



## Coming Home (An Alex Benedict Novel)

By Jack McDevitt

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As the deadline for the *Capella*’s reappearance draws near, Alex fears that the puzzle of the artifacts will be lost yet again...

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## **Coming Home (An Alex Benedict Novel) By Jack McDevitt Bibliography**

- Sales Rank: #385543 in Books
- Brand: Ace Books
- Published on: 2015-10-27
- Released on: 2015-10-27
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.80" h x .99" w x 4.20" l, 1.00 pounds
- Binding: Mass Market Paperback
- 384 pages

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## Editorial Review

Review

### Praise for *Coming Home*

“An easy, approachable style of writing that is both quotidian and exciting...Reading *Coming Home* revitalizes proper pride in humanity—what it has accomplished today and what it will design, do, and discover tomorrow...An encomium both to history and the future...[and] a heartwarming tale of friendship and fun-filled adventure.”—SF Signal

“Another McDevitt classic...*Coming Home* is easily on par with what we’ve come to expect from Jack McDevitt, and his fans will not be disappointed.”—AmazingStoriesMag.com

“Classic hard science fiction.”—*Florida Times-Union*

### About the Author

**Jack McDevitt** is a former naval officer, taxi driver, English teacher, customs officer, and motivational trainer, and is now a full-time writer. He is the author of the Alex Benedict novels, including *Firebird*; the Priscilla Hutchins novels, including *Starhawk*; and the stand-alone novel, *Beyond the Sky*. His novel *Seeker* won a Nebula Award, and he is a multiple Nebula Award finalist. He lives in Georgia with his wife, Maureen.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Dates not classified as Common Era (C.E.) are based on the Rimway calendar.

## PROLOGUE

11,256 C.E.

When Alex Benedict graduated high school, his uncle Gabe, the only parent he’d ever known, provided the ultimate gift: a flight to Earth, the home world, the place where everything had started. It was a mixed blessing, though. Alex had a hard time adjusting to interstellar travel, though he didn’t like to admit it. The jumps in and out of transdimensional space upset his stomach. And the constant changes in gravity levels never helped. But there was no way he would pass on the opportunity to see the oceans and mountains so prominent in his reading. And the great cities, Paris and Denver, Berlin and Shanghai. And the Alps and the Grand Canyon. The pyramids, the Great Wall, and the Arkon. And, for Gabe’s sake, he pretended to be enthusiastic about touring the world capital in Winnipeg.

What most excited him was that Gabe had promised to include a visit to the Moon. That, of course, had been the stage for everything, where Neil Armstrong had climbed out of Apollo 11, stepped down onto the ground, and delivered his giant-leap statement.

But he was surprised to discover, on their arrival, that Armstrong's footprints were no longer there. "What happened to them?" he asked Gabe.

His uncle frowned. "Actually, nobody knows." Gabe was tall, with black hair beginning to gray, and sharp features that had been hardened by so many years digging into archeological sites under alien suns. "They were there for a while, but they disappeared during the Dark Age. Vandals, probably." Gabe shook his head. "Idiots." They were seated at a small round table in an observation lounge, drinking sodas and looking across the shops and hotels and cottages that covered the lunar surface at MoonWorld, the multiplex area reserved for tourists and shielded by a semitransparent dome. A few kilometers away, the cluster of walls and beams and platforms that had been the original Moonbase lay serenely in the vacuum, illuminated by the glow of the home world, which never moved from its position just over the horizon.

Alex leaned back in his seat. "Nine thousand years," he said. "It just doesn't look that old."

"Time tends to stand still in places like this, Alex. If you don't get wind and rain, nothing changes."

Alex picked up a change of expression, a darkening of mood. "What's wrong, Uncle Gabriel?" he said.

"I was just thinking how much I'd have enjoyed walking around and looking at the Apollo landers. The first manned spaceships."

"What happened to them?"

"They were here for over a thousand years. But when everything collapsed, they took all that stuff back to Earth. Too many people had access to the Moon by then, and they wanted to preserve as much as they could. So they put the landers in museums. Primarily in the Space Museum in Florida. Most of the rest of it went to the Huntsville Space Museum, where they were keeping other artifacts from the Golden Age. Eventually, though, they had to move it out of there, too, because they were losing control of the area. There'd been a worldwide economic collapse. Alabama just wasn't safe anymore. There was a lot of material from the first thousand years of off-world exploration. Helmets, personal gear belonging to the astronauts, electronic records from the early flights. Absolutely priceless stuff."

"So where'd they move it to?"

"Some of it was taken to Centralia. Which in those days was called the Dakotas. We don't know how much. Or what actually was saved." A look of weariness came into his eyes. "Whatever was left was put into a storage facility there. After that, we don't know what happened to it."

"It would be nice to find them," said Alex.

"Yes, it would. Some people have devoted their lives to trying to figure out what happened. Huntsville had artifacts from the very beginning of the space era. From the Florida Space Museum. From Moonbase. From Tyuratam. I'd give anything to have been able to look through all that."

"Florida was underwater by then, I guess?"

"Yes."

"What happened to the Apollo flight modules?"

"They were left at the Florida Space Museum and went under with the rest of the state."

"I bet you'd like to have one of those, Uncle Gabe."

Gabe took on a negative look. "I'm not sure what it would sell for. It's not exactly the kind of thing you could put on a bookshelf."

"You're kidding."

Gabe smiled. "Alex, I'd give anything just to have a chance to *touch* one of them." He sighed. "It's a pity."

"I don't think I'd have wanted to be around during a dark age. It's odd, though. They had interstellar flight. And data retrieval and everything."

Gabe nodded. "None of it matters if you have an unstable society and tin-pot dictators. They had several hundred years of economic collapse. Widespread poverty. A few people at the top had all the money and influence. They had terrible overpopulation, struggles over water and resources. Civil wars. And widespread illiteracy." The thirty-second to the thirty-ninth century. "It's a wonder we survived."

"But there were other worlds. Other places. How could they all have collapsed? I've read the books. I know what they say about greed and corruption. But I still don't understand how people let it happen."

"The colony worlds weren't self-sufficient at the time, Alex. So they just got taken over. People with money and influence gradually pushed everyone else out of the way. It was like a disease."

They sat quietly for a couple of minutes. Alex finished his soda and put the glass down. "Uncle Gabe, this would probably be a good place for a dig site. You ever think about coming here?"

"They don't allow it, son." He looked out at a crater rim. "I don't think there's much here anyway. The place has gotten a pretty thorough sweep."

\* \* \*

They strolled over to the museum. There were about forty people inside, wandering among the showcases, buying souvenirs, looking at portraits of astronauts and pilots and ships ranging from the Apollo vehicles to modern interstellars. They went into the showroom, which offered a virtual tour of the original Moonbase. Posters informed them the tour would show the facility as it had been on the morning of March 2, 2057, when the first manned voyage to Jupiter was nearing its objective. "Sounds like fun," said Gabe. "Why don't we watch?"

"Jupiter's the big planet, right?" asked Alex.

"Yes. If it hadn't been for Jupiter, we probably wouldn't be here."

"Really? Why's that?"

"It acted as a sweeper. Cleared out a lot of the debris that would have rained down on Earth. Usually, if you don't have one of those in the planetary system, life stays pretty primitive. If it gets moving at all."

"The Jupiter flight was the first manned mission after Mars, right?"

"Yes. Mars was the first off-world settlement. Unless you count Moonbase, of course."

"I *know* that." Alex made no effort to hide his annoyance.

“Sorry,” said Gabe.

“You know, Uncle Gabe, I can’t imagine how they traveled around in those days without a star drive. It must have taken forever to get anywhere.”

“It was fairly slow going, kid.”

“I mean, they needed *three days* to get to the Moon.”

Gabe laughed. “Yeah. They did. That’s correct.”

Alex looked out at the Earth. “You can almost *touch* it.”

\* \* \*

They sat down in a theater area with about a dozen other people and put on headphones. The lights dimmed, and soft music filtered in. “*Good morning, Alex,*” said an amiable female voice. “*Welcome to Moonbase.*” The lights came back up, and Alex’s chair seemed to be moving along a curving corridor. His uncle was beside him. The others were gone. “*My name is Leah,*” the voice continued. “*If you wish at any time to stop the tour, simply push the red button on the right arm of the chair. Push the yellow button to speak to your uncle.*”

The corridor was cramped and gray. Not at all like the tasteful, spacious passageways of MoonWorld.

They turned left into an austere meeting room. Several people were seated on narrow chairs, and a young man in uniform was apparently checking off names and assigning quarters. Everybody wore odd clothing, the kind you saw in historical films. Hairstyles were strange. There was a pomposity in the way the women wore theirs. Girls looking like that would have been laughed out of Alex’s old high school. And the men all had facial hair. As if they were trying to look like people who desperately needed to be taken seriously. Most striking, though, there were people of different colors. Racial variations had long since gone away in most areas of the Confederacy after thousands of years of intermarriage. “*Moonbase was established in 2041,*” said Leah, “*by a private corporation. Originally, the plan had been that it would be a government operation. Eventually, however, it became clear that wouldn’t work. Moonbase, Inc. came into existence, made possible by an agreement among seventeen nations and eleven corporations.*”

Their chairs navigated out of the meeting room. “*We are now in the living quarters,*” said Leah. “*Forty apartments are available for staff. Another thirty for visitors. The Galileo Hotel provides forty additional rooms.*” They passed through a doorway and found themselves in the lobby of the Galileo. A cube-shaped transparent pool was elevated overhead. There were probably twenty kids and a half dozen adults swimming and splashing around while others watched from the sides.

“Nice place,” said Alex.

“*If you mean the pool,*” Leah said, “*it was so popular that they had to enlarge it on three different occasions.*” She took them to one of the apartments. “*As you can see, it’s smaller than those available today.*” But it looked comfortable. The bed folded out of a wall. A display screen was mounted on the opposite side. Beneath the screen, on a table, was an electronic device. “*It’s a computer,*” Leah explained. “*Note the keyboard. It’s not unusual for the time. Data storage was still in a relatively primitive state.*”

“Did any of them survive?” asked Gabe. “I mean, any of the computers they had at Moonbase?”

“*There is one, which you can find at the Paris Deep Space Museum.*”

“What happened to the others?”

*“They disappeared, along with virtually everything else, during the Dark Age.”*

Gabe took a deep breath.

The Moonlight Restaurant was the most misnamed facility Alex had ever seen. It was cramped, with dull yellow walls and drab chairs and tables, overflowing with maybe thirty people. They drifted past a souvenir shop, whose shelves were filled with magazines and jigsaw puzzles and pullover shirts, some with images of the Moon and of Moonbase. There were models of a primitive-looking ship that Alex would not have trusted to take him anywhere. *“It’s the Isaac Newton,”* said Leah. *“It was one of the early vehicles carrying people to Mars.”*

Everything in the shop was sold in packages bearing pictures of other antiquated space vehicles and astronauts in clunky pressure suits. And, of course, a ringed planet. Saturn.

“Uncle Gabe,” said Alex, “it’s too bad they didn’t leave some of the landers up here. Sitting on the Moon, they’d have lasted forever.”

“If nobody ruined them.”

“Think what one of them would sell for.” Alex couldn’t resist the comment because he knew how Gabe would react.

“That’s not what matters, son.”

\* \* \*

The souvenir shop blinked off, and Leah took them outside. There was no multiplex in that era. The dome, of course, did not exist either. Several pieces of the automated equipment that had built the structure were scattered across the regolith. Three landing pads had been placed several kilometers away, near what appeared to be a cabin. *“It’s actually a subway entrance,”* said Leah. *“It provides transport into the central complex.”* They veered off again, toward an array of radio telescopes. *“Solar collectors, Alex. They supply power for Moonbase. If you’ll look to your left, you will see that construction is getting started on a nuclear facility. At this time, it was still several years from completion.”*

\* \* \*

*“As you are probably aware, Alex, March 2, 2057, is an historic date.”*

“Because of the Jupiter flight.”

*“Correct. Actually, they were going to Europa. They’re getting ready inside, so if no one has an objection, we’ll go to the command center and see what happens.”* The lights blinked, and Alex was seated in a wide room with seven or eight people, all watching displays and talking into microphones. The displays were mostly carrying lines of numbers, but one had an image of a gray globe, which had to be Jupiter, and another was showing the rugged, broken surface of a moon. *“Notice the giant red spot on the planet,”* said Leah. *“It’s a storm. It was at least five hundred years old at this time, but didn’t fade out of existence until the fifth millennium.”*

*“The person in charge of overseeing the Europa operation is Nazario Conti. He’s over to your left.”* Conti was short but imposing, wearing a relaxed attitude that suggested historic projects were simply part of the

normal routine.

“Is that an accurate representation of him?” asked Gabe.

*“No. In fact we know he existed and that he was one of the senior people on-site. But the records have been lost, so we don’t really have any idea what he looked like or even that he was present during the operation at this moment.”*

Gabe did not reply, but his expression said it all. So much was gone.

*“I should also add that the language has changed over nine thousand years. We’ll have these people speaking Standard.”*

“What’s the name of the ship?” asked Alex.

*“The Athena. It had a crew of seven or eight. Accounts vary. We know that the captain was Andrey Sidorov.”*

“Have you a picture of him, Leah?”

*“Regretfully, again, we do not.”*

Something was happening. Conti had been summoned by one of the operators. He pressed a button, and a voice came in over the radio: *“Moonbase, this is Athena. We have established orbit around Europa.”*

The room filled with applause.

\* \* \*

They had dinner in the hotel dining room. It was spacious and elegant, much in contrast with the mundane facilities that had been offered thousands of years earlier at the Moonlight. So far only the iced tea had arrived. Gabe tasted his. “You know,” he said, “the difference between what the Moon is now and what it was like during the Golden Age isn’t so much the nicer facilities.”

“How do you mean?”

“When only Moonbase was here, there was a timelessness about everything. You looked out the window, and you were living in a place that hadn’t changed in millions of years. Time probably didn’t even seem to exist. MoonWorld, on the other hand, is temporary. Come back next year, and there’ll be new shops. They’ll have installed a different elevator somewhere.” He closed his eyes and smiled sadly. “Imagine how complete the illusion would be if they’d left everything alone. If the landing modules were still out there. If you could still go see the Rover’s tire tracks.”

Alex nodded. “I guess so.”

“Well, in any case, this is where it all began, son. This place marks the height of the Golden Age.”

“Before they ran out of things to discover,” said Alex.

“Well, I wouldn’t put it exactly that way. But I guess you’re right: by the middle of the third millennium, we’d exhausted most of the big issues. We knew the universe was governed by mathematics. We knew about evolution. Relativity. Quantum mechanics. Particle theory. Consciousness. We were aware there was no



Grand Unified Theory.” He shrugged. “Eventually, science became simply a matter of improving existing technologies.”

The food arrived. Grilled cheese for Gabe, pork roll sandwich for Alex. “So you’re saying there’s nothing left to discover?”

“I don’t know.” Gabe picked up his sandwich. “They’re talking about another breakthrough with life extension, but it may not be possible. And they’re still trying to find a way to cross to one of the parallel universes. Or for that matter, even to demonstrate they exist. But I think that’s about all that’s left.”

There were a couple of girls seated off to one side. One of them, a blonde, made eye contact with Alex. He tried a smile, but she looked away. “What?” asked Gabe, who noticed he’d been distracted.

“I was just thinking that when the opportunity shows up, you have to make your move.”

Gabe started on his meal. “Absolutely,” he said.

Alex smiled. His uncle thought his comment had something to do with MoonWorld. Well, maybe it did.

## ONE

The Dark Age arrived like a thunderclap. The people of the world thought they were secure, that life would go on as it always had, and that they need not worry about details. So they did not pay sufficient attention to government and culture. They took their collective eye off what mattered. Science provided starships, but in the end the only thing the passengers cared about was a means of escape. Monetary systems collapsed, people quarreled endlessly over issues that could never be settled to everyone’s satisfaction, political systems became hopelessly corrupted, and in the end, small armies of political, religious, and social fanatics delayed recovery across six centuries.

—Harold Watkins, *Road to Ruin*, 3711 C.E.

1435, RIMWAY CALENDAR. SEVENTEEN YEARS LATER.

It was a day that started slowly, like most days, then blew up. Twice. The first eruption came while I was tallying the monthly income for Rainbow Enterprises. A light snow was falling when our AI, Jacob, informed me we had a call. “It’s from Dr. Earl.”

Marissa Earl was an acquaintance of Alex’s, a psychiatrist who belonged to his book club. I went back into my office and sat down. “Put her through, Jacob.”

Marissa was fond of saying that psychiatry was the only scientific field that was still substantially unpredictable. I’d seen her only a couple of times, once at a fund-raising dinner, and again at a theater presentation. She was active in community arts and ran a few of the local events. When she blinked into my office, she was wearing a large smile while looking simultaneously troubled. But there was no missing the excitement. “*It’s good to see you again, Chase,*” she said. “*Is Alex in the building?*”

“He’s out of town, Marissa.”

“*Okay. When do you expect him back?*”

“In two days. Can I help you?”

She frowned. *“Probably not. Could you get in touch with him for me?”*

Sure, I thought. If I don’t mind having to make explanations later. Alex doesn’t like to have his time away from the office interrupted by anything short of an emergency. “Why don’t you tell me what’s going on, and we can take it from there?”

Marissa was relaxed on a couch. A box rested on the seat beside her. She glanced down at it, leaned back, and took a deep breath. *“Does the name Garnett Baylee mean anything to you?”*

“It rings a bell, but I don’t recall—”

*“He was my grandfather. An archeologist.”* Her eyes softened. *“I never really saw much of him. He spent most of his time on Earth. Doing research. And, I guess, digging. He was especially interested in the Golden Age.”*

“That’s a period Alex has always been intrigued by, too, Marissa.” It must have been a wild time. Nuclear weapons that could have ended the species overnight. The development of data processing and mass communications. People getting off-world for the first time. And, of course, it was when the big scientific discoveries were being made. Those who were around during those years saw incredible changes. New technologies constantly showing up. Diseases that had been fatal when you were a child were wiped out by the time you had kids of your own. Not like today, when stability rules. Or, as some physicists would say, boredom.

*“He had a huge collection of books, fiction, from those years. My dad said he was always watching shows set in that period. And he was infuriated that so much had been lost.”*

“I’m not sure I know what you’re referring to,” I said. “We still have pretty good visual records of the third millennium. We know its history. There are a few holes, but by and large—”

*“I’m not talking about the history. What he cared about were the artifacts. Have you been to Earth, Chase?”*

“Yes. I’ve been there. Once.”

*“There’s not much left from the years when they were going to the Moon. It’s all gone. Other than a few old buildings and some dams. My grandfather was always looking for stuff. Like maybe a pen that Marie Curie had used. Or a chair that belonged to Charles Darwin. Or maybe Winston Churchill’s reading lamp.”* She shrugged. *“According to my father, it was his life. He spent years on Earth trying to track things down.”*

I wondered who Darwin and Curie were. “How’d he make out?”

*“He found a few things. An old radio. A few lost books. Nothing that was connected specifically to any historical figure, though—”*

“Books? Anything significant?”

*“Yes. One was Tender Is the Night.”*

“Really? He was the guy who found that?”

*“That’s correct.”*

"I think he and Alex would have gotten along pretty well."

*"He contributed most of what he found to the Brandenheim Museum. It's on display. You can take a look next time you're down there. They have a whole section dedicated to him."*

"Sounds as if he had a decent career. You say you didn't see much of him?"

*"When I was about fourteen, he came back here to live with us. I'd only seen him once or twice before that, but I was so young, I can barely remember it. I was surprised to discover that our house belonged to him."* She was looking past me, into another time. *"He apologized for not being around when I was younger. He was a nice guy. Did you know he found the only existing wristwatch? You know what that was?"*

"I've seen them in the old clips."

*"It didn't belong to anyone in particular, as far as we know. It was just a watch."*

"Okay." The snow was coming down harder. "What actually can we do for you, Marissa?"

*"His room was on the second floor. He was with us for about seven years. But then he had a stroke, and we lost him. That was almost eleven years ago. Dad eventually took over the room and used it as his office. And I guess nobody ever really cleaned it out. Recently, we came across something on a shelf in one of the upstairs closets."* She removed the lid from the box. My angle wouldn't let me see inside it, but I had a pretty good idea where this was leading.

"Well, Marissa," I said, "whatever it is, I'm sure we'll be able to get you a decent price for it."

*"Good. That's what I was hoping you'd say."* She reached into the box and took out a black electronic device, wrapped in a cloth. She set it on the seat beside her.

"What is it?" I asked.

*"I took it to the Brandenheim. I thought the guy I was talking to would go crazy. He tells me it's a—"* She stopped and checked her link. *"It's a Corbett transmitter. It's for sending messages through hyperspace. This one is apparently an early version. They thought I was going to donate it, which I had originally intended. I just wanted to get rid of it. But I got the impression it's worth a lot. So I backed off. They got annoyed."* She smiled. *"I guess I'm not much like my granddad."*

"Okay," I said. "We'll take a look. When Alex gets back, he can check the record, and if he needs to see it, we'll have you bring it over."

*"Fine. I'd like to get an estimate of the value. You don't have any idea, do you?"*

"No, Marissa. I've never seen one of these things before."

"Oh," she said. *"I thought you were a pilot."*

"In my spare time, yes." I was running a quick check on my notebook. And got a jolt. "Holy cats," I said.

*"What? What is it, Chase?"*

"The Corbett is the breakthrough unit. It's the earliest model there was." The information I was getting indicated it dated from the twenty-sixth century. The early FTL flights had no reasonable way to talk to

Earth. Until the Corbett came along. If the Brandenheim had it right, the thing was over eight thousand years old. There was only one known model in existence. So, yes, it was going to have some serious trade value. “Your grandfather never told you he had this?”

*“No. He never mentioned it.”*

“He must have said something to your parents.”

*“My dad says no. He never knew it was there until he went into the closet to put some wrapping paper on the top shelf. There were already a couple of boxes on top of it, and a sweater. There wasn’t enough room, so he took everything down.”* She looked at the transmitter. *“This was in a case. It was the first time he’d seen it. In fact, he came close to tossing it out. Fortunately, he showed it to me on his way to the trash can.”*

“All right. We’ll get back to you.”

*“The museum says if I contribute it, they’ll put up a permanent plate with my name on it.”*

“Is that what you want to do?”

*“Depends how much I can get for it.”*

“You say your grandfather gave them some artifacts?”

*“Yes.”*

“But they didn’t recognize this when you showed it to them? I mean, he hadn’t shown it to them at some point himself?”

*“Apparently not. Maybe it was just something he decided to keep. Maybe he forgot he had it. He was getting old.”*

I nodded. “Jacob, can you give me a three-sixty on this thing?”

Jacob magnified the transmitter and closed in on it. I got a close-up of the controls. Then he rotated the angle. It wasn’t especially striking, and it looked like a thousand other pieces of communication gear. About the size of a bread box. The exterior had a plastene appearance. There was a push pad, some dials, selectors, and a gauge. Imprints and markers were all in ancient English. And a plate on the back. “Jacob,” I said, “translate, please.”

“It says ‘Made by Quantumware, 2711, in Canada.’”

One side appeared to have been scorched. I ran a search on Quantumware. It had been the manufacturer of the early FTL communication units. I was hoping to see *Judy Cobble* engraved on it somewhere, or the name of one of the other early starships.

*“The people at the Brandenheim,”* said Marissa, *“say it’s just an identification plate.”* She looked momentarily unhappy. *“They can’t match it up to anything because it’s so old.”*

Most people establish an online avatar, creating a more or less permanent electronic presence that can represent them if they’re out of town. Or after they’ve passed away. Usually, the avatar looks exactly like the person for whom it substitutes. But like the original, it can be unreliable. People create them to make themselves look good, possibly to mislead others, and to lie like a bandit, if that’s what it takes to make the

desired impression. And it provides a kind of immortality. “Marissa,” I said, “would you object to our contacting your grandfather’s online presence?”

*“He didn’t have one.”*

“Really?”

*“According to my father, there was an avatar at one time. But he must have gotten rid of it.”*

“Okay. Did he come back on a transport?”

*“Back from where?”*

“Earth.”

*“I don’t know. I can check with my father. Probably.”*

“Okay. Do that. See if he remembers. Did your grandfather ever say anything that might have led you to believe he’d made a major find?”

*“Not to me. At least not that I recall. My folks said he was disappointed when he came home. That he was depressed. It didn’t exactly sound like a guy who was returning after making a major discovery.”*

I looked helplessly at Marissa.

*“Finished?”* she asked.

“Who can we talk to about him? Any of his colleagues who might know something?”

*“Lawrence Southwick, maybe.”* Head of the Southwick Foundation, known principally for underwriting archeological initiatives. *“He was a friend of my grandfather’s. He’s retired now. I don’t know that Grandpop was close to anybody else.”*

\* \* \*

Garnett Baylee had been a much-admired charismatic figure. He’d been a popular speaker at fund-raisers, but had apparently never accepted any remuneration other than expenses. The money had been funneled primarily to the Southwick Foundation, but he’d also made contributions to other organizations that supported archeological work, especially with a concentration on the Golden Age.

I was surprised to discover that Baylee had never collected a degree. He’d claimed to be an archeologist but had never gotten around to meeting the formal qualifications. Everyone seemed to know that, but it hadn’t mattered. His passion had replaced the formalities. He’d made a running joke of the pretense, using it to display his respect for a profession, frequently playing off comments that implied he wasn’t smart enough to join. I watched a couple of his performances. He would have made a superb comedian had his passion for recovering lost history not been also on display. The archeological community loved him. And watching him, I regretted never having met him.

There were thousands of photos, covering his lifetime. There he was at about four years old, already digging holes in the lawn. And at about sixteen in a canoe with an attractive but unidentified redhead. They showed him in school and at parties. At weddings and ball games. Some pictures showed him with his dark-haired wife, whom he had apparently lost early. Playing games with his kids, and later with his grandchildren,

including Marissa. And I saw him on safari, cruising deserts in a skimmer. He stood at dig sites, held up artifacts for the viewer, gave directions to his work crew, and gazed up at pyramids.

People who knew him said that he'd never pursued a degree because he was simply too knowledgeable, too brilliant, leaving him no patience for routine academic work. He simply bypassed it. And apparently lost nothing thereby.

Baylee was more than moderately handsome. Even in his later years, his features resisted the usual tendency toward gradual decline and ultimate collapse. He was tall, broad-shouldered, and there was something in his eyes that made it clear he was in charge. I could see a distinct resemblance to Marissa, who also showed no reluctance to take over.

It was impossible to imagine this guy's coming up with a major discovery and failing to mention it. I sat there looking at a picture of the transmitter.

\* \* \*

The second eruption was delivered by Shara Michaels, who called and invited me to dinner at Bernie's Far and Away.

"Sounds like a last-minute operation," I said. "What's going on?"

"I have some news. Will you be there?"

"What time?"

\* \* \*

The Far and Away was crowded. A piano played softly in the background. Shara was seated at a corner table with another young woman, probably in her twenties. She waved me over. "Chase," she said, "this is JoAnn Suttner." Suttner had chestnut hair and wore a gold blouse and light blue slacks. She and Shara had already drawn the attention of a couple of guys at an adjoining table. I sat down, and we shook hands. "JoAnn's working with the SRF," Shara said. "She's the top gun in megatemp research." That was shorthand for time-space structure. SRF, of course, was the Sanusar Recovery Force, a team of scientists dedicated to tracking down the lost ships that had gotten tangled in warps caused by the passage of superdense objects. Sanusar was to have been the final port of call for the *Capella* on that fatal last flight. "Her husband," she added, "is one of the top mathematicians in the Confederacy."

JoAnn rolled her eyes. "She always talks like that, Chase. Anyhow, it's nice to meet you."

"The pleasure's mine, JoAnn. What's going on?"

Interstellars had been disappearing since they first came on the scene back in the third millennium. It's probably inevitable, when you have hundreds of vehicles traveling among the known systems, and beyond, constantly. Losses have been attributed to a variety of causes. Engine breakdown. Power failure. Deflector malfunction, causing a ship to emerge from transdimensional space into an area already occupied by rocks and even too much dust. When that happens, when two objects try to occupy the same space, you can look for a large explosion. A few incidents were even attributable to hijackings.

But it turned out there was another reason for at least some of the disappearances. Black holes and other superdense objects traveling through space tend to leave damage in their wake. Not the kind of damage we'd always known about—disrupted stars, planets ripped from orbit, and so forth—but something else entirely.

The space/time continuum itself could become twisted. Warped. The result has been that some vehicles, jumping into or possibly out of transdimensional space, got sidetracked. And lost control. They became wrapped in the time/space distortion, and carried a piece of it with them. It continued to affect the vehicle, moving it along its projected course, but causing it to reemerge periodically in linear space. It was also apparent that, on board the ship, the passage of time also became distorted. It was, scientists had come to believe, what had happened to the *Capella* eleven years earlier.

We'd recovered three ships since discovering what was happening. In each of them, crew and passengers had known they'd suffered a malfunction, but they'd been totally unaware that weeks and years had been passing in the outside world. One of the three, the *Avenger*, was a destroyer that had disappeared during the Mute War two centuries ago. For the crew, only four days had passed between making their jump and being rescued. The first recovery had been the *Intrépide*, which had, incredibly, left its home port seven thousand years earlier. From the perspective of the passengers, the flight had lasted only a few weeks.

The lost ships were by then commonly referred to as Sanusar objects, named for the world that was to have been the *Capella*'s final port of call.

"I'll tell you what's going on," said Shara. A big smile took over her features. "We think we've found the *Capella*."

"Really?" I said.

"Yes. It looks good this time."

They'd predicted an arrival more than a year earlier, but the lost ship hadn't shown up. "You're not going to get everybody excited again, are you? And then leave them watching blank screens?"

"Chase," said Shara, "I'm sorry. We're still in the early stages of research on this stuff."

They thought they'd known where it would be coming in, but the evidence had never arrived, nor, when they sent out a couple of vehicles just to be certain, had the ship. For Alex and me, it was personal. Gabriel Benedict, my former boss and his uncle, was among the passengers. He'd left a message for Alex, informing him about the *Tenandrome*, which had seen something during an exploratory voyage that the government wanted to keep quiet. It had been the *Tenandrome* that had brought Alex and me together. "What makes you think you have it this time?"

JoAnn picked up the conversation. "I'm sorry, Chase. I can imagine what you must have gone through. We'd have kept it quiet until we were certain had we been able to, but there was just no way to do that. But we should be able to do something positive this time. I know everybody thinks we gave up on it. But we didn't. One of the things we did was to check the record for every sighting that came anywhere near the *Capella*'s projected course over the last eleven years. And we got lucky. There was a sighting through one of the telescopes in the Peltian System. We couldn't be sure that it *was* the *Capella*. All we got was a glimpse of radiation, but it was located where we'd expected to see her. We sent a ship out, and they picked up a radio signal. And it *was* the *Capella*."

"Beautiful," I said. "What did the signal say?"

"About what you'd expect. That they were lost and were requesting assistance."

"When did it happen?"

“A little over five years ago. The original sighting, that is. Nobody thought anything of it at the time. I mean, we weren’t looking for Sanusar objects then. Nobody really even knew they existed. But when we saw it, we went out and tracked the signal down. It was aimed toward where Rimway would have been if this were still 1424.” The year when the *Capella* had vanished.

“So,” I said, “you know when it left Rimway, and when it reappeared. So you know—”

“—When we can expect it again and where it should be. Yes.” Both of them were beaming. I probably was, too.

“When’s it going to happen?”

JoAnn passed the question to Shara, who apparently handled the trivia. “In a bit more than three months,” she said. “It’ll be here on the first day of spring, give or take a day or two.”

“First day of spring? That sounds like a good omen.”

The callbox inquired whether we were ready to order. We took a minute to comply, then I asked the critical question: “What are we going to do when it happens? Judging from what we’ve seen with the other vehicles, we’ll only get a few hours’ access. That’s not much time to locate it, get to it, and take twenty-six hundred people off.”

Shara nodded. “That’s the bad news. We probably won’t be able to rescue everyone this time around. Although JoAnn’s been working on something.”

Our coffee arrived. JoAnn picked up her cup, looked out at the snow, which had eased off a bit, and put it back down without tasting it. “It might be possible,” she said, “to manipulate the drive unit and shut down the cycle.”

“You mean to keep the ship from going under again?”

“Yes. We might be able to stop the process dead in its tracks.”

“How optimistic are you?”

“We have a pretty decent chance, actually. Somewhere around a ninety percent probability.”

“Wow,” I said. “That’s great news.”

JoAnn nodded, but didn’t look happy. “There’s a downside.”

“Oh.”

“There’s also a possibility we could send the ship out somewhere where we’d lose it again.” Her eyes blazed. “Or we might destabilize everything and destroy it altogether. That’s why we haven’t been making a lot of noise about it.”

“Is there any way you can eliminate that possibility? I mean, can you run an experiment or something?”

This time she *did* taste the coffee. “Unfortunately, there’s a level of uncertainty about all this that we may never get rid of. Not completely. I don’t know. The ranking genius on all this is Robert Dyke.”



"I've heard of him," I said. "But wasn't he—?"

"That's correct. Like your uncle, he was also on the *Capella*. He's maybe the one person in the Confederacy who could work all this stuff out."

"So what are we going to do?"

"Well, you said the right word, Chase. We're going to run an experiment."

"Good. I hope you guys will keep us informed."

"We can do better than that," said Shara. "You and Alex have been a big part of this since the beginning. You can come along if you like. We're going to put a yacht into the warp, hopefully get it tangled, then see if we can unwrap it. Stabilize it."

"That sounds like a good idea," I said. "And we have an invitation? When?"

"We'll be getting set up tomorrow," said JoAnn. "So figure we leave the day after."

Shara smiled uncomfortably. "Sorry about the short notice, Chase. But we just got clearance, and time is a priority."

## TWO

The black hole is nature's ultimate assault on the notion of a reasonable, friendly universe. No advantage can be extracted from its existence. It adds nothing to the majesty of the natural world. And if there is evidence anywhere that the cosmos does not give a damn for its children, this is it.

—Margaret Wilson, *Flameout*, 1277

I called Alex that night and told him about the *Capella*. "*That's good news,*" he said. "*I hope they can make something happen. Suttner has a pretty good reputation.*"

"She seemed kind of young for a genius."

"*That's the way it usually goes with physicists, Chase. Make your mark before you hit thirty, or you're out of the game.*"

"They're running a test of some sort in a couple of days," I told him, "and they've invited us to go along."

"*In a couple of days? No way I can make that. But you're going, right?*"

"Sure."

"*Okay. Everything in shape at the office?*"

"Yes, Alex. Everything's quiet."

"*What kind of test?*"

"I don't really have details. They want to find out whether they can tinker with the drive and stabilize the

thing.”

“*Okay. But be careful. Don’t volunteer for anything.*”

“Relax, Alex. Everything will be fine.”

“*I’ll see you when you get back.*”

“There’s something else,” I said. “We might have found a Corbett transmitter.”

“*A what?*”

“A Corbett transmitter.”

“*Would you want to brief me on what that is?*”

That was an enjoyable moment. It’s not often I come in ahead of the boss on an archeological find. “It’s a twenty-sixth-century hypercomm transmitter. This was the breakthrough unit.”

“*You mean for FTL transmissions?*”

“Yes.” What else could I mean?

“*Really? You sure?*”

“According to the Brandenheim.”

“*Where’d it come from?*”

“That’s the really interesting part of the story. Marissa Earl showed it to me.”

“*Marissa?*” He grinned. “*It has something to do with Garnett Baylee?*”

“That’s correct.”

“*I wasn’t entirely serious, Chase. Baylee? Really?*” He scratched his temple. “*He’s been dead about nine years.*”

“Eleven, in fact. They found it in one of the closets in his house.”

“*Nobody knew he had it?*”

“Right. His family still lives there, and they came across it by accident. I have a picture of it if you want to take a look.”

“Yes,” he said. “*Of course.*”

I love watching his eyes light up. “*Chase, did you say whether the museum’s made an offer?*”

“No, Alex. I don’t know about that. I didn’t really want to ask.”

He shook his head. Not surprised. “*Well, it doesn’t matter. Our clients shouldn’t have any problem beating whatever the Brandenheim would be willing to pay. The whole story amazes me, though. Not much of that*

*Golden Age stuff has survived. People have been looking for it for thousands of years. Baylee spent a substantial amount of his life searching for artifacts from that period.” He was frowning. “I met Baylee a couple of times. He was a nice guy, but he wanted to be the premier archeologist on the planet. I can’t imagine he’d have come up with something like this and stuck it in his closet and forgotten about it. I wonder if he was possibly suffering from delusional problems?”*

“I don’t know. Marissa didn’t say anything to suggest that.” For a moment, we stared at each other. Alex was in a time zone three hours later than I was. He looked tired, and it was obvious he was ready to crash for the night. “So,” I asked, “do you want me to do anything about this? Should I make an offer? Just to make sure she doesn’t let it get away?” Normally, we restrict ourselves to playing middleman in these arrangements. But for something like this—

*“It’s too early. We don’t want to look anxious. Call Marissa tomorrow, though, and tell her not to do anything without checking with us first. Tell Jacob that if she tries to call me, he should put it through.”*

“Okay. But I should probably mention that she didn’t seem to be consulting us about a sale.”

*“Really? What do you think she wanted?”*

“I think she just wanted to get a sense how much it was worth. And maybe talk with somebody who might have an idea why her grandfather would forget he had something like this.”

*“I can’t imagine why she’d expect us to know.”*

“You’ve a reputation, Alex. But anyhow, if you prefer, I can call and tell her we can’t be of any assistance.”

He laughed. *“Ask her to make the transmitter available to us so we can run some tests. Let’s just be sure this is what it seems to be.”*

\* \* \*

The following morning, I called Marissa and relayed Alex’s wishes. She told me that she wasn’t planning on taking any action for the moment and would wait until we’d had a chance to examine the transmitter. Then, while I was having breakfast, an announcement came over the HV that Ryan Davis, the president of the Confederacy, would be making a statement at the top of the hour. The president was visiting Cormoral, and there was, of course, no way he could speak to us directly from a distance of forty light-years. That meant the message had already been received, and they were trying to expand their audience.

President Davis was a charmer, with brown hair, brown eyes, chiseled features, and a smile that always gave me a sense that he was talking directly to me. But there was no smile this time. *“Friends and citizens,”* he said, *“we are all concerned about recovering, if we can, the people on board the Capella. I want to assure you that we have a topflight scientific team, the Sanusar Recovery Force, working to bring its twenty-six hundred passengers and crew home. You can be certain that we are doing everything possible to make it happen.”*

*“Unfortunately, we are in unknown territory. We have not encountered warped space and time before. I know there is much concern across the Confederacy about this lost ship. And about the others that may be adrift out there somewhere. We are told that time seems to pass at a different rate on the lost ships than it does for us. That is, time passes much more quickly for us. Judging from what we have seen on the other three lost ships that have been recovered, it is likely that only a few days will have passed on the Capella since they left Rimway eleven years ago. That’s difficult to grasp, but our scientists assure us it is a valid*

*picture of what has been happening. It is, they say, likely to be the case with the Capella. The situation could be even more extreme. We rescued two girls from the Intrépide last year. Cori and Sabol Chaveau. They boarded the ship seven thousand years ago. But while they were in flight, only a few weeks passed. Let me reiterate that we are doing everything possible to protect the lives of the passengers and crew. It is our first priority. We will take no action that will endanger them. And we will do everything possible to bring them home."*

### THREE

No matter whether we think of lover, gold, or good times, do not cling to that which is gone. That path leads only to tears.

—Kory Tyler, *Musings*, 1412

I rode the shuttle up to Skydeck. Shara and JoAnn had arrived the day before and were waiting in the restaurant at the Starlight Hotel.

"What actually are we going to do?" I asked.

"We sent a test vehicle out yesterday," said Shara. "It's unmanned, strictly robo. As soon as it gets into the infected area, it'll attempt a jump. We have the drive set so that, if it gets tangled, it should come back into linear space within a few hours—"

"*Our* time," JoAnn said.

"And it'll stay up, we think," Shara continued, "for about four hours."

"And that process will continue?" I asked.

"Yes."

"How far will it travel between appearances?"

"We can't be certain yet, Chase. But we're estimating about one hundred twenty thousand kilometers. The problem develops due to an interface between the drive unit and the warp. When we get to it, it will already have been through the process a couple of times. What we hope to do is adjust the drive feed so that it is not responsive to the change in the continuum."

I was having trouble following. "What does that mean exactly?"

JoAnn obviously thought it was a dumb question. Her eyebrows rose, and her gaze went momentarily toward the overhead. But she managed an understanding smile. "Change the energy feed," she said. "The power level of the drive unit has to be within certain parameters for the ship to stay contained by the warp field. If we adjust the feed, we should be able to stop the process."

"That sounds easy enough."

"If we can get the right setting, yes. It is—"

"And if you get the wrong one—?"

“Probably nothing will happen. If we get it seriously wrong, we might lose the ship. The problem is that we’re still learning about the settings. The *Capella* did its transdimensional jump in an area of space that had been damaged a quarter of a million years ago by a superdense object. Probably a black hole but not necessarily. A section of it literally wrapped itself around the ship. The drive unit dragged the vehicle and the section of warp forward. Time is effectively frozen on board. Fortunately, it surfaces at regular intervals for a few hours, before the interaction between the star drive and the warp drags it back under.”

\* \* \*

The pilot was waiting in the passenger cabin. He said hello, welcomed us on board, and told us his name was Nick Kraus. “Are you related to John?” I asked. John Kraus was the director of the SRF.

“Yeah. He’s my brother.”

Shara grinned. “Nick usually pilots the big passenger cruisers.”

“Like the *Capella*?”

“I’ve been working the *Morning Star* these last few years,” he said. Nick looked good. Brown eyes, amiable smile. A bit taller than you’d normally find in a pilot.

“So you’re here as the in-house expert?”

“Something like that,” he said. “I’m on loan from Orion Transport. And I’m glad to be here. It’s much more interesting work than hauling around a couple of thousand sightseers.”

Nick obviously knew Shara and JoAnn. “Chase,” he said, “have you been up here before? On Skydeck?”

“On occasion.”

Shara smiled. “She’s Alex Benedict’s pilot.”

“The antique dealer?” He showed surprise.

“Yes.”

Nick was clearly impressed. “That must be interesting work. Have you gotten a chance to land on ancient space stations?”

“One or two.”

“Beautiful. I envy you.” He checked the time. “Okay, guys, good luck. You have the course directions?”

“They’ve already been inserted, Nick.”

“Okay. We’ll be leaving as soon as we get clearance. Should only be a few minutes. There’ll be about forty minutes of acceleration once we get started. I’ll let you know before we head out. Meantime, you might get belted down.” He disappeared onto the bridge.

We settled into our harnesses. I was happy about getting to ride as a passenger for a change. I could hear Nick talking with the ops people. Then the engines started. “Okay, everybody,” he said. “On our way.” He had a quiet voice and an easy manner. “Everybody relax and enjoy the flight.” So I did. I eased back and

looked out the window at the dock as it began to retreat.

“Good luck to us,” Shara said to JoAnn. “You pull this off, and they’ll be giving you the Presidential Citation.”

We passed out of the station. “Okay, ladies,” said Nick, “hang on.”

\* \* \*

The *Capella* was expected to surface about twelve light-years from Rimway, in the general direction of the Veiled Lady. “I’m a little uncomfortable,” Nick said, “about getting anywhere near this entanglement. There’s no chance we’ll get stuck, I hope?”

JoAnn shook her head. “No. The only drive units affected by these things are the Armstrongs. They were being replaced long before we knew about the issue with the space/time warps. We have a Korba drive. Which everybody has these days. But you know that, Nick. So no, there’s no need to worry.”

“As soon as the *Carver* appears,” Shara said, “it’ll start transmitting. We should be able to get to it within a day or so.”

“That’s our experimental yacht?” I asked.

“Yes. The AI’s running things.”

“I hope this works,” I said.

“It’ll work.” Shara gave me a thumbs-up. “Don’t worry.”

“If we bring this off, is it over? I mean, will we be able to get everyone off the *Capella* when it shows up? Or will there still be some reservations?”

“What we really need,” said JoAnn, “is to run a test on one of the *Capella*’s sister ships. That would eliminate all doubt. We’re trying to talk Orion into loaning us the *Grainger*. They’ve been reluctant because they’re afraid we might lose it.”

“There’s no chance of that happening, is there?”

“Actually, there would be,” said JoAnn. “We’re in unknown territory.”

“It’s unfortunate,” said Shara, “that TransWorld didn’t survive. They wouldn’t have had any choice but to cooperate.” TransWorld, which had owned the *Capella*, had been bankrupted by the incident, a combination of lawsuits and a general business collapse. Nobody had trusted them afterward.

Nick’s voice came over the allcomm. “*Okay, ladies, we’ll be making our jump in ten minutes.*”

\* \* \*

After we got into hyperspace, Shara and JoAnn got talking physics, so I looked for my chance and went onto the bridge. Nick was reading a book and eating a muffin. “How you doing?” I said. “Mind if I join you?”

“Please do.” He picked up the box and offered it to me. “They’re good.”

I took one. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. So is your life as adventurous as it sounds?"

"I wasn't aware it sounded adventurous. Mostly what I do is sit at a desk."

He looked at me for a long moment. "Chase, I'm worried about her."

"Who are we talking about?"

"JoAnn."

"This thing's getting to her?"

"Yes. She feels personally responsible for the lives of the people on the *Capella*."

"How well do you know her, Nick?"

"We've been friends for a few years. We met on the *Grainger*, when she was one of my passengers." He was checking his instruments. "She's the reason I got this assignment."

"How do you mean?"

"The SRF needed someone who was familiar with the operational side of the cruise ships. John was reluctant to ask for me. It didn't look good, I guess. I was his brother, and there'd be some question about his objectivity. But I'd been working with JoAnn on aspects of this for three years. She put in my name, and here I am."

"She seems fine to me, Nick. But I can understand she'd be feeling some pressure. I'm not sure I can do much to lighten the load, but—"

"I know, Chase. Just be aware."

\* \* \*

We surfaced on target and, within an hour, picked up an automated transmission from the *Carver*. Nick opened the allcomm: "It's up and running," he said. "Stay belted in. As soon as I can lock down its position, we'll be turning toward it."

It took a while, of course. When he'd gotten a second read on the transmission, he looked at me and shook his head. "We're too far out." Then he was talking to JoAnn again. "We'll need about five hours to get to it."

"*That won't work, Nick,*" she said. "*It will probably have moved on before we'd get there. Head for the next target area. The delta site.*"

"Will do." He looked down at the control panel and went to the AI. "Richard? How far do they expect the next appearance to be?"

"*About forty thousand kilometers, Nick. If it's on schedule, it will be there at 1400 hours.*"

That gave us six hours. He went back to the allcomm: "JoAnn, Shara, we'll be doing some maneuvering, then going through another acceleration. Once we get started, you'll be stuck in the harness for about three-

quarters of an hour.”

“Nick,” said Richard, “*we have another transmission. This one is from Barkley.*”

“JoAnn,” said Nick, “we’ve got Barkley.” He signaled me that he was talking about the *Carver* AI.

“*Put him on,*” said JoAnn.

Barkley had a deep bass voice: “*Casavant, everything has gone precisely according to plan. I am caught in the megatemp warp, have already been up and down twice. I am moving within the projected parameters.*”

“*Okay, Barkley,*” said JoAnn. “*We can’t get to you before you go under again, so we’ll meet you at the delta site.*”

“*Very good. I’ll see you then.*”

“*How long have you remained in linear space after coming back up?*”

“*Three hours, fifty-seven minutes, and fourteen seconds on the first appearance. The second one was about three minutes less.*”

“*Okay. How much warning have you been getting before you become aware that you’re being taken back down?*”

“*Less than a minute, JoAnn. About fifty-seven seconds.*”

“*Okay. We’ll see you shortly.*”

“*One more thing, JoAnn: What time is it?*”

“*It’s 7:57 A.M. Why?*”

“*It’s just after midnight here. I wanted to set the clocks to reflect reality.*”

\* \* \*

We reached the delta site in advance of the *Carver* and began closing toward the area where it was expected to arrive. But we were uncertain, so Nick kept a slow pace. We got out of our seats and returned to the passenger cabin, where JoAnn and Shara were talking about a rumor they’d heard that President Davis was going to apply pressure on Orion in an effort to obtain use of the *Grainger*.

“Let’s hope it happens,” said JoAnn. “We really need access to it to lock this thing down.” She looked up at Nick. “When the *Carver* shows up, we want to get within visual range. Then, when Barkley feels the process starting again to take him down, *that’s* the moment to intervene.”

“How exactly do we do that?” he asked.

“We’ll be getting readings from Barkley about what’s going on in the drive unit. When we have those, I can give him some adjustments. Maybe it’ll break the process. Maybe not. We’ll have to see what happens. Probably, he’ll get hauled down, but he should reappear again within, I hope, a few minutes. And, if we’re lucky, that will be the end of it. If it works out—” She stared at me, and those dark eyes glittered. “If everything goes as planned, we’ll be a step closer to keeping the *Capella* from taking another five-and-a-



half-year dive.”

“Pity it’s not safe to go on board ourselves to do this,” I said. “It would be a little quicker than passing information to an AI.”

That brought a glare from Shara, and I realized I was talking too much. “We had a discussion about that,” she said. “JoAnn wanted to do it, but John said no.” Now she was looking at Nick, but the irritation was fading. “It’s too dangerous.”

“It would have given us a better shot,” said JoAnn.

“Let’s let it go, okay?”

“Well, anyhow,” I said, trying to recover, “this’ll probably work fine.”

JoAnn nodded. “I hope so. It took almost four years just to get the math in place. The truth is there are too many elements to be certain. It’s not only design and mass, but there are details associated with the drive unit, how much power it generates and how quickly it comes online. And, of course, the nature of the damage that’s been done to the continuum. We haven’t figured out yet how to lock *that* down. We need more time.” She sighed. “This is a place we’ve never been before, Chase.”

\* \* \*

The *Carver* reappeared on schedule. “*He’s about an hour away,*” said Nick, speaking over the allcomm. I was back in the passenger cabin.

“So far so good.” JoAnn looked pleased. “Barkley, is everything okay?”

“*Everything seems to be running as planned, JoAnn.*”

The *Carver* was a low-cost Barringer yacht. They’d been popular at one time, but the company had stopped making them twenty years earlier. Gabe had owned one when I succeeded my mom as his pilot. It was clunky in comparison to the *Belle-Marie*, but it brought back some happy memories. There aren’t many of the Barringers around anymore.

It took a bit longer than an hour, but eventually we pulled to within a few kilometers of it, off its port side. “Close enough,” JoAnn said. “Let’s stay where we are.” Barkley’s lights were on both inside and out. The ship looked occupied.

“The thing should take effect again in about an hour and a half,” said JoAnn.

We watched the display, which gave us a clearer view than we could get looking out the ports.

Nick pointed out that no one had eaten, but he seemed to be the only person aboard with an appetite. He got some chocolate chip cookies from the dispenser, and we all ate a couple.

The *Carver* floated quietly on the monitor, transfixed against the background of stars. I sat staring at it, literally praying, thinking how the evacuation problem was maybe about to go away. The *Capella* would arrive in three months, and we would get everyone off, and it would be over.

And Gabe would be back.

Shara commented that it was a new experience for her. “It’s the first time I’ve been involved in an experiment that had life-and-death consequences.”

## **Users Review**

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