

CHAPTER ONE

Jack's Anxiety

Thursday, February 1, 2035, 2336 hours

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

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

"Check."

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

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

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

"Check ..." Jack sighed.

"Check," Joe said automatically.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Borman here. Dorsal turret *perfect*."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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