminine beauty possible. Why couldn’t they have made love? At least once?

Ranna had told him no four days ago. He was such a fool. He’d been in love with her for so long, and wasn’t he so smugly sure she secretly loved him back, even if they were so far apart in age? But apparently she flirted with him just as she did with every other man she came across. Monday afternoon Urside just couldn’t stand it any longer. Was it because all the asteroids were going into the sun, and May 6th was coming up and everyone knew Hygiea was going in as well, and everything was doomed?

Whatever the case, he’d tried to take Ranna into his arms in the server room. He was astonished at how fast she’d wriggled free. He had to admit she’d been pretty gentle about it, but she made it clear there was no hope. That even though she was single, she didn’t want a relationship now. And she had to piously point out that he had his girlfriend Mandy to think about. “I’ll drop her! I’ll drop her!” Urside had yelled to his shame.

He was offered the consolation prize of Ranna’s continuing friendship. He wasn’t sure he

wanted it. But he was too weak to leave the Cat Farm and his webmaster job and he knew it.

For a few days he thought the Ranna insanity might finally be over. But when he got the courage to tell Mandy yesterday that he'd made a pass at his boss, he'd somehow wound up declaring that he still loved Ranna, that he knew he could never have her, but that he just needed to be honest with Mandy in the face of the asteroids and everyone's fears of the coming destruction of the entire solar system.

None of that had gone over too well. Urside had just been babbling whatever twisted nonsense would get him through the next lying minute. At least she'd stomped out before he'd started in on Heuristic Time Transition.

And he would've told her. He would've piled all his fears in Mandy's lap. Because for months Urside had worried, had dreaded, that somehow his own experiments since January had caused the asteroids to fall into the sun. That had to be madness, though, didn't it? But wasn't everything about Urside's life madness now? Because that man on the stage was confirming Urside's guilt.

"So you have to understand where we were by October '33," Commer said. "We'd already been at war for over a year with these insane Centaurians who won't accept our apologies for blundering into their space, and we know we can't afford any disunity on Earth if the Centaurians invade *us*. But meanwhile the Central Asians blast off a chunk of the moon, then they launch a few H-bombs and wipe out New York, Paris, and Berlin, and we're at war on *two* fronts now. We don't want to use our Xon bombs on this planet, but hell, CAP fired off one Xon, maybe they've got another. In fact, they're threatening to wipe out the U.S. with one, so ..."

"No ..." Urside groaned. So many scenes down the corridors of all his travels were beginning to make sense. What people in the future felt, what they meant when they referred to *the old Earth*.

"So Jack's flying the *Typhoon I*, and I'm copilot, and we do it! Jack gets the order from General Scott and we drop the Xon. We carve out a crater five hundred miles wide! The Himalayas are totally gone! The mass of mountains absorbing the bomb probably kept the earth itself from being ruptured, but Jack and I blow Central Asia and a big chunk of this planet off into space! We destroy the earth! Are you ready for this, do-gooders? Are you ready for this, nonprofit ladies? *In 2033 we destroy this planet!* You have five years left! Five goddamn years!"

CHAPTER THREE

Planetary Malaise

Ranna Kikken refused to burst into tears as the smooth-faced, dark-haired prophet ranted about the end of the world. A fruitcake in an idiotic Halloween costume had ruined her conference, and the police would never get here. He was just trying to make everyone sick.

Commer was a powerful, well-built young man, and she was appalled to note that, despite his fantastic, cynical words, his steady voice inspired trust. People were falling for what he was saying. How could she repair the damage? In a way he was right. He *was* the first speaker. But as soon as the cops hauled him away, Ranna would be the second. And she'd tell everyone why Commer stood for all the superstitious negativity they had to fight. She'd get the conference back on track.

"In November '33 comes the decision to evacuate the earth," Commer went on. "Ten thousand spaceships of all descriptions. The amazing new tech and the exponential growth of the USSF really paid off, although we also threw in antiques from your day like old near-Earth orbit stuff, up through pleasure cruisers and military vehicles like the *Typhoon I*, which could do one-thirteenth light. Jack and I, and our brothers, flew hundreds of flights towing giant passenger shells. We helped plan the Evacuation with General Scott, but I think, really, we were trying to atone somehow. Nobody was really sure if Mars could be terraformed, nobody was sure if it was wise to move billions of people off the planet, but damn, within one month of the Final War we've got *ten thousand spaceships* in gear."

Why was Ranna allowing this? That voice was so damn *soothing*. And it held so much bitterness and sorrow. Was that why he'd crashed CTESOPE? That he'd seen enough suffering himself, but was so scrambled he couldn't say why, so he made up this fairy tale?

"Nobody knows how many people Jack and I killed with the Xon, but out of seven and a half billion people left after the Uranus disaster, only two billion ever made it to Mars. One estimate is that the Xon killed two and a half billion, then mass pollution and radioactivity killed another two billion, then maybe half a billion were left behind. You know, we just couldn't get to everyone, and some people refused to leave. A lot of the Evacuation was accomplished by force. That's a dirty little secret the USSF doesn't talk about much."

Joe sighed. "And if you're adding all those numbers up in your head, you realize half a billion *more* people died en route to Mars. With ten thousand spaceships doing hundreds of flights, well, there are some accidents. Just about everybody we moved was in a panic the whole time. Wouldn't you be, if you knew one out of five was going to die on the way? I can still see those big passenger shells snapping free on liftoff, and then burning up in the atmosphere."

Silence in the auditorium. Ranna fought the urge to grab Urside's hand. What on earth was wrong with her?

"Into about June '34 we did this. What a damn Dunkirk! We try to terraform Mars, but then we start fighting *Martians*. Can you believe that? Damn if there isn't an ancient Martian culture there after all!"

"This really is getting out of hand," Ranna whispered. She turned from Urside to Robbert at her left in that ugly plaid jacket he refused to have dry-cleaned. Something about a sacred bicycle tour of Australia when he was a teenager, and he'd never wanted to wash the jacket since. She knew she was supposed to take *Robbert's* hand but couldn't bring herself to do so. Mr. Geswindoll was proving a spectacular lack of help today anyway.

"I couldn't even begin to explain all the insanity of that war, but somehow we worked it out,

after terrible ... loss. Jack and I lost our two younger brothers in that war. Jim, and John, and a bunch of great friends. But we stabilized stuff. We made peace with the Martians, and I even have some good Martian friends now. But after the initial joy of survival, of starting all over on Mars, damn if people aren't saying how homesick they are for good old dead Earth. Not me, though. We screwed up the planet and I'm done with it. I have a new life on Mars now, and, and, man, I don't know ..."

The intruder was slowing down. Good. The police would arrest him and maybe later Ranna could question him. She couldn't fathom what Churchill was doing up on the lectern, snoozing beneath Commer's gesturing hands. The blue-eyed cat, the mystical beast, the most affectionate cat of all, the one everyone knew really ran the Cat Farm.

She couldn't possibly manage the place without Churchill. She'd gotten the idea for the Cat Farm from him. When she'd found him here that spring, hanging out by himself, it had all just come to her instantly. They'd hardly ever used the summer estate anyway.

Could she let this madman screw up six months of work? She'd raised twelve million for this conference. She was good at this nonprofit business. She'd made the Cat Farm out of nothing, she'd made CTESOPÉ out of nothing, she could raise the cash for twenty more nonprofits if she felt like it. She was not going to let this sci-fi nutcase wreck the First Annual Conference.

Commer fingered Churchill's fuzzy gray neck. Everyone could hear the cat purring through the mike. "But the insanity *continues*," Commer said. "Jack and me, and his new wife, Amav, we take off in the *Typhoon II* for Alpha Centauri. We're gonna negotiate peace with these totally insane Centaurians. But we screw it up. *I* screw it up." He took a sharp breath.

"*I betray Jack!* My own brother! I get brainwashed by the Alpha Centaurians! What do you think of *that*?"

Everyone froze at the cry. Churchill stood up on the lectern and arched his back.

Ranna peered closer at the tormented man at her lectern. Although everyone here seemed convinced that Commer really did know something about the future, in reality it was something with his brother that had unhinged him. This man was Afflicted. He had the Planetary Malaise. God, that was what this conference was all about. *Ending* such suffering.

"Jack and Amav were *tortured* out there while I collaborated with the enemy! They had some way of absorbing you! I would have prevented it if I could, but it was the women that triggered it. They had all these women who were brainwashed. I couldn't resist 'em. Don't know why I'm saying any of this, not what I came to talk about. Who am I kidding, I didn't mean to come here at all!"

Commer reached for Churchill. "Good cat, good kitty." He gulped for air. "We were finally rescued. Jack and Amav too. But I was such a coward! God, I can't get it out of my head! We get a sort of shaky truce with the ACs, and we get home. But nothing's ever gonna be the same!"

"Look, Mr. Commer," Ranna called up. "I don't know who you are, or what your story is, but we can get you some help."

"No! I'm cut off! I'm out of it now! They sure as hell don't want me in the USSF anymore! People tell me I have this new life, this new start! I say crap on that! The damn do-gooders always say that! What if you've screwed up so bad you can never recover? Don't you think that happens?"

"But look, we can make it all right!"

"No, it'll never be all right! Not after people start *time-traveling*!"

"God, *yes!*" Urside cried.

“Heuristic Time Transition! As if we didn’t have enough insanity! HTT has to be a real physical phenomenon. Glasgow must be right! Because I’ve just done it! I HTT’d here! I mean, I guess I have! Look, last fall this Glasgow guy at the University of Mars claimed he had scientific proof, even though it was all limited to quark behavior. Everyone dismisses this guy as a crackpot, but somehow we all know it’s true. There’ve been too many rumors of people actually having done it, and what I think is that since last fall everyone on Mars has been scared some bozo is gonna HTT and blow the timeline to hell!”

“Oh God ...” Urside whispered, eyes wide, face like melted rubber.

“Dammit, what’s the *matter* with you today?” Ranna snapped.

“I mean, it’s been a fad for ages, like astrology, we all know that,” Commer continued. “That idiot von Goertner wrote that book on Heuristic Time Transition a few years back. Wow, I guess it’s current now! Well, it looks like the idiot’s right, all sorts of people have been doing it, there’s no control at all! I mean, I never thought *I* could do it, I could never be one of those poets and artists who do it. Anyway, von Goertner’s book is making a big comeback on Mars now. About having these incredible *emotional surges* that transition you to *different times*. Glasgow also says something about the high amounts of energy involved. He calls it quark chi, some sort of raw energy. I don’t know, I’ve never had any real emotions, I guess.”

“Wow ...” Ranna whispered along with Urside.

“Glasgow says HTT depends on connecting the *inner* chi to the *outer* chi and flowing along and finding these *links* to other times. He thinks maybe because of the upheavals so far this century, there are all these big, repressed emotions, this chi crap or something, and they’re opening up these time-travel links. I mean, maybe people are trying to get back to Earth, you know, *before* ... or maybe the links are totally scrambled, and people from all times can now go anywhere.”

“Yes!” Urside screamed. “I knew it all along!”

“You--you do not!” Ranna said. “Just stop this *craziness!* I’ve got a conference to run here!” She took a deep breath and gazed coolly up at the stage. “Mr. Commer or whoever you are, your time is up. I’ll speak now, and then Dr. Norsen.”

“Ranna, he’s got something important to say!” Urside pleaded.

“Dammit, Urside!”

“So I quit the USSF!” Commer cried. “In October last year, that’s 2035 to you, I just quit it! And I’ve thrown in with someone my brother *hates!* I’m in business with Huey Vespertine, a traitor to humanity! At least that’s what Jack says! What do you do-gooders think? Ah, what the hell, you don’t know what a jerk Huey is, you haven’t lived through all the insanity on Mars yet!”

Ranna sank back in her seat. That was pure Planetary Malaise up there on stage, racking itself to pieces. And she was supposed to be the one to do something about it? Wasn’t it time to admit how much it really disgusted her? Why was she fooling with the Malaise? Who was she to think she could deal with it?

Joe Commer was right. Ranna was just another nonprofit lady. Her whole life was *nonprofit*. All of them, she and Hedrona Bhlon and everyone else here, all nonprofit ladies who couldn’t even cure their own Malaise. Couldn’t even figure out what it was.

Hell, Ranna knew what her Malaise was.

She *wanted* that jerk on the stage. Oh, yes she did. He was gorgeous. That red flight suit on that hard body was stunning. And she believed his stupid story herself because she found him so attractive. She wanted him this instant. She could take him to bed right now.

She flirted with everyone, she led them on, she *destroyed*. Just as she'd destroyed Urside.

At least Ranna hadn't ended her marriage out of unfaithfulness. She'd been such a good girl. She'd taken so much crap. Then came the night Bartlett got drunk and started swinging his golf clubs at her. It sure woke her up. Why had she ever allowed that son of a bitch to eat up seven years of her life?

Then the men. What had she really been looking for? Ten men, twelve men over the last two years. She'd lost count.

But in any case, Urside Charmouth would never be one of them.

Ranna had been delighted when what looked like a dreamy adolescent with long goofy red hair showed up at the Cat Farm looking for a tech job. Three years ago, just a couple months after she'd founded the Farm. It had only taken him a minute to convince her how badly she needed a webmaster for the Cat Farm, and one more minute for the two of them to act like old friends.

She'd been stunned to find that Urside merely looked like a teenager. In reality he was a twenty-nine-year-old who'd been drifting along at menial tech jobs at various universities ever since both parents had been killed in a car wreck in 2016. Apparently he'd split an immense insurance payment with a half-brother, and now, with funds drying up, he was eager for better computer work. But he'd always seemed oddly unaffected by the deaths of his parents, and had no contact with his brother. Was he just repressing some trauma? That was another reason she'd been drawn to him. She wanted to be available for Urside when he finally needed to talk. A friend.

At least she'd thought that was what he wanted. For some time she'd suspected he was mistaking their friendship for something else. She'd hoped that whatever such notions he might have would eventually evaporate. But Monday he'd made a pass at her. Propositioned her in the server room. She'd refused in shock mirroring his own.

They'd had no contact since then. She'd let him sit beside her today just to see if he could be just a friend. Had she really been leading him on? Had she destroyed him? He looked so sad.

Beyond the arched windows, across the fields on the lake, four bamboo houses rose on stilts. The lake was the most beautiful part of the Cat Farm. Cats loved trotting across the piers to gaze down at hundreds of huge Japanese goldfish. She recalled the evening she and Urside had laughed themselves sick to see two cats pawing for the same fish, colliding with each other, and flailing into the lake amid laughing flashes of gold and orange. Urside had waded in and dragged them both out, getting his arms raked in the process.

Wasn't that supposed to be friendship? And what did they have now, after Monday? He'd told her he *loved* her. But his girlfriend Mandy was the most beautiful woman Ranna had ever seen. What did Urside want with a woman pushing fifty? Who was beginning to break down, physically, mentally, every way?

Ranna shook her head. She had to be responsible now, had to pay attention to the crazy man on stage rambling about Heuristic Whatever. But she found herself focusing instead on his handsome mouth. Here was a splintered, suffering man, ruining her conference, but all she wanted was to get up there with him and kiss those lovely lips.

She had to stop this idiocy. She had a responsibility to CTESOPe, to all these people who'd registered for a real conference. Okay, so a lot of them were nonprofit ladies, but they supported her, they supported an end to Planetary Malaise. Maybe their money distorted them, but they were her allies. She had to focus and be respectable. She couldn't be fantasizing about taking this conference crasher to bed. She had Robbert now. She had the calming influence he'd already

brought to her life.

Calming? Who was she kidding? When just this morning he was whining about “needing to get away and write,” because his goddamn poem ideas were starting to flow? Right when she needed him for the conference? There was so much hassle on opening day, but did he care?

Was he going away to write, or to drink? She’d had to drag him here by the arm of his smelly old coat, and he’d been snuffling in self-pity all morning. Was he an alcoholic? Was that his Malaise?

Urside was undoubtedly jealous. Ranna was sure he suspected about her and Robbert. Maybe that explained why Urside derided him as “the BS poet.” But Urside couldn’t know all the details. He was so out of things. For the billionth time Ranna wished for full telepathic understanding between all human beings. Why call it Gaia if they couldn’t share complete soul contact? Where everyone knew everything directly, where by definition there could be no secrets?

And up on the stage he refused to relinquish, the lunatic with the erotic lips and intoxicating dark eyes was still spewing his time-travel fantasy.

“*Can* Heuristic Time Transition harm the timeline? Or has it *already* harmed it? Is that what’s been causing the total paranoia of the twenty-first century? This unease you all feel?”

“The animal disturbances!” someone shouted.

“Yeah,” Commer said, stroking Churchill. “The poor animals, coming unglued, but toughing it out. But don’t really worry, people, the animals are okay. All you’re seeing here in 2028 is the same sort of craziness that gets into animals before an earthquake. They know the Final War’s coming, and the breakdown of the solar system. But they’ll be okay. They’re just a barometer now. But, meanwhile, the greatest threat *has* to be HTT. Have I screwed things up by showing up here? If I tell you that CTESOP was a total failure, that it contributed nothing to our survival or our understanding, does that change anything?”

“No!” Ranna protested. “He can’t mean that!”

“Just listen!” Urside said, with a hand to her arm.

Confusedly, she patted the hand, then grasped it. “Urside, I ... I don’t know ...”

“It’s all right, Ranna, I can take care of this,” said Robbert Geswindoll, standing up. “The Celestions are guiding me.”

“Robbert, what on earth are you doing?”

“Do we assume that old theoretical physics workaround that we create an entirely new universe every time we HTT?” Commer continued. “I can’t buy that. Who would keep track of all those universes? Makes me dizzy to even think about it. No, my theory is that all the time travel is preordained, that it’s been going on by definition from the beginning of time, and so our linear concepts of time just aren’t true, that we can go wherever we want, say whatever we want to anyone, and it all just doesn’t matter.”

“I hope he’s right!” Urside cried.

“Robbert, get back here!” Ranna snapped.

“And look,” Commer said, “I know I failed Jack. I slunk away from the USSF because I just couldn’t handle anything anymore. But what I’m thinking now, doing my first HTT here, is maybe if we coordinate things right, we could *reverse* the destruction! What do you think? Maybe I’m wrong about everything being preordained. What if we carefully went back and engineered fixes in just the right places? We could save the asteroids. We could damn sure prevent the moon from exploding! We could damn sure prevent the Final War, or blundering into Alpha Centauri, or *Jim and John dying*.”

“Aw right, buddy, I think everyone’s heard enough BS,” Robbert said as he gained the stage.

“Forget it! We could save the earth! And really *do* it, not just talk about it like you do-gooders!”

“Robbert, what are you *doing* up there?” Ranna cried.

“You need a man to end this fiasco, you just call on me,” Robbert said, then turned to Commer. “Young man, it’s my duty to inform you that the Celestions have called upon me to end this farce.”

Joe blinked. “Later, dude, I’ve got to talk to the people here.”

“Surely, young man, you’re aware that time travel is nonsense. You say you read about CTESOPE in some future book. Then why didn’t it mention you showing up and disrupting the conference?”

Commer sized his opponent up, and Ranna thought he was going to punch the shaky, emaciated old man out on the spot.

Commer stepped away from the lectern. Ranna gasped at his muscular body in that tight maroon uniform. “Well, the book didn’t go into any great detail on CTESOPE, it was so insignificant. It was just one more example of futility from ’28. It’s weird, but now I remember that *The Reamers* did mention that there was a debate about time travel at this conference.”

“Get off this stage,” Robbert said, “before I kill you with my bare hands.”