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SUNBORN

VOLUME FOUR OF
THE CHAOS
CHRONICLES

JEFFREY A. CARVER



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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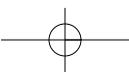
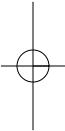
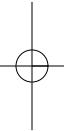
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This one is for Chuck,
who helped make it possible.

It's also for you readers,
who have waited patiently for too many years.

I thank you all.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book has been long, long in the making, and there were times I thought I would never finish it. Without the help of the people I'm about to thank, I probably would not have. I know acknowledgment pages can start to sound like a broken record, the same people being thanked over and over, book after book. There's a good reason for that: the assistance of generous, smart, caring, loyal friends and family who help unceasingly, year after year, book after book. So it has been in my writing life.

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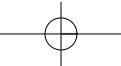
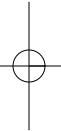
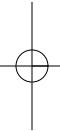
A special mention goes to the members of Park Avenue Congregational Church of Arlington, Massachusetts, who have taken

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a special interest in this one—especially Nick Iacuzio and the much-missed Arlene Brown, whose generosity spawned several important characters in the story.

And finally, you, the readers, who have been waiting patiently (or impatiently) for a new Chaos book for far too many years. Many of you have let me know you are waiting, and a more loyal bunch of readers no writer could ask for. This one's for you.

SUNBORN



PROLOGUE



Somewhere in the fire-scored darkness of space, a being that was neither matter nor energy slipped through spacetime like a whisper, a breath, a rustle of a curtain in the night. The being called itself by a name that, if spoken aloud, would have sounded something like *De-ee-ee-ee-ee-ee-abb-b-b*, trailing off into extremely low-frequency reverberations. In visible light, it looked like a cloud of coal dust—except when it shrank to a single particle, or stretched to the breadth of a planet.

Deeaab moved with ease through the many dimensions of space. Time was a clay to be molded by its thoughts. It had slipped into this universe out of deep time, across a boundary few could even detect, the membrane dividing one universe from the next. It had fled the fading glow of a universe that was dying.

The crossing was perilous, with no chance of return. Deeaab had seen at least one of its fellows succeed in crossing at the same time, but others had not. Those who had failed were lost forever. The loss was never far from Deeaab's thoughts; it was like an ever-present pull of gravity.

Wandering through the star-spiral it now took for home, Deeaab listened to slow mutterings in spacetime that seemed to come from very large bodies—and also to the quick chittering of strange little creatures that flickered in and out of Deeaab's awareness like shadows. Much that Deeaab heard it did not understand, whether from the great or from the tiny. But it was astonished when it finally realized that the *stars* were the great bodies that were speaking—that they were alive with thought and awareness. Could this be? Deeaab had never heard a star speak before.

Marveling, Deeaab approached one sun, at the edge of a cloud. Understanding came with difficulty, but Deeaab could *feel*

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the star's thought. The star seemed glad of its presence, and Deeaab lingered, seeking deeper contact. In time it began to understand the star's feelings; and what it felt was disturbing. Deeaab felt pain, and fear, and a certainty that this sun was dying—but not of natural causes. Deeaab called the sun *Bravelight*, and wished it could help. But how? There was an inimical force here, unseen, bringing death where there should only be life.

Bravelight swelled and reddened. Deeaab drew away, but continued to keep watch . . . until the shocking moment when its friend flared with sudden, blinding intensity, exploding with a death-convulsion that sent Deeaab tumbling away.

After the death of *Bravelight*, Deeaab wandered again, numb with grief and fear. It heard other murmurings, and troubling rumors of other stars dying young and in pain. What could Deeaab do? Had it fled the demise of a universe that was simply dying of old age, only to find a worse place, where death was even crueler and more capricious? Was this just the way things *were* in this universe?

In time, it came to another star-cloud, a place where suns were being born, one after another. Compelled by the memory of *Bravelight*, Deeaab felt drawn to the cloud, seeking new friends. But when it felt death lurking here, too, Deeaab withdrew.

But Deeaab did not leave that region of space. Instead, it stayed nearby, waiting . . . hoping that understanding might come, and a course of action be made clear.

Deeaab pondered, and prayed.

1

WAYSTATION



The company sped across the light-years for what felt like an eternity, enclosed only by a faintly glimmering force-field bubble. Behind them they had left an ocean world; ahead was the unknown. Inside the star-spanner transport, John Bandicut felt a distinct sense of time and space passing by as a physical stream—stretching ahead of them, flowing around and behind them. He watched as the stars outside the bubble streaked past against the backdrop of space.

Ik, the Hraachee'an, was the first to notice the gradual appearance of a ghostly, rose-colored nebula ahead. Soon after Ik pointed that out to the others, Bandicut observed the star field crinkling, as though someone were rippling the fabric of space like clear cellophane. A moment later a shock wave rocked the star-spanner bubble. "What—" *rasp rasp* "—was that?" cried Li-Jared, several of the Karellian's words dropping out in translation.

Whatever had hit them blazed golden around them, and for a moment they all seemed to turn transparent and luminous. Bandicut could scarcely breathe.

Entering new flight regime. Approaching interstellar waystationx.

Bandicut blinked at the words of the translator-stones embedded in his wrists. Interstellar waystation?

"Something's changing ahead," said Ik.

Bandicut pressed his face to the front of the bubble. "I think I see it—some kind of shadow ahead, between us and the nebula."

"Hrah. It looks like a channel of some kind."

Antares pressed close behind Bandicut, her breath warm on his cheek. "How could there be such a thing in space?"

No one had an answer, but what had looked to Bandicut like a patch of shadow grew larger quickly, then abruptly wrapped around the bubble like a tunnel. Suddenly they were flying like a

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high-speed train through a not-quite-solid tube, which began to glow with a pale blue light.

They felt a series of soft jolts, as though the star-spanner bubble were decelerating in discrete increments. With no further warning, it glided into a platform that reminded Bandicut of a subway station on Earth. The bubble softened and vanished with a twinkle. Bandicut and the others looked at each other. "I guess we're invited to get out," Bandicut said. His two robots went first, clambering out onto the surface and pronouncing it solid and apparently safe. Together with his companions, Bandicut followed them onto the platform. It was a strange and wonderful sensation to feel something solid beneath his feet again. /What do you think, Charlie? I mean Charlene?/ he asked silently, speaking to the quarx—presently female—in his head.

/// I think we're about to meet someone. ///

/Oh?/ He turned. A new robot was floating toward them. Or perhaps a holo-image of a robot. It was tall and vaguely humanoid. A silver band encircled its head where eyes might have been. Small clusters of sparkling jewels floated independently along the band—apparently the robot's eyes, moving to focus on all the members of the company at once. "My name is Jeaves," it said in a deep voice that sounded both human and familiar. They had heard that voice during their passage in the star-spanner. "Welcome to the Cloudminder Interstellar Waystation. I have been asked to serve as your host, though I am a visitor here myself. The station is largely uninhabited at this time."

"Hrah," said Ik. "Where are—?"

"I'll explain everything once we're inside, and do my best to make you comfortable here," Jeaves continued. "Including servicing your robots, if you like."

"Yes, we—"

"I have many questions for you, as I'm sure you do for me. But before we can enter the station proper, I must ask you all to stand by just a little longer. I believe you are familiar with the normalization procedure?"

"Of course," rumbled Ik. The others muttered agreement. On Shipworld, the vast structure outside the galaxy where the four had met, each had gone through normalization—a mysterious

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application of alien technology that adjusted their physiologies for local food, air, and so on. It had happened again when they'd gone to the ocean world.

*/// John, I get the feeling
this isn't going to be just a pit stop . . . ///*

Bandicut missed the rest of the quarx's words. He suddenly felt light-headed, and was enveloped in a cottony glow. He started to call out to his companions. But the glow blurred not just his vision but his thoughts and his balance. He felt himself falling, his thoughts leaking out into the light . . .

JEAVES PROCEDURAL DIARY: 384.14.8.7

Preliminary debriefing of the newly arrived company is complete. I performed the procedure during a light trance-state induced during normalization, with the assistance of the translator-stones each member of the company carries.

Summary:

The company includes representatives of four organic species, each from a different homeworld (John Bandicut, Human of Earth; Ik, Hraachee'an; Li-Jared, Karellian; and Antares, empathic Thespi Third-female). In addition, there are two robots of Earth manufacture—Napoleon and Copernicus—enhanced to the point of sentience (but not by their original makers). They seem to share a personal bond with John Bandicut. Finally, there is one noncorporeal symbiote—Charlie (or Charlene) the quarx—resident in John Bandicut's mind.

The group came together on Shipworld, and by all accounts, distinguished themselves during the crisis brought on by the boojum incursion. (Report on boojum crisis available in Shipworld archives.) Due to urgent need, they were dispatched immediately afterward to assist with a situation on the ocean world known as Astar-Neri, in the Sagittarian arm—where they prevented a deep-sea entity known locally as the Maw of the Abyss from destroying an under-sea civilization. Their discovery of the true nature of the Maw—a damaged, near-sentient stargate—is recorded separately in a detailed report.

The success of this just-completed mission owed largely to their

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exceptional teamwork and negotiating skills. The broad spectrum of their intelligences, empathy, courage, and problem-solving abilities make this company a formidable agent of change. Compared with other operatives who might be called into service in the Starmaker crisis, this company in my judgment offers by far the best hope for success. Plus, of course, they are here now, and available. With the instability in the Starmaker Nebula growing at an alarming rate, time appears to be critical.

All members of the group emoted a desire for extended rest and relaxation—hardly unreasonable, given their recent service. I can certainly allow them a day to rest and adjust to their new surroundings, which I have attempted to shape for their comfort. However, given the urgency of the situation, I have little choice: I must move quickly to persuade this group to join us in the Starmaker mission. The consequences of failure could redound far beyond the nebula . . .

2

MISSION UNWELCOME



The robot's holographic image floated like a ghostly silver mannequin above the dull red cavern floor. "I trust you have enjoyed your respite, however brief," he said to the assembled company. "A day and a night isn't much. But now we must speak of a matter that cannot wait. A matter of great urgency."

Bandicut groaned. The quarx had been right. This *wasn't* just a pit stop at the waystation. Li-Jared answered first, though. "A new *job*?" he snapped, his electric-blue eyes sparking with anger. Vaguely simian in form, the Karellian paced energetically over what looked like the floor of a water-carved sandstone ravine in the middle of a desert. Somewhere beneath all that rock was the deck of the space station. "Has it occurred to you," Li-Jared drawled, "that we might not *want* a new job?"

We certainly do not, Bandicut thought. Not anytime soon,

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and certainly not dropped on us the way the last one was. They had just spent a pleasant evening in idyllic surroundings, eaten good food, and even been fitted with new clothes while their old ones were cleaned and mended. They had slept in comfort, and awakened to stroll through several carefully maintained environments, each in a different section of the station. Had all of that been a softening-up for this moment? He felt an echoing feeling from Antares, who stood at his side.

“Hrah,” agreed Ik. The tall, bony Hraachee’an stroked his sculpted, blue-white head with long fingers and turned both ways to note the reactions of his companions. “After what we have been through, we thought we had earned some time to relax and . . .” Ik paused, raising his hands, at a loss for words.

See to our own needs? Bandicut thought, completing Ik’s sentence. Yes. They had just saved a world. And had done plenty more before that.

“I understand,” said Jeaves. The holo of the robot’s cylindrical body extended its arms toward them in an apparent gesture of conciliation. The sparkling eyes in the band around its head came together to become just two eyes. They softened. “But the need is urgent. You are the only ones in a position to—”

John Bandicut shook his head. “We’ve heard *that* bef—” he started to say. But he was interrupted by a sudden shudder that passed through the ground, shaking them all. “What the—?”

“Please wait while this passes,” Jeaves said sharply as the shaking continued. “This will likely be the equivalent of a mild seismic quake on a planetary surface. It should end soon.”

“Uhhll, seismic quake?” said Antares, her voice tinged with uncertainty. “I don’t understand.”

Bandicut gripped her arm to steady her. “It means the ground shaking—maybe pretty hard.” Right now, it was starting to feel as if a freight train were passing by. “Jeaves, what’s causing this?” He looked up. Overhead, an enormous clear dome protected them from the vacuum of interstellar space. It reminded him of domes on Shipworld, a pretty solid place; but they were not on Shipworld. As the ground continued to quake, he wondered about the strength of this dome.

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Li-Jared swung his gaze from left to right. “What the hell is—” *bwang* “—going on, Jeaves?” he echoed, with a froglike twanging sound that seemed to emerge from deep in his throat.

Over the rumbling, Jeaves said, “It’s a hypergravity shock wave. It’s part of the problem I was telling you about. We’ve been getting them intermittently for some time, but they’re growing in frequency and severity.”

“When’s it going to stop?” Bandicut yelled, waving a hand uselessly against the dust now rising from the ground.

“Soon, I hope,” Jeaves answered, raising his own voice to a shout. “It’s a disturbance in spacetime, propagating through n-dimensional space. Once it passes, I’ll show you where it came from.”

Li-Jared was scowling, which on a Karellian face looked something like a leer. “This doesn’t have something to do with the Maw of the Abyss, does it? We thought we’d gotten away from the Maw!”

“Not that we know of—” Jeaves began. His words cut off when the station shuddered harder, and the ground heaved violently, knocking all four of the company into the dust. The ground bucked in waves. Bandicut cursed, sliding on his elbows and knees, trying to protect Antares, who had fallen half under him. Jeaves shouted something he couldn’t hear. But he *did* hear the cracking of stone walls. Then he heard Jeaves’s words, amplified: “. . . *into the shelter! Get into the shelter!*”

Bandicut could barely lift his head. Shelter? What shelter? Then he saw a row of blazing marker lights leading down into a deep cut in the ground . . .

“*Quickly!*” Jeaves shouted, and Li-Jared yelled, “This way, Ik!” and hauled on the Hraachee’an. Bandicut did likewise with Antares; they couldn’t stand up to run, but together they crawled toward the opening, falling through after Ik and Li-Jared, and nearly on top of them.

A light came on as a door slid shut. They untangled themselves enough to realize that they were still bouncing up and down, but less violently and on a padded surface. They were apparently in a sealed emergency shelter not much larger than the star-spanner bubble. Jeaves reappeared in their midst—a smaller

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projection—and asked, “Are you all right? Is anyone injured?” When no one seemed hurt, he continued, “You can ride out the shock wave here. This is the worst we have experienced—and I must tell you, it alarms me.”

“My robots!” Bandicut called. “Are they all right?” The last time he had seen Napoleon and Copernicus, they’d been heading off to another sector of the station for servicing.

Jeaves flickered. “We’re experiencing broken communication to that area. But the service bays are well protected.”

/// They’re being seen to by the shadow-people.

I’m sure they’re in excellent hands, ///

the quarx murmured silently, in Bandicut’s head.

/I know, I know./ The shadow-people, fractal-creatures who looked like torn shreds of darkness and appeared to have no material form, were the ones who seemed to keep things running on Shipworld—and apparently here, too. */But still . . . /*

“How much longer?” Li-Jared asked in a voice quavering from the vibration, and maybe from fear.

Jeaves did not answer at once. The shaking seemed to lessen, as though it were being muffled. “We are trying to create a compensation field around the shelter, so we can talk,” Jeaves said finally.

“When is it going to *end*?” Antares asked.

“I don’t know. None has lasted this long before.”

Bandicut squeezed Antares’s hand. The Thespi female leaned against him, her long auburn hair falling against his shoulder, and together they settled back against the padding to ride it out. He felt her anxiety vibrate through him along with the continuing shudders of the quake. He slipped an arm around her shoulder to reassure her.

“You said you would tell us where this was coming from,” Ik said.

“All right, then, let’s start,” Jeaves answered. “Please look up.” As he spoke, the light in the shelter dimmed, and the ceiling and upper walls seemed to disappear, replaced by the night sky. To Bandicut, the view looked like a clear sky on a dark night on the North American plain. A great, breathtaking swath of the Milky Way arched across the field of view—except that the star patterns

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were all unfamiliar. "I need to tell you something about the neighborhood this waystation is located in," the robot said. "We are about twenty-four thousand light-years from the center of the galaxy."

"In the disk plane?" Li-Jared asked.

"Yes. Now notice the nebula." The view rotated about thirty degrees.

It was hard *not* to notice the wispy, ethereal cloud of glowing gas and dust floating slightly offset from the band of the galaxy. Bandicut raised his hands and held them side by side. They didn't quite cover the glowing cloud.

"We are presently a few hundred light-years from the nebula," Jeaves continued. "It is known locally as Starmaker. But you may know it by another name, John."

Everyone turned to look at Bandicut. He peered up at the cloud and the star patterns, then shook his head.

"It is well known on your homeworld," said the robot. "In fact, it is visible to the naked eye from your northern hemisphere. But we're seeing it from what you would think of as the back side. Your astronomers call it the Great Orion Nebula."

Bandicut drew a sharp breath. "*The Orion Nebula?*" he whispered, stunned. "My God." Of course he knew it; in the constellation Orion the Hunter, it was the middle "star" in the sword hanging from the Hunter's belt. A profound feeling of homesickness overtook him. Not since his exile from Earth's solar system had he seen anything that offered even this much connection with home. Now . . . he had a place again in the galaxy; he knew where he was.

Jeaves was still talking. "The Orion Nebula, besides being located some fifteen hundred light-years to this side of John's homeworld, Earth, is one of the great star-forming nebulas of the Milky Way galaxy."

Bandicut breathed out again. */Fifteen hundred light-years. Still a long way home./*

/// Yes, but we're closer now than before.

*Didn't we guess Shipworld was about
fifteen thousand light-years? ///*

/Yah./ It had been a wild guess, though. All they really knew