

BOOK ONE OF THE JACK COMMER SERIES

THE MARTIAN MARAUDERS

MICHAEL D. SMITH



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Book One
of the Jack Commer Series

Michael D. Smith

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For my wife Nancy

CHAPTER ONE

Survey

Thursday, June 8, 2034, 1000 hours

The five-hundred-mile-wide crater had been thoroughly radar-mapped, though nobody had ever seen it. They all knew the ground was still burning eight months later. Copilot Joe Commer looked away. All he could picture was the red-orange lava beneath all that soot.

“You know, I still can’t believe it,” he muttered. “Those were the *Himalayas*.”

His older brother Jack shrugged from the command seat to his left. “Are the sensors deployed?”

Joe took a breath. “Yep, they’re out. All five up and running. No problems.” Far to starboard hung the icy white fragments of the moon, beginning its eons-long spread into a complete ring. Joe listened to the whirring of the ventilation fans and the beeps of the electronics. The Control Room of the *Typhoon I* was brilliantly lit, and the reflections of its interior curved through the cockpit window, obscuring the line of twilight on the ruined planet below.

It was the first run where they hadn’t come to pick up a passenger shell. Nothing to do but drop off a few sensor satellites. Nobody else to rescue, nobody who wanted to be rescued. They were really saying goodbye.

Joe shuddered at the charcoal blanketing most of the planet. He could all but smell the death below. How could he ever have lived there?

The United System had declared June 5th the final day for mandatory evacuation, and three days ago the USS *Celeste* had picked up four hundred refugees, all against their will. There were only handfuls of human beings left down there anyway, all doomed, but they’d made their choice. What good did it do anymore to send USSF troops into the refugee camps, taking casualties fighting the diehards, just so they could haul a few survivors back?

Captain Jack Commer punched an orange square on his console. “Jim, prepare standard navigation program for the ride home.”

“Up and running,” came the crisp voice of Jim, the third Commer brother, from his workroom down the fuselage. “Tell me when you’re ready and I’ll lock ’er in.”

“Stand by,” Jack said, his face solid and square, his deep-set brown eyes intent on the readout panels. “First let’s download some sample readings from New Orbiter 1. John?”

“Got it, Jack!” came John Commer’s high voice. “This is an amazing interface! The satellite’s actually *talking* to us! That’s incredible! And the software was so easy to set up! All I had to do was flip a switch!”

Jack sighed. “Fine, John. Go ahead and patch it through so we can all hear it.”

“Okay, Jack! Fine, just fine! It’s so easy! All you have to do is *activate* it, and the default settings are *perfect!*”

Joe watched Jack struggle whether to reprimand or indulge the fourth and youngest Commer. Jack finally shook his head with a half-smile. “Just patch it through. If there’s a problem, talk to Ken.”

“No problem,” came the voice of communications officer Ken Garrison. “Downloading to all crew now.”

“Wait! I was programming the *voice!*” John cried.

“Forget the voice! Just patch the damn thing through!” Jack snapped. Joe caught his disgusted glance. How many times had they had the *John* discussion, alone here in the Control Room?

“General Summary, Planet Analysis Report One,” New Orbiter 1 spoke to each of the eight *Typhoon* men in their compartments. “Atmosphere poisonous for human beings. Cloud cover has destroyed most plant life. Radioactivity levels in major urban areas and in Central Asia fatal to human beings. Planet still experiencing magnitude four earthquakes at all locations. Entire planetary surface deadly to humans. 40,500 humans estimated left on Earth, all expected to die within two months. Specific data totaling 1,200 petabytes feeding into crystal storage.”

“A couple months,” came Harri McNarri’s voice over the intercom’s ship-wide circuit. “Wow. There were six hundred thousand in March.”

“Guess next time we’re back those last people will be gone,” Joe sighed. “If we ever come back. What’s the point?”

“We aren’t gonna try to convince ’em to evacuate?” McNarri said.

“The computer automatically radioed messages to the various refugee camps,” Jack said. “No replies. They were serious when they said they’d die on Earth. The Evacuation is officially over, and I’m going to respect their wishes.”

Joe scanned the garbage below. “Well, sometimes I wonder.”

“About why anyone would stay?” Jack said.

“About why anyone *ever* stayed. What the hell did we think we were doing down there for five thousand years? Just crashing around through one war after another?”

“You mean millions of years, don’t you?” McNarri put in. “Millions of years of human evolution led to *this*.”

“Well, I was talking about recorded history. Seems to me that once we started recording it all, we should’ve grown up somehow. Was all that *crap* down there just a training ground for space? For getting us off the stupid planet?”

That silenced the crew.

No, nobody was supposed to say that. You were supposed to say how sad it all was and how grief-stricken you were. Hell, Joe wasn’t grief-stricken. He’d been kicked out of the damn nest and now he had a new life in space. Sure, it had been a painful kick, but he guessed it needed to be.

“Well, people just want to forget,” McNarri finally said. “Can’t say I blame ’em. Won’t make much sense coming back here until a couple thousand years or so. And even then, this place will still be a godawful mess.”

Joe shook his head. The ship’s engineer still didn’t get it. He thought somebody would really want to come back. In a thousand years people would’ve put this disaster way behind them. Earth would be a polluted curiosity, a place where daredevils in rad suits might climb Mt. Everest for kicks. Well, not Mt. Everest, that one was gone, maybe some other slag heap.

“Well, there’s still the concept of planetary engineering,” Jack said, evidently deciding to let the discussion flow on ship-wide intercom. “That’s why we’re deploying these upgraded sensors. The USSF wants current data for research purposes.”

“C’mon, Jack, you don’t really believe that stuff, do you?” Harri said. “Planetary engineering? In our lifetimes? It’s just too immense a task.”

“Look, Harri, if we can start terraforming Mars, who’s to say that in a few decades we might not terraform the earth as well?”

“Sheesh, you sound like that Frankston quack.”

“He can’t be a total quack. He designed some of the Mars projects, after all.”

“Can’t be done, Jack. At least not in our lifetimes. Maybe in a couple thousand years. We don’t have the technology or the means. This whole planetary engineering crap is just nonsense

the media shoves down our throats. And anyway, we can never replace the moon. Why would anyone want to come back here if there isn't a moon?"

"C'mon, Harri, you're an engineer, you know there'll be advances in the field."

"Forget it, Jack. I just hate quackery. That Frankston guy is one of the worst. Or was. He decided to stay behind and die down there, after all."

Jack shrugged. "All I'm saying is he may have had some good ideas."

"If you say so, Captain. I need to check the reactor. We can continue our debate later."

Jack sighed. Joe grinned back. Debating the argumentative Major McNarri was always difficult, mostly because Harri was always right. Joe had no idea where Harri had picked up his vast expertise. In a way he was the most important man on the ship, because he knew how to repair every system on board. In addition, he was an M.D., their ship's doctor. He would be irreplaceable if he ever resigned. Not that any man aboard the *Typhoon* would, of course.

Communications Officer Garrison came over the intercom. "We have a communication from General Scott, Jack."

"Thanks, Ken," Jack said. "What's the clearance?"

"Standard."

Jack leaned back. "Well, if it's not Secret or Urgent, let's let everyone hear it. We need a little entertainment here today anyway."

Joe nodded. A communiqué from Mars, even one that took twenty-one minutes to get here across the current 232-million-mile distance, was a living contact from home. The five sensor satellites they'd deployed were just ghosts talking about the ghosts below.

"Patching it through," Ken said.

"Jack," came William C. Scott's clipped baritone, "when you're through with your deployment I've got another little assignment for you. Since the *Typhoon's* due for a two-week inspection, you and your crew will have plenty of time to attend to it."

Jack grinned. The two-week inspection was news to Joe as well. They hadn't had one of those in a couple years. Maybe the *Typhoon* was due, but McNarri surely would've been the one to suggest it. More likely it gave Scott the opportunity to send them on another demented special ops mission. The last had involved coordinating the rescue of two hundred tourists stranded in the Vallis Marineris a few weeks ago.

"The matter is this," the General went on. "Something's--I don't really know how to say this, but something's come up at this end."

Joe caught Jack's puzzled glance.

"And unfortunately, it's dovetailing with all these stupid rumors over the past few months. The entire population riled up, and over nothing. But I say this is really an opportunity to put all this talk of native Martians to rest once and for all."

"Oh, no!" Joe groaned. "Not the *native Martians* again."

"Quiet, Joe," Jack said.

"--reports of noises at night, vibrations in buildings, strange footprints, all these little bits of so-called *evidence*. And this idiotic talk of *Martian spirits*. Like that video of that dark shape prowling around the Armstrong Center, with AresNet blowing the whole thing out of proportion. Interviewing housewives living behind the Center, as if they're experts! Turned out to be a dog somebody strapped an EnviroField on. And riffraff like Huey Vespertine say there must be some ancient Martian culture we're trampling on! I don't have to tell you that all of Marsport's getting edgy. Of course, it's got to be that we're seeing some long-term effects of relocating our people to Mars. Some people are spooked and their ears and eyes are playing tricks on 'em, that's all."

“Sheesh,” Joe said. “What people will--”

“That is, until now.” General Scott’s voice got heavier. “I thought it was all in people’s imaginations, until now. Boys, I need you back here immediately. There’s been--I really don’t know how to say this--”

“What?” crackled the voices of several crewmembers simultaneously.

“--been a discovery. In--in the Kilpatrick Desert.”

“What?” Jack cried.

“--still can’t believe it. But I’ve seen the footage, men. On AresNet, right after you left for Earth this morning. We’re all dumbfounded here at HQ. Dammit, it can’t be possible! And in the Desert! The Kilpatrick Desert!”

“Right where he crashed!” John broke in. “In Hellas Basin!”

“Quiet, John! We know where he crashed!” Jack snapped.

“Where Colonel Kilpatrick died! No wonder the General’s upset!”

“John, let’s listen for God’s sake!” Joe said.

“All I’m trying to say--”

“Cut it, John!” Jack cried. “We want to hear--”

“Nobody listens to me!”

“--of the ruins. It’s unbelievable,” Scott went on. “We have no idea how far underground some of these--these *temples*, I guess you could call them, may go. And they’re covered with things like hieroglyphs, for want of a better term. We’re flying out more teams of specialists, but so far we haven’t cracked this--this language, if that’s what it truly is.”

“Damn,” Jim Commer put in. “Can this be real?”

“I know, I know,” Jack said in shock. “Ruins? Martian ruins?”

“So as soon as you’re done, get back here at full speed,” Scott said. “I’ll fill you in more when you return. Out.”

“Wow ...” Joe said.

“God, he’s right,” Jack said. “All those crazies who think there are native spirits prowling around are going to go into high gear.”

“Yeah, the same idiots who’ve been accusing us of covering up data about life on Mars,” came the voice of turret gunner Mickey Michaels.

“Yeah, so we could evacuate to Mars without worrying about what stupid bacteria we might be doing a genocide number on,” complained Craig Reynolds, the other turret gunner.

“Scott’s probably already feeling the pressure,” Jack agreed. “He and Kilpatrick spent five months in Hellas. Never came up with anything.”

Joe nodded, mind racing at the thought of ancient ruins. It was a measure of how upset Scott was that he hadn’t thought to send along any downloads from AresNet. For the next four and a half hours the *Typhoon* was cut off, unless someone at the USSF got his act together and sent more data. “Well, the old man will make it through.”

“Yeah, sure,” Jack said. “Still, I can’t wait to get back and find out what this stuff’s all about. He’s obviously going to send us to the Kilpatrick Desert for a couple weeks.”

“You think so? Yeah, you’re probably right.”

A light blinked on Joe’s console for the Navigation Room. Jim Commer was on the line.

“Yes, Jim, what is it?” Jack said.

“When I was loading our course, I got a flag. NAV4 says there’s an asteroid-sized object near our flight path. We don’t have it in our databanks. All I can think is that John’s sensors must’ve picked something up on the way over and just stored it in memory, but on the way back

we're close enough to trigger the alert."

"Huh," Jack said. "It's getting damn rare to find new asteroids these days. Hey, John, check with Jim on this object. Let's compare data and see what's there. We might have a little time to go after the thing on the way home." Joe knew they were all eager to get back to Mars and the news from the Kilpatrick Desert. Still, they were under standing order to check out every new asteroid.

"I've got it, Jack!" John called. "Jim was right. It wasn't close enough on the way over to abort the nav program, but it'll come within two million miles on our way back. I'll bet it's a new asteroid! The computer doesn't have anything on it. I'd say it's not too large, maybe a chunk a couple hundred feet wide."

"Fine," Jack said. "Jim, I'm taking us out of orbit now. Plot me an intersection course with that thing as well as its orbit. We'll name us a new asteroid and we can get back to Mars in a hurry after that."

"Roger," said Jim.

"Joe, prepare to increase to maximum thrust. You take her this time."

"I've got 'er," Joe replied. "Inertial dampers on."

As Jim's new course fed into the computer, maneuvering jets turned the *Typhoon* in the proper direction. Joe hit the throttle and the inertial compensators cut in, keeping the interior gravity at 1G under any acceleration. Within a minute Joe had the *Typhoon* at top end, 49.8 million miles per hour.

"We'll intercept in five minutes," Jim said.

"Fine," Jack said. "How far will this take us off our course to Mars?"

"Not too far. Won't slow us up for more than a few minutes."

"Jack! Jack! I--I can't believe it!" John shouted, voice breaking into distortion over the intercom. "The--the thing--I thought it was moving in an elliptical orbit, but--"

"What's the problem, John?" Jack snapped, his irritation evident to everyone.

"Well, I don't know how to say this, but--"

"But *what*?"

"Well, the thing's changed course! It's moving *towards* us!"

CHAPTER TWO

Saucer

Joe gripped the console joystick, adrenaline surging. The *Typhoon* was supposed to have all records of USSF, scientific, and commercial craft throughout the solar system. He scanned his console for a plot of the object, but John had neglected to feed it to the Control Room.

“Jack, it’s a ship! It has to be a ship!” John cried.

“I know that!” Jack yelled back. “What else can it be? Get me precise measurements on that thing! The pilot needs information, John, information! You know that! You’ve had pilot training!” He turned to Joe. “Joe, you keep piloting command. I need time to think.”

“Sure,” Joe said. “Jack, do you think this thing could be AC?”

“Well, who can--hell! John! Configuration on that object! Does it match Alpha Centaurian?”

“Well, I don’t know,” John muttered. “How’m I supposed to know?”

“John, get on top of this! Is that an AC ship or not?”

“Uh--sorry, Jack, I guess I got carried away. It’s just that I’ve never seen--”

“Measurements!”

“Uh, sorry, uh, let’s see ... length is 205 feet, width is, uh, looks like its width is also 205. Wow, it’s perfectly circular! Man, like a classic flying saucer!”

“Hmm,” Jack said. “Joe, what do you think?”

“Not one of ours, that’s what I think.”

“Not any AC design I know of. Their ships are thousands of feet long with all sorts of crap stacked on ’em.”

“But we can’t rule it out on those grounds. And for all we know, John’s misread the sensors.”

“Don’t get me started,” Jack sighed, then spoke into the intercom: “John! Double-check configuration and please send detailed plot to command and copilot consoles.”

“I didn’t misread the sensors!” John shot back. “The thing is circular! Why does Joe always assume--”

“John! Double-check it anyway! That could be an AC ship invading our solar system! We don’t have any time to waste!”

“Okay, okay, I’m doing it, I’m doing it! Calibrate zonal sensor A ... long range scanner override ... c’mon, scanner, override ... okay, press F3 to override ... dee dee dee ...”

“Jeez ...”

“While he’s doing that, I’ve downloaded you the plots,” Jim broke in.

“Thanks, Jim,” Jack said as a 3D plot of the alien object’s trajectory appeared on Joe’s console.

“Jack, Jim grabbed my sensor output for his NAV4 Cluster again!” John complained.

“Look, it’s okay this time,” Jack said. “We know you’re busy, and we’re having a little emergency here.”

“But I always have to recalibrate the matrices if NAV4 intervenes!”

“I don’t care, John! We’ll recalibrate them later! And go for visual as soon as you can! Dump it on our screens in the Control Room!”

“Man, the goddamn ACs can’t be in our solar system, can they?” Joe said. “They aren’t supposed to be able to *get* here. Their ships are too unreliable.”

“We just don’t know,” Jack said. “This could be it, Joe. This really could be it.”

“Dammit, after all we’ve been through,” Joe muttered, ashamed of himself for succumbing

to one second of whining. Still, after the end of Earth, after the Evacuation, after the solar system had *chopped itself in half*, weren't they entitled to a break?

Jack jabbed a blue square on his command pad. "Weapon turrets."

"We're here, Jack," spoke Mickey Michaels, commander of the turrets.

"What's with that thing?" asked Craig Reynolds, the second turret operator.

"We've got an unidentified spaceship heading our way. Pick up the heading from John and set blasters to maximum power. If and when I tell you to, destroy it."

"Wow ..." said Michaels. "I mean, roger. We can hit it."

The two turrets, mounted on the back of the *Typhoon I*, each contained a swiveling PlanetBlaster capable of hitting any object within 10,000 miles of the ship. Michaels liked to say that these guns could hit a dime at 7,000 miles and remove one letter from it, or slowly melt the entire surface of a planet, but they'd never tried either experiment.

"Okay, I guess it's standard procedure for your first officer to remind you that there's no reason to suppose that ship is actually hostile," Joe said.

"Forget it," Jack said. "We don't know that. I'm not taking any chances. That thing changed course and it's heading right at us. I want you to aim the *Typhoon* at top end straight down that thing's nose. If it has one."

Joe grinned. "You got it. I was just reminding you of USSF First Contact Policy One."

"Piss on USSF First Contact Policy One. This could be the start of the AC invasion. They're crazy, they hate our guts, and they'd give absolutely no warning." He punched another square on his console. "Garrison, any contact?" Jack called to the communications officer.

"None, sir," came the reply. "I'm sending out standard messages."

"Turrets, when we're within firing range we're going to veer sharply to starboard. Be prepared to shoot to port when I tell you." He jabbed his pad again. "John, is that thing still on a collision course?"

"Well, I don't know if I'd say *collision*, Jack, but--"

"John! Does it show any sign of getting out of our path?"

"Uh, no, Jack. It's like it's heading directly for us at 10.6 million miles per hour. Distance: 2.148 million miles. Time to intersection: 2.13 minutes."

Joe tensed his right hand tight around the joystick as the seconds passed.

"Is it showing any signs of slowing down or changing course?" Jack called.

"No," came John's reply. "Time to intersection: 1.89 minutes."

"Systems checks, everyone. Battle status. Turrets ready. McNarri, come forward and man the Xon bomb command station."

As the crewmembers checked off their systems over the intercom, Harri McNarri entered the Control Room and took a third seat behind the Commers. He swiveled to face a small console at the rear of the cabin.

"Well, Harri, how's the reactor holding up?" Jack said.

"Running perfectly," McNarri said over his shoulder. "Jack, are you really sure we'll need an Xon?"

"We just may. I'm not sure what that thing's capabilities are. Maybe it's not at top end, maybe it'll take evasive action. If we can't get within ten thousand miles and have to have the Xon bomb radiation take it out, so be it."

"Right." Harri went through the Xon arming sequence. Joe could tell Harri was shocked. The last time they'd armed an Xon was eight months ago.

"Turrets, are you ready?" Jack called.

“Ready,” said Michaels. “We have maximum on both blasters. Our computers are locked onto the object.”

“Jack, are you sure we should fire at that ship without making contact?” Joe said. “If it turns out to be one of ours, with some weird computer error causing it to do this--”

“I won’t blast it if it tells me it’s one of ours. Garrison? Any contact?”

“Still none, Jack.”

“John!” Jack said. “Do we still not have any identifiable configuration on that thing?”

“Uh, no, nothing,” came John’s reply. “Um, time to intersection, uh, twenty-five seconds.”

“Tell me at ten.”

“Jack, my reflexes don’t mean anything at this closing speed,” Joe said. “The computer will have to take the evasive.”

“I know that,” Jack said. “Get the backup autopilot online too. Set it to auto-evasive at eight seconds if main doesn’t confirm at ten.”

“Got it,” Joe said, punching in commands. “You know, it’d be great if we could disable this thing and capture the crew.”

“Forget it. No time. I’m not taking chances.”

“Okay, just giving options,” Joe grunted, tensing on the control stick.

“Ten seconds!” John cried.

“Blasters, fire!” Jack shouted. Joe felt the slightest computer-aided quiver in the stick as a massive white streak flashed by in the sun’s glare. From the rear of the ship came the tremors of the dual PlanetBlasters.

“We are blasting!” cried Michaels. But thousands of tiny lights blossomed everywhere.

“Bombs, missiles--something!” John babbled. “We--”

The cockpit canopy showed nothing but white. Without waiting for orders Joe shot the ship further right and down, so fast that the inertial compensators had trouble keeping up. He could feel the computer aiding his movements, which were probably wildly exaggerated compared to what the system thought necessary to avoid whatever was exploding out there.

“Tiny little *missiles* ...” John said dreamily. “Thousands of ’em, none over a foot long. Who ever heard of that?”

“Turrets--results!” Jack yelled.

“We--got it, Jack,” Michaels said, voice drained. “Both PlanetBlasters caught it before the evasive. It’s gone.”

“John, give me a view from the rear. Patch it to everyone’s console.”

Joe’s console showed a jagged glowing red cloud of debris fading behind them. “Wow ...” he whispered. How quickly they’d gotten into combat, how quickly it was over. He exhaled, heart racing, feeling relief and disgust at the results, along with an uneasy mix of pride and shame in his own reactions.

To his surprise Jack was on his feet, pacing. “Yeah, wow. Hard to believe, isn’t it?” He turned to McNarri. “Harri--ship’s status. Any damage from the missiles?”

“None, sir,” McNarri replied. “That copilot of yours has good reflexes. We avoided ’em all.”

Jack grinned at Joe. “We’ll keep him on for now. Harri, let me know if you find anything to the contrary. We’ll give the ship a thorough going-over once we get to Mars. Scott wants a two-week inspection anyway.”

McNarri whistled. “We’re not due for any inspection!”

Jack laughed. “I knew it! We’ll discuss that later. Joe, turn us around. We’ll sift through the debris, see what we can find. John!” he called back to the sensor officer’s workroom. “Feed

Joe's console the coordinates of the debris field. Jim, plot us a course back to Mars from there."

"Roger, I'm on it now," Jim said as Joe slowed the ship to twenty million miles per hour and swung it in a wide circle.

"Listen, Jack ... that was real great, what you did back there," came John's voice.

"John, are you feeding Joe the location of that debris field?"

"Well ... okay ... let me try ... grid zone Alpha, standard pulse ... dee dee dee ..."

"Harri," Jack said, "stand down the Xon and let's do a diagnostic on the solar rechargers. That was a fast acceleration to top end and we probably used up enough drive to slow us down a bit on the way home."

"I'm on it," Harri said. "They're at 89%. Not bad. Got 'em recharging now."

"Anyway, what I wanted to say is, I'm sorry I wasn't a little faster back there," John said. "I guess it all happened a little fast."

Jack exhaled. "It's okay, John. You did okay." He walked back to the command console and looked out the front window of the *Typhoon*. The glowing debris field came into view. "Let's just cruise right up to it so we can take some samples."

"Got it," Joe said, slowing the *Typhoon* to a few thousand miles per hour over the unknown ship's last known velocity and activating the sample tubes under the nose. Anything they got would be sealed in lead and stored in the compartment under their feet. Meanwhile the debris field, the remnants of a ship that had been traveling 10.6 million miles per hour, spread further and further apart.

"Garrison, was there ever any communication from that ship?" Jack said.

"None, sir."

"John, did you get photos and detailed scans of that thing?"

"Well, Jack, to tell you the truth, in all the excitement I guess I forgot to set the main analysis program in gear."

Jack pursed his lips. "Hell, John."

"Sorry, Jack. I guess I just ... messed up. But I do have the long-range scans. They still show a lot of detail. I'll send them through now."

Seconds later a radar image of the other ship showed on both Jack and Joe's computer screens.

"It sure doesn't look like any AC ship design I've seen," Joe said. "Look at that thing. Who the hell would build a military *flying saucer*?"

"Well, there are those stupid little circular civilian ships."

"You think this was an oversized Mercedes PleasureCraft?" Joe hooted. God, what if some billionaire really did commission some oversized space yacht? How many innocent people would they have just blasted? And for nothing? For some communications glitch?

"No, nobody'd use that design for military work," McNarri put in, getting up from the Xon bomb console. "Too inefficient if you need to cruise in a planetary atmosphere. Unless they have one heck of a power source."

As McNarri opened the Control Room hatch to move down the ladder into the fuselage, Joe became aware of the chatter from the open doors of the various workrooms on the catwalk behind them:

"--got to be Centaurian! How else did it avoid our databanks?"

"Hell, there could be all sorts of rogue ships we don't know about."

"But I do have this radar image of one of the missiles launched at us," John said over the intercom. It came to Joe's screen, a foot-long cylinder with rounded ends.

“Not exactly fascinating,” Jack said. “We’ll let headquarters examine all this data. We ought to be able to get something out of the debris as well. John, please scan ahead and identify interesting pieces we might want to take back.”

“Uh, roger,” John said. “Let me shift to that module. I’ll have to figure out how it links up to the sample tube interface.”

Jack sighed and, still on his feet, punched a square on his console for ship-wide contact. “Men. You did great. We certainly didn’t expect this attack, but you all did extremely well. I know we’re all curious about the source of that craft, but it’ll have to wait for USSF analysis back on Mars. Our next task is to pick up as many samples as we can from the debris field. As we do so, and on the trip back home, everyone will stay on alert for any other intrusions. Thanks. Out.”

Joe noted the tone in his older brother’s voice when he spoke of the trip back. Home. Mars was home now. This short meaningless battle reinforced that. Whether they’d just blasted some foolish rogue ship that had no idea what it was taking on, or an Alpha Centaurian battleship invading the solar system, the crew had further bonded. They’d survived, they had a home to return to, a home to defend.

“Sorry this is taking so long to set up the sample tube interface,” John said. Joe noted that John had decided to broadcast this to everyone on board. “But whenever Jim patches in his NAV4 Cluster to my sensor array I have to recalibrate the whole thing.”

“John, we’re in a combat situation here,” Jack said, also choosing to reply to the entire crew. “Harri can look into that glitch when we get back. All we need is a simple pickup of twenty or thirty pieces of debris off that ship. If you can find anything organic, so much the better. You don’t need to recalibrate your entire sensor array now.”

No reply from John.

Jack switched to John’s workroom only. “John, answer me! We’re in the debris field now. You’re the one who should be telling *me* that! I need you to zone in on likely debris candidates! Do you hear me?”

“Yes, Jack ...” came a tiny voice. “I’ll get right on it ... I’m so sorry ...”

“Patching ship’s controls to Sample Collection Mode,” Joe said. John’s sensors would now aim the ship toward promising pieces of debris.

“Yes, Joe ...” came John’s petulant whimper. “I’m really sorry ...”

“*Dammit*,” Jack muttered as he shut the intercom off. “You know, this just can’t go on, Joe. We’ve got to do something about John. Despite what I just said about the entire crew doing an excellent job, John could have gotten us all killed.”

“Look,” Joe said. “I agree. I mean, I know we have to talk about it sometime.”

“He just doesn’t belong on the *Typhoon*. Why can’t we all just admit that?”

Joe turned back to his console, shocked. Had the battle upset Jack so badly? Could he really think of splitting up the Commer brothers?

“Look, Jim’s a damn navigational genius. We couldn’t possibly function without him. But John? I mean, they just about cancel each other out!”

Joe winced. In all the *John* discussions, Jack had never gone quite that far.

“I don’t care what Dad thinks!” Jack fumed. “We nearly lost the *Typhoon* due to John!”

“Look, Jack, why don’t we discuss it with General Scott when we get back? Maybe he’ll have some insight. I mean, everyone’s edgy right now. We can’t think properly. This is the first time any of us have seen ship-to-ship combat, after all.”

Jack exhaled. “I know. I know.”

“Meanwhile, maybe everyone ought to try and relax. We just had a scrape. But maybe if we just spend some time picking up debris, we can all relax again. Might take anywhere from a few minutes to a couple hours to get what we need. Then we can head for home. Fill in on all the news. Find out about those ruins and all.”

“Home ...” Jack sighed, pulling himself back into the command seat. “Yeah, Joe, let’s get on home.”

CHAPTER THREE

Standdown

Thursday, June 8, 2034, 1700 hours

The automated bus came off the Upheaval Freeway and onto Jupiter Boulevard. Jack tried to will the tension out of his neck, his forearms, and his back. He checked his watch. Twelve hours since they'd lifted off this morning for Earth. The other seven crewmembers were sprawled in their seats. Michaels, Reynolds, and McNarri were asleep.

Jack supposed they should all be excused that sloppy *Typhoon* standdown. They must've spent all of ten minutes closing down the ship after putting her in the hanger. Jack had informed Facilities of the load of debris to send to Investigation, then he'd run a Quick Mode AutoDiagnostic and walked out. He hadn't even asked the other seven if they'd shut down properly. He probably should mention that when they got to the hotel.

Two 4.67-hour journeys. Although at 49.8 million miles per hour it no longer mattered where planets were in the solar system, and they no longer had to calculate orbits and conserve fuel, Jack knew his entire crew vastly preferred the runs where Mars was within forty or fifty million miles. Nobody wanted to sit still for over four and a half hours, twice in one day. They'd left at 0500, arrived at Earth 0940, spent an hour deploying the five satellites, then *fought that ship*. And surveyed the debris field to noon.

Jack had ordered himself not to even think about the attack until some analysis of the debris was complete. He wished he could pretend this was all a pleasant normal work day. Wasn't it time to grab a few beers and relax with the boys?

Mars' one-third gravity lessened the fatigue. His back already felt a little looser. Beside him Joe yawned. Ahead Jim studied the high glass boxes of downtown Marsport connected by thin skyways, some architect's idea of an homage to the classic science fiction stories of Mars from the previous century. The pink sky was failing, but the lighted boxes of the city glowed yellow in the coming sunset.

All built by robots within a few months. Most of those skyscrapers were still going up. In the lower Martian gravity, they'd be much taller than on Earth. The city also incorporated two lovely pedestrian pathways circling downtown. The outer ring, Earth, was raised, resembling the Great Wall of China, and you could see the entirety of downtown from all angles as you went around. The inner ring, Venus, was a sunken pit filled with geologic specimens from around the solar system, and thousands of different kinds of Earth trees kept alive in their own EnviroFields. Jack loved to explore both rings.

The bus rolled to Canal Street, passing the United System Building, two hundred stories tall and headquarters of the USSF. Jack noted the silent gratitude of the entire crew that he hadn't programmed a stop at HQ but instead allowed them to ride a couple more blocks to their hotel. Nobody wanted to be debriefed; nobody wanted to think of the journey, or the attack. Everyone was anxious to be home. There was so much going on here, like the Kilpatrick Desert discovery. He was so tired, and hoped Scott would never send them back to Earth again. Who wanted to visit a dead planet? Then again, Easterling, Deputy USSF Commander, was so gung-ho for missions back to collect artifacts from libraries and museums. There was a big political push for that, but couldn't they send some slower, nonmilitary ships for that stuff?

Jack could also feel the men's relief at riding a civilian bus back from the spaceport. They often avoided taking a USSF jeep to their hotel. The bus was charmingly slow, removed from any military duty of even returning some ensign or airman's salute, and it also gave a great view

of Marsport as they came down the Upheaval.

Up on the right was the tall black tetrahedron of the Marsport Hotel. The officers' quarters at the spaceport weren't due to be completed for a few months, so the *Typhoon* crew had their own rooms at the hotel. Here again they enjoyed the respite from military life, and all eight men would be sorry to be assigned their new quarters, even though they'd be getting single rooms.

"Wake up, Harri, we're here! Mickey and Craig, you too," Jack said. "How can you guys sleep through the attractions of Canal Street?"

"Aw, jeez," Harri said, stretching. "I was trying to *demonstrate* how."

"Marsport Hotel!" came the automated voice from the front of the bus. "Warning! Depressurization at stop! Sensors show all passenger EnviroFields set to activate. If for some reason you think yours is not ready, please press the HELP button on the seat in front of you. Thank you. Depressurization *now*."

Jack felt his own EnviroField click on as the bus sucked all but a fraction of the air out of the bus and stored it in canisters atop the vehicle. In a moment the front door opened to the outer Martian environment.

"Those are the Commers!" came a child's whisper through a suit radio as the eight men of the *Typhoon* made their way down the center aisle and out.

They strode across a plaza filled with sculptures carved from pink rock. In the center of the plaza workmen were constructing one of those new giant information screens. They seemed silly to Jack, who was accustomed to processing his information through his personal USSF Comm, but he understood the emotional need for people to congregate at information sites and read the day's news in letters a foot high. Or input their own news into AresNet if they desired.

So far the only information available on the ten-by-twenty-foot slab was a sign that said "Information Kiosk Under Construction" in numerous languages. Jack's goal was to learn Chinese. English and Chinese were the two big languages on Mars, although Jack supposed a lot of those ideograms were languages other than Chinese. Still, so many USSF personnel were Chinese that a working knowledge of the language would come in handy, despite the ongoing refinement of translation software.

Jack felt himself slipping into his command role even in the act of walking across the plaza with his crewmates. He noted which ones seemed most tired or edgy, and guessed which ones would be most receptive to discussing the sloppy ship standdown, and which ones might have the worst problems dealing with the spaceship attack. Which, again, he wasn't going to think about right now.

And here he was herding seven grown men through the hotel airlock, across the lobby and to the elevators. When two elevators came, the four Commers took one and the other four took the second. That was unusual, as the four Commers liked to make sure the groups mixed, that the Commer brothers didn't become some upper hierarchy.

"Tired," was all Jim said as the four brothers avoided looking at themselves in the mirrored elevator.

"Me, too. Man, what a day," Joe said. Jack knew the saucer was on everyone's minds. The Kilpatrick Desert curiosity had been pushed to the back of their fried brains.

"We'll need to look at that NAV4 cluster glitch first thing in the morning!" John said. "Do you think it could be a central server problem? Maybe the new sensor alignment package wasn't compatible with--"

"Later, John," Jack said. "We can deal with it later. And our two-week inspection ought to include some overall computer upgrades."

“Still, you’ll never know when we’ll fight another *saucer* like the one we ran into today!” John said. “Do you think maybe the ACs could be jamming our sensor modules, and that it’s only *apparently* a NAV4 cluster glitch?”

“Look, we don’t know it’s Alpha Centaurian,” Joe cut in wearily. “And that NAV4 glitch has been with us for a couple months now.”

“Let’s just drop it for a while, shall we?” Jack said. “Everyone’s tired, John, let’s just relax and think about this tomorrow.”

“Okay, okay, I was just trying to be of assistance here.”

Jack shook his head. With the four of them in the elevator, he was again reminded of that crack about “the Commers decreasing in size.” Every Commer wound up two inches shorter than the last. Jack was the tallest at 6’1”, although Joe, who worked out a lot, was the most physical of all of them at 5’11”, with huge biceps and pectorals straining out of his tight red tunic.

Crew-cut Jim at 5’9” was of medium build, but his body was a highly efficient tool. There was nothing spare on him, and he looked ready to attack any problem instantly. He had sharp features, a pointed chin, intense blue eyes and a confident, direct voice. Jack had always wondered why Jim had never expressed interest in ship’s command. There was a slightly dark complexion to his face, somewhat like Joe’s, in comparison to John’s milky one. Jack supposed his own complexion was midway between Joe’s and Jim’s.

At 5’7”, John got by on his high-energy charisma. At least, he was charismatic up to the point where he crossed the line into irritating. More than once Jack had heard John described as “the small cute one.” His thin blond hair brushed the tops of his eyebrows. His blue eyes were somehow brighter, bigger, and airier than Jim’s. Jack and Joe shared the brown eyes in the family, Jim and John the blue.

Speaking of cute, John had a lovely girlfriend, Laurie, red-haired, petite, an airman first class at the USSF Spaceport. No one could explain how John had snared her, except to consider that the youngest Commer could be charming when he wished. Joe had cynically said that he himself would act charming if it would get him into Laurie’s tiny pants. That had earned him a rare rebuke from Jack: “For God’s sake, respect his girlfriend! This is probably the first one he’s ever had.”

They came up to their rooms, 1001 through 1004 at the end of a sunlit hall. As Jack unlocked 1001 and watched Joe sail through the open door to flop onto his bed, he berated himself for paying too much attention to these trivial concerns. Why had he pulled rank on his own brother and told him to mind his own business about John’s girlfriend? Who cared? Why was Jack involving himself in such nonsense? This wasn’t a game. Jack Commer had more important duties, such as being responsible for the USSF’s most powerful spaceship.

Jim and Harri, Mickey and Craig, Ken and John were getting into their rooms, groaning and sighing. “Let’s call up for some margaritas,” Craig said.

“Later, lemme sleep,” Mickey responded. “We’ll hit the bar later, man.”

Before their door closed Jack could hear John eagerly biting into the NAV4 problems with Ken Garrison, who was already asleep or faking it. Jack wondered if now might not be the best time to chat with John about his performance during the saucer attack. Sure, he was exhausted, but maybe it was best to get this unpleasantness out of the way now.

He was distracted by a USSF corporal exiting the elevator.

“Oh, there you are, sir,” said this corporal, saluting. “General Scott noted that your USSF Comm was off.”

“What? Really?” Jack said, returning the salute and then pulling his comm from his pocket.

“Well, I’ll be. I’ve had it off the entire mission.” He knew what was coming next. No wonder they’d remained unmolested during their bus ride back.

“General Scott wishes to see you and Commander Joe Commer immediately,” the corporal said.

“I see,” Jack said with a sigh. “I should have figured he’d still be in his office, what with all the Kilpatrick Desert news. Well, then, dismissed.” The corporal saluted and left. Jack turned to the other men who’d managed to get off their beds and hang in the doorways. “The rest of you are off the hook. For now at least. Come on, Joe.”

*

Jack checked his watch as the express elevator shot to the USSF Command Suite on the 130th floor, developing 1.5G as it did so.

“Worried about time?” Joe said, steadying himself under the acceleration. “We could’ve had that corporal take us back in his jeep. I saw him duck down Neptune to the parking garage as we were coming up.”

“Nah, I needed the walk. Unkink my legs,” Jack said. “I was just surprised it’s still so early. 1730 hours. Feels like it’s about 2200 or so.”

As the elevator decelerated there was a brief moment where Jack’s feet almost left the floor. Then they returned to one-third gravity and the elevator doors slid aside to reveal the red, white and blue-tinted glass of the sprawling USSF Headquarters lobby.

Lieutenant Larsen of USSF Security was on duty at his command station. “Just you two here today, sir?” Larsen said, saluting.

“That’s right,” Jack said as he and Joe passed through the DNA scanner. “You know Scott doesn’t like crowds. I can’t remember the last time we had the whole crew in his office.”

“We heard about that ship that attacked you,” Larsen said. “Great work taking it out.”

“Thanks. Couldn’t take chances. Can’t wait to see the debris results.”

“Would you two get your butts in here?” General William C. Scott rasped over the intercom. “Wasting the entire damn night out there! And I can’t believe the security officer on duty is babbling United System *secrets* to anyone who walks up.”

“Well, uh, sir!” Larsen said, coming to attention even though Scott was nowhere in sight. “Uh, really, sir, I saw it was the Commers, you know!”

Jack grinned at Larsen, put a finger to his lips, and mouthed: “He’s kidding.” He pushed open the heavy oak door to Scott’s office.

“That’s better,” Scott snarled from behind a titanium desk that seemed as large as *Typhoon I’s* wing. “Larsen, secure the door and initiate a full-scale security sweep of this entire floor. We can’t chance any slip-ups.”

“Oh, yes! Yes, sir!” Larsen said, throwing Scott a salute that almost took his own forehead off. “I’ll get on it right away, sir! Security Sweep Bravo underway, sir!”

“Sheesh,” Scott said. “The man has no sense of humor. But the security sweep should keep him busy for a while. Well, sit down, boys.” Scott gestured from behind piles of paper at two large blue chairs. Jack had always wondered about the old man’s affinity for paper reports. Jack had all that stuff accessible, and better organized, on his USSF Comm.

“First of all, General, I’m sorry about my comm being off,” Jack said. “I had some problems with the battery last night and I guess I forgot to turn it back on.”

“No problem,” Scott said, picking up a long heavy wedge at the front of his desk that spelled

out SCOTT - SUPREME COMMANDER USSF (SCUSSF). “The man who has this thing on his desk can certainly take the time to order a corporal to drive over to the spaceport to find you, and then chase you all the way back to your hotel room when he doesn’t find you there. We only wasted an hour or so. No problem.”

Jack swallowed. “I--I--”

“You could’ve always called me on *my* comm,” Joe pointed out.

Scott swiveled his small powerful torso in his adjustable gravity chair and fixed Joe with a long silent stare out of his black eyes. His face was a weathered Martian boulder catching the dying sunset from the thirty-foot-long floor-to-ceiling window. He let the silence go on long enough for a few Martian dust storms to etch new lines into the rock. “Commander Commer,” he finally spoke, “I believe my primary contact on the *Typhoon* would be its captain, not you.”

“Uh ... sorry, sir,” Joe gulped.

“What he meant, sir, I’m sure,” Jack said, “was as backup, in case of--”

“You boys are as bad as Larsen!” Scott laughed, shaking his name plate at Jack. “No sense of humor! Commer, I ought to lay this piece of crap on *your* desk when I retire! Pass over a few hundred eager generals and admirals and make *you* the damn SCUSSF! You could see what it’s like to be surrounded by people with no sense of humor.”

There was a long silence as Jack and Joe avoided Scott’s eerie laugh. Jack focused on the view of Marsport and the sunseting desert from 130 stories up, wondering once again if General Scott wasn’t quite unhinged at the bottom of it all.

Jack had always wondered if the Evacuation didn’t snap the old man. How had he hauled two billion people to Mars? What about his order to drop the Xon? Wouldn’t that snap anyone?

Or maybe it was the *Triumph* disaster. To be the second man to step on Mars and have your inertial dampers fail on the launch for home. Watching your best friend Kilpatrick get killed. Crash-landing in Hellas and living in the wreckage for two months. What had that done to his mind? Scott’s back was so crippled that all he could do was sit in that adjustable-gravity chair all day and run the damn bureaucracy.

“Well, to be frank, sir, sometimes it’s hard to tell whether you’re joking or not,” Jack finally spoke.

Those obsidian eyes set deep in the Martian boulder fixed Jack again. “That’s how you get to *be* SCUSSF, you know. Keep ’em guessing.”

Jack nodded. “I--I guess so, sir.”

Scott let his name wedge thump back onto his desk. In one-third G it didn’t pack the wallop it would’ve on Earth. “Well, enough pleasant career counseling, boys. Let’s get to work. We’ve got problems, as I’m sure you know. How’s your crew holding up after that attack?”

Jack blinked at this tidbit of solicitude. “Well enough, I guess. They’re all exhausted, though.”

“You included?”

“Uh ... no, sir.”

Scott cocked his head. “Get some sleep tonight. That’s an order.”

“Well ... yes, sir.”

“Commander,” Scott turned to Joe. “How about you? A little tired?”

“Well, now that you mention it ...”

“Rattled by that ship, no doubt. I bet you all are.”

“Well, I guess we’re all worried it was an AC ship.”

“We won’t know until they analyze the debris,” Scott said. “They’ll be able to tell us which

solar system the metal is from. My guess is AC, but I still maintain the Centaurians don't have the technology to mount any sort of full-scale invasion on us. Not yet at any rate. This was probably just a scout."

"Still, it's sobering to consider that they might be in the system," Jack said. "But the only other explanation is some unregistered civilian ship. I'm just hoping it's not that."

"Well, all we can deal with is reality. All I know is that no ship outside the military can do 10.6 million miles per hour."

"That we know of," Joe interjected.

"Well, we'll deal with whatever comes up, that's all." Scott leaned on his huge muscled forearms. "As we'll deal with this goddamn archaeological dig in the Kilpatrick Desert. Wish to God those science types would just back off for a while, but they had to go discover this thing and now we have to deal with it. Dammit to hell!"

There was a silence during which Jack contemplated the lights turning on in skyscrapers across the panorama of downtown Marsport.

"So now we've got to deal with the fact that the public is already tying the Kilpatrick ruins into those strange noises in southwest Marsport that AresNet's been hyping. The entire population's on edge. And the mayor's a total idiot. Plill's babbling about poltergeists, about spirits of ancient Martians, dammit, he'll babble anything! I should never have gone along with his appointment."

Jack shrugged. His own dealings with Anmond Plill, mostly ceremonial, had been anything but pleasant. Plill made no secret of his distaste for "militarists."

"And now these damned Martian ruins." Scott picked up a report in a thick plastic binder. "Latest data." He tossed the heavy binder at Jack, who snatched it out of the air with difficulty, loose pages spewing into his lap. He scanned the color photos of strange structures amid sand, boulders, and what looked like caves. Now he realized how exhausted he was, because he couldn't make sense of what he was seeing and worse, he didn't care.

"Well, in short, gentlemen, we have a public relations problem here," Scott said. "We've got to convince the public we're on top of this. Which is why I'm sending my war heroes, all eight of your crew, to the Kilpatrick Desert tomorrow morning at 0800 hours."

"Uh, yessir," Jack said, hopes of sleeping well into the afternoon evaporating. "But of course, we're not archeologists or anything like that."

"Of course not. We'll be inserting our own USSF archeological team there in a day or two to keep those civilians from the University of Mars in line. But I've also sent a Star Drive communication through to Alpha Centauri and I'm recalling General Douglas. First he can tour the ruins, then he can analyze your ship debris in full detail. And we plaster his picture all over AresNet."

Jack nodded. "Wow, the Alien Hunter himself."

"Batty but brilliant," Scott rejoined. "Weird how he can sniff out those Centaurian hiding places and find those damn spies. It still amazes me how we can call him back from four light-years away in just a few minutes. He'll be arriving on the *Cloaked Vengeance* at 2000 hours. Your first assignment will be to accompany General Douglas to the hotel when he lands at the spaceport. Then you and your crew will accompany him for a *Martian hunting expedition* at 0800 tomorrow."

Jack and Joe dully absorbed this news of even less sleep. Jack found himself transfixed by the changing light outside. It was only when Scott slammed a few binders on his desk that Jack understood he'd fallen asleep in his big blue chair.

“That is all, gentlemen. Dismissed.”