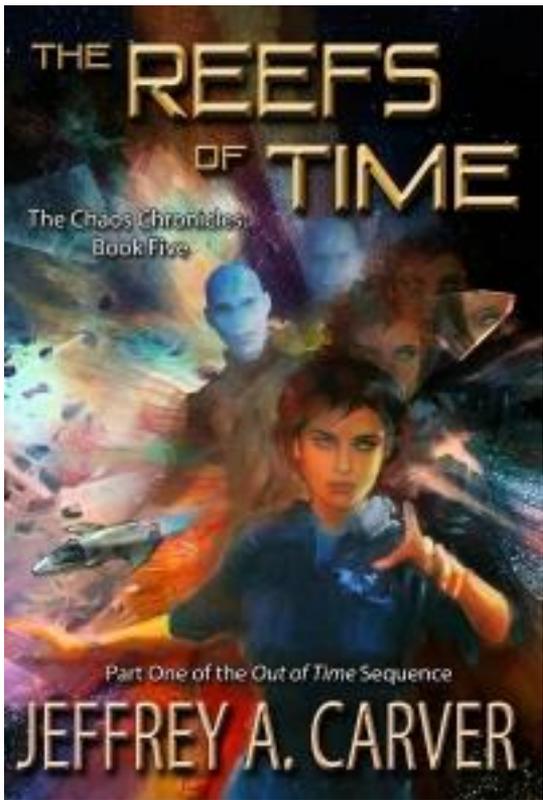


THE REEFS OF TIME

The Chaos Chronicles
Book Five

Part One of the *Out of Time* Sequence

JEFFREY A. CARVER



THE REEFS OF TIME

Volume Five of The Chaos Chronicles

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[SAMPLE]

Jeffrey A. Carver

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PART ONE

Storm Gathering

*“The long unmeasured pulse of time moves
everything.”*

—Sophocles

*“O time! swift devourer of all created
things!”*

—Leonardo Da Vinci

“Always in motion is the future.”

—Yoda

PROLOGUE ONE

In the Starstream

A RIVER OF light, a ribbon of tortured space, the starstream was a new feature in the galaxy by any cosmological standard. A mere human-century old, it had been created by Humanity and Humanity's galactic friends, or perhaps not so much created as jiggered into being. It was sentient tinkering that had triggered the fusion of three cosmological objects: two black holes and one cosmic hyperstring. The hyperstring, a longline flaw in space-time, was by good fortune already anchored at one end by the star-gobbling black hole at the center of the galaxy. It was the other end that was the object of Humanity's engineering, which was to trap it like a dinosaur in tar in the black hole left by the collapse of a star called Betelgeuse.

The starstream twanged and hummed like a harp string. Stretched between the two black holes, it spanned two thirds of the radius of the galaxy. That alone would have been a glorious achievement; but it was useful as well as interesting. It formed a perfect n-space transport system, speeding starships toward myriad new frontiers. In the century since its creation, it had become a major thoroughfare for interstellar commerce and migration, involving dozens of races and hundreds of worlds. From the inside of the starstream, it was a luminous pipeline, seeming to extend forever. From the outside, it was practically invisible.

The creation of the starstream was not without conflict or loss of life—a price that continued to be paid long after its creation. It was discovered and used by others, as well as its creators. And not just the Throgs, who killed worlds and millions of people before they were stopped (an action in which I played a small part¹)—but by others, even more dangerous. Things out of not just deep space, but deep time.

And that was when the worst of the trouble began. Intelligent and malicious dust that devoured, reports whispered. Things that destroyed minds, murmured others. Things that were terrifyingly like other adversaries galactic humanity had faced, but maybe worse, and with more to follow.

Eventually the rumors and reports traveled all the way out to Shipworld, beyond the outermost edge of the galaxy. On Shipworld, the governing bodies took such reports very seriously. Some sort of action would have to be taken, for the protection of inhabited worlds everywhere.

I was a part of that action, too.

There is much to tell about it, and about related matters. I will do my best to make it all clear . . . starting with another and completely different introduction.

—Jeaves, an AI currently residing on Shipworld

¹ A story I told at somewhat greater length in my earlier mission report entitled, *Down the Stream of Stars*.

PROLOGUE TWO

Karellia

KARELLIA: WORLD OF beautiful, perilous sky.

The planet Karellia was a cerulean and white and earth-red gemstone—pretty enough as inhabited worlds went, bearing significant areas of arid terrain, forest, and maroon fungal plains. Less than a fourth of the planet's surface was ocean, so the blue regions were relatively small and scattered. Still, rich underground water reserves blessed the world with verdant fields and forests, from the tropics to the colder climate zones. Even the deserts were host to abundant ecologies. But none of these things accounted for the name given to the world by its inhabitants.

Karellia: world of beautiful, perilous sky.

Karellia's sky was alive; the world was cradled by a terrible, fire-breathing dragon. Its mother star and all of the star's planets were bound in by a nebula of awesome and terrible energy, a nebula called Heart of Fire, that continuously sleeted the entire planetary system with charged particles and a billow of soft radiation. Around Karellia itself, a tight, fiery belt of trapped particles glowed and danced with an even brighter auroral display—a display that threatened death to any living thing that dared enter its realm.

Beneath the Belt, under that draconic gaze, lived the denizens of Karellia, sheltered from the astral storm by the same planetary magnetic field that held the Belt in place. From Karellia, the Belt

was a halo that arched like a vast, misty cathedral ceiling over the curvature of the planet. In daytime it sparkled almost gaily in reds and golds; at night it glowed in ghostly shades of cyan and scarlet, its beauty belying its perilous nature. No one living entered the Belt.

But of late, there was something new in the sky, even more perilous. Something not caused by nature:

Asteroids, flung down from the stars.

Whatever initial uncertainty there had been about the source of the asteroids—thirty years now since the first—had been erased by the tracing back of the rocks' trajectories. A planet circling Karellia's sun's binary companion—barely glimpsed through the intervening dust and plasma—had been discovered only a few decades before the first attack. A few old robotic probes to the planet and its system had gone missing. But that planet was unquestionably the source of the asteroids.

Some enemy on that planet wished Karellia ill, and was hurling dangerously large rocks at its neighbor.

The Karellians didn't know why, but they did know that the attacks were threatening their very survival.

Karellia lacked long-range space travel—the radiation was simply too horrendous—but its scientists were shrewd, and they had conceived a planetary defense. It was effective, for now. But for how much longer? Attempts at communication had failed. Following years of debate, a consensus emerged that perhaps it was time to take the fight to the other—whoever the other was.

A fleet of offensive weapons now orbited Karellia: a deadly array of sixty-four deep-space rockets, all bearing thermonuclear warheads—ready to launch at the Ocellet's command. The Belt and the Heart of Fire might keep the Karellians from taking the

fight to the enemy in person; but these well-shielded rockets just might get through, just might put an end to the falling asteroids.

Or they might start an even larger conflagration.

The Karellian leader with her finger on the trigger was deeply mindful of the uncertainty over that prediction. For that reason if no other, the missiles remained in check. But for how much longer should she hold back a retaliatory strike?

Meanwhile, the planetary defense held, its invisible glitter unlike any other defense in the known galaxy.

CHAPTER 1

In the Triton Ice, 207 Sp.

(2176 C.E.)

DAKOTA BANDICUT PEERED to the left and to the right, forward and backward, through the windows of the passenger transport as it crawled across the icy surface of Triton. She had come four and a half billion kilometers to see this, and she did not want to miss a thing. After almost an hour, the transport ground to a halt. Scott, the tour guide, announced their arrival on site from the front of the van, and the half dozen passengers, all clad in silver spacesuits, began crowding toward the door. Stepping with feathery lightness onto the icy surface of Neptune's moon, kilometers from the mining base, Dakota felt a shiver inside her spacesuit—not from the cryogenic cold, which she couldn't feel at all, but from the personal momentousness of what she was about to see.

For years, she had been hoping to visit this place. Now that she was here, she didn't know what to expect, or how to feel—or even, in any rational sense, *why* she was here. But now that the moment had arrived, she felt . . . awed, uncertain, and a little afraid. *Afraid? It's silly to feel afraid*, she thought. *You're just going to see an empty cavern that hundreds of other people have seen. What's there to be afraid of?* And yet, the butterflies in her stomach

weren't going away—and she had this still, expectant feeling that something special might be about to happen.

Gonna feel pretty silly when it turns out to be nothing much, and you walk away with a few pix of a hole in the ground.

As last out of the van, she had to sidestep around a few people to see anything. But there it was: the place where humanity, for the first and only time, had encountered an alien intelligence. *That alone is worth some chills, isn't it?*

"Can we do a quick comm check, please, before anyone moves away from the crawler?" That was Scott trying to keep everyone—all six people—corralled next to the vehicle for a moment. *"Aimee here." "Joe." "Misha."* When everyone else had spoken, Dakota said her own name, so softly she doubted anyone could have heard it; so she repeated it. Satisfied, Scott waved them forward.

Dakota's heart beat even faster as she stepped ahead of the others to cross the thirty meters to the edge of the cavern. Triton's surface was the color of dirty ice, with a bit of orange and brown seasoned into the mix. The sun, low in the sky, was little more than a bright star against blackness, while the blue crescent of Neptune hung like a shield behind her right shoulder. Daylight out here at the edge of the solar system looked more like dark twilight; but amplified by the circuitry in her suit visor, it allowed enough illumination for safe walking. As she approached the cavern opening, the underground lights flared into view, forcing the amp in her visor to dial back for comfort. Dakota paused a moment at the top of the long ramp down into the cavern. The bank of floodlights at the bottom shone on the spot where the translator had once stood.

The translator. Dakota knew it only from holos and from Julie Stone's descriptions. It looked to the eye like an impossible assemblage of squirming balls, black and silver and constantly in motion, balanced like a perpetually spinning top. The pix couldn't reveal its powers, but her Uncle John's friend Julie had told her in her long-distance holos: *It is an astounding intelligence; it can speak in my mind; it can drive spaceships at impossible speeds; it is so alien.*

That was twelve years ago, when Dakota herself was twelve, and thought she'd be stuck on Earth for the rest of her life. But in those twelve years, Dakota Bandicut had worked and studied doggedly, and with some major strokes of luck, had made it into the space services and been hired to pilot survey drones in Neptune's atmosphere—much like her uncle, John Bandicut, who had arrived here as a survey pilot. It was Uncle John who had been selected by the alien translator for first contact. And when he had gone—died, everyone said—saving the Earth from a comet, a few people said—stealing a spaceship in a psychotic breakdown, others said—the translator had picked Julie Stone for its next contact.

Officially, that hadn't worked out too well, either. While en route to Earth with the translator, Julie had hared off with the translator on another crazy mission. Just like Uncle John, Julie had claimed she was saving the Earth from a menace no one else could see. The last anyone had heard from either Julie or the translator, they'd been hurtling straight into the sun, supposedly with some dangerous object in their grip. Were they both crazy? Dakota didn't think so. But whatever the truth, Uncle John and Julie and the translator were gone.

Dakota blinked and forced the thought out of her mind. While she'd been standing motionless in reflection, several other members of the tour party had started down the ramp. She stirred back into movement.

At the foot of the ramp was a well-trod cavern. There wasn't all that much to see, though the play of floodlights on the blue-white ice was beautiful to look at. The cavern itself was a space that the translator had apparently carved out at some point while it sat here for millions of years of hibernation, awaiting humanity's arrival. Dakota swung left and right, looking around in the now-open-topped cavity. Someone—Misha—was asking Scott if alien alloys had been found in the ice near the translator. As Scott answered, Dakota tuned out, because she already knew there were no alloy deposits of any note found *here*, although significant traces had been found elsewhere in the region around

the mining encampment. The translator had apparently *used* the metal alloys, somehow linking together all of the deposits scattered around the moon into an antenna for its surveillance of human activity around the solar system. By which means it had identified John Bandicut and drawn him toward the fateful discovery.

Dakota thought, half seriously, that it wouldn't surprise her to hear voices in this cavern—the voices of long-dead aliens, or maybe the voices of her uncle and his girlfriend. Or maybe that other alien thing that had joined Uncle John—what he had called in his message to Julie a *quarx*.

She heard no voices, though, except those of the tour group.

Scott was still answering questions, and now was leading them in a straggling group to the exact spot where the translator supposedly had once been stuck in the ice. Dakota, rather than following, felt an inexplicable compulsion to crouch down and probe a little farther back into the cavern space, where the ceiling got lower. Was she looking for something in particular? She had no idea. She just felt somehow that the spot *over there* had been well scoured over; but *here*, just maybe, she would find some lingering evidence of an alien intelligence. Crouching lower, she scratched at the ice with her gloved fingertips, feeling perhaps the slightest hint of cold coming through the thermal protection. Her touch left a thin imprint. She scratched again, imagining that she might expose . . . what? A vein of alien alloy? Silly.

Except, at that moment, something sparkled in the ice, and—*Ow!*—she felt a sharp *pinch* in her right wrist, as though a rubber band had snapped her. She rubbed her wrist, puzzled. An instant later, she saw another glint and felt a similar pinch in her left wrist. *What the hell?*

Backing up and straightening, she raised her hands and examined her wrists. There was nothing to see; the silver exterior of her spacesuit looked as it always had. She rubbed her right wrist with her left hand, though, because it still tingled. *Damn. Did that translator leave little stingers lying around for people who poked around too much?*

A heartbeat later, she froze. The translator had put tiny stones in the wrists of both her uncle and Julie. Translator-stones, Julie had called them. Stones with extraordinary and peculiar powers. Dakota's heart pounded furiously; she suddenly found it hard to think.

Hello, Dakota Bandicut. Do we have your name right?

Dakota made a choking sound, which carried on the suit radio, and brought a call of concern from the group leader. "*Is everyone all right?*"

"Yes. Yes—sorry!" Dakota said. "I'm fine." *Fine?* Her thoughts were whirling. *Get a grip, girl.* What had she just heard? A voice. In her mind. Just like Julie. Just like Uncle John.

Oh damn. Oh damn oh damn oh damn!

She didn't know exactly what she had hoped for, coming here. Some closure, some understanding. Not stones from the translator. The translator was gone. Twelve years gone. This was not possible.

She felt a soft stirring somewhere inside her skull. Then she heard the voice again:

Is it really so bad?

She pawed at the sides of her space helmet, shaking her head. *What's happening to me?* After a moment, she dropped her hands to her sides and stood still, trying not to clench her fists. She didn't want the others in the cavern to think she was having a breakdown. Did any of them know she was John Bandicut's niece? They might. Should she tell them? Tell them what? That she, too, was hearing alien voices in her head?

Please don't.

/What? Who are you? What are you?/ She was so rattled, the noise of her own thoughts was hard to distinguish from the voice.

We are daughter-stones of the translator. We have joined with you, as our sister-stones joined with Julie Stone and John Bandicut. Please don't be alarmed.

Dakota closed her eyes. *Please don't be alarmed?* She repeated the words to herself. *Don't be alarmed.* She was plenty alarmed. */How can you expect me not to be alarmed?/* she thought.

We will not harm you. We may, under some circumstances, be able to aid you.

Dakota took a slow, careful breath. Two of the others were looking in her direction, but all she could see was shiny faceplates. She was trying to parse what the stones had said to her. /Exactly how,/ she thought with great deliberation, /might you aid me?/

That remains to be seen, the stones said. *We may be able to help you open doors of opportunity, Dakota Bandicut.*

/Doors of opportunity?/

We believe your future will take you to the stars.

That jolted her. She hardly knew how to respond. /To the stars?/

And sooner than you might think.

To that she could only stand in dumb, shivering silence. Filled with both awe and apprehension, she gazed up at the black dome of space that crowned this desolate moon at the solar system's edge, and wondered what sort of turn her life had just taken.

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