

JACK McDEVITT

CRUISING THROUGH DEUTERONOMY

The banging sounded like distant thunder.

Cardwell was slow to move, had in fact been sitting in the dying firelight, allowing the storm to carry away his gloomy mood. Kick padded barefoot from the kitchen through the hallway and opened the front door. The wind blew louder.

There were whispers in the hall, and an authoritarian voice that he did not recognize. Rick appeared. "Dad," he said. "You have a visitor."

A tall, severe figure followed the boy into the room. Cardwell saw at once that he was a clergyman, one of those advanced types that affect plaid jackets. He was quite tall, with intense dark eyes contrasted against a bland smile. He shook rain off his hat and coat, and held them out for Rick. "Dr. Cardwell?" he asked, coming forward.

Cardwell heaved himself out of his chair. "You have the advantage of me, sir."

"I'm Pastor Gant." His glance swept the room, and registered diffident approval.

"From the Good Shepherd Church over in Bridgeton." He said it as if it explained his visit.

Cardwell debated whether he could leave him standing. But his breeding got the better of him, and he indicated a chair. "What can I do for you, Pastor?"

"I'll come right to the point if you don't mind." He sat down and held his hands out to the fire.

"Yes. Good. Can I offer you a brandy?"

He waved the idea away with a choreographed gesture. His fingers were long and graceful. "No, thank you. I'm not opposed to drink on principle, you understand.

But I prefer to abstain."

Rick, whose boredom with Cardwell's inner circle was usually painfully obvious, took a chair where he could watch.

Pastor Gant reached into his pocket, and took out precisely what Cardwell had expected: the clipping from last Tuesday's News. He held it toward the firelight, and looked at it as though it were vaguely loathsome. "Is there actually anything to this?" he asked.

"The Displacer?"

"The time machine."

"The story is correct in its essentials."

"I see." The long fingers toyed with the paper. He turned toward the boy.
"Son,"
he said, "perhaps it would be best if you left the room."

Rick didn't stir, but Gant did not seem to notice.

"Pastor," said Cardwell, "I don't want to be abrupt, but I'm really quite preoccupied at the moment."

"Yes, I'm sure you are." He crossed his legs, and let his head drift back.
"Doctor, you must understand that the people of my church are good people."

"I'm sure they are."

"But life can be very harsh. Several, at this moment, are bearing up under terminal illnesses. Another has recently lost a child. Just about your son's age, I might add. Still another--"

"Might I press you to come to the point?"

"Of course." He looked not quite substantial in the flickering light. "The only thing that keeps us going when life becomes--" he searched for a word, "--difficult, the only thing that sustains us, is our sure and certain knowledge of a divine protector."

Cardwell's stomach began to hurt. "Reverend," he said, "I'd be pleased to discuss all this with you at a future date."

Gant stared into the fire, as if his host had not spoken. "You will take all this from them, Doctor."

Cardwell frowned. There'd been some minor fuss over that article. Fortunately, the limited circulation of the News, and the general tendency of people in the area to mind their business had however protected him. "I hardly see how that can be," he said.

"You know what will happen if you complete the device?" He rose from his chair and towered over Cardwell. His eyes grew very large and very black. "You will cruise through Deuteronomy. Glide across Numbers. Descend into Exodus. There were no trumpets at Jericho, you will say. No angel at Sodom. No division of the Red Sea. No haircut for Samson." His smile lengthened at that, but there was no warmth in the gesture. "You will say there was no Fall, and hence no need for a Redeemer. You will travel into the sacred country and every time you return you will bring with you a cargo of despair. I simply cannot allow that to happen." He drew a small revolver from his pocket and pointed it at a spot between Cardwell's eyes.

Rick gasped and started forward. But his father, with a quick jerky wave, stopped him.

"I'm sorry," said the pastor. It was hard to see his expression in the play of light and shadow. "I truly am." He studied the weapon. "It is often difficult to

know the right thing to do."

Cardwell could not take his eyes from the gun. It amazed him that a stranger would come into his home and threaten to use one on him. The entire world centered in the round black muzzle. "You're too late," he said.

Gant's gaze shifted. Bored into him. "What do you mean?"

"I've already done it. I've made the flight. Several, in fact."

"I don't believe you."

"Did you really think I'd let the newspapers have the story if I weren't sure? And there's only one way to be sure." He eased himself back into his chair. Anything to get out from in front of that muzzle. And he was relieved to see that when it followed him, it locked onto his right knee. "There is a prototype, George. Your name is George, isn't it?"

That surprised him. "How did you know?"

"I pass your church every day on my way to the campus. Your name is prominently displayed."

"I wish that you might have seen fit to come by and say hello."

Cardwell nodded. "Possibly I've been remiss."

"I'm surprised you would see that." Gant's brow furrowed.

"How could I not? Pastor, I've been on the ark."

The rain hissed against the windows. "That's ridiculous."

"Is it? Then why are you here? Either you believe it's possible, or you don't. If you don't, I'd like to know why you're threatening my life."

Gant stared at him. He seemed to be having trouble breathing. "Is it really true?"

"Yes, it's true. I've walked her decks. Felt her roll in the swell of the storm. Seen the tigers in their bays."

The gun came up. Swung a few degrees. Cardwell realized it was pointed at Rick.

"Stay back," said Gant. "I don't want to shoot you." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Indeed, I wish there were a way to do this without shooting anyone."

"Then believe me," Cardwell said desperately.

The pastor stared at him for a long moment. "Noah," he said.

"Yes?"

"Did you talk to him?"

"I didn't know the language. I saw him."

The hand wavered.

"Listen to me. I was at the foot of the mountain when Moses returned with the Tablets. I saw him shatter them against the rocks. I watched Solomon give judgment and walked through his temple. I stood a few feet from David when he killed the Philistine. I was in the crowd when Jesus delivered the sermon on the mount."

Perspiration glittered on Gant's forehead. "You're lying," he said. "You're mocking me. And blaspheming everything that's holy. You're a non-believer. I know about you. I've read what you've written."

Cardwell smiled gently. "That was true once. George, I was on the shore during the storm when the Master stepped out of the boat. I looked into His eyes."

The pastor tried to speak, but only strangled sounds got out.

"Gant, do you, at last, not believe?" His voice rose until it was one with the wind beating at the window. "Where is your faith?"

The gun clattered to the floor. A sob welled up in Gant's throat, and he fell forward into Cardwell's arms and almost knocked him down. But Cardwell held on, and the pastor embraced him. A log popped and fell into the fire.

"Thank you," said Gant, finally, wiping his cheek. "I was terribly wrong to come here. Not to see what would happen." His face brightened, and he squeezed Cardwell's shoulders again. "I hope you'll come by the church and share your experience with all of us." And, without stopping for hat, coat, or gun, he walked straight out of the house.

When he was gone, they locked the door. "Dad," Rick said, "you were terrific."

"Thanks."

"Are you going to call the police?"

"Maybe in the morning. Let me think about it."

"I was scared."

"So was I, kid."

The boy picked up the weapon and put it on a bookshelf. He grinned. "The displacement principle doesn't work, right? You told me that yesterday. The time machine won't ever get off the ground."

"That's right."

The boy's eyes gleamed. "Don't you have any respect at all for the truth, Dad?"

"Sometimes I think truth is overrated," said Cardwell. "On that one, I believe I'm with the Christians. My money's on faith."

