

ANTARES PASSAGE

A Novel By

Michael McCollum

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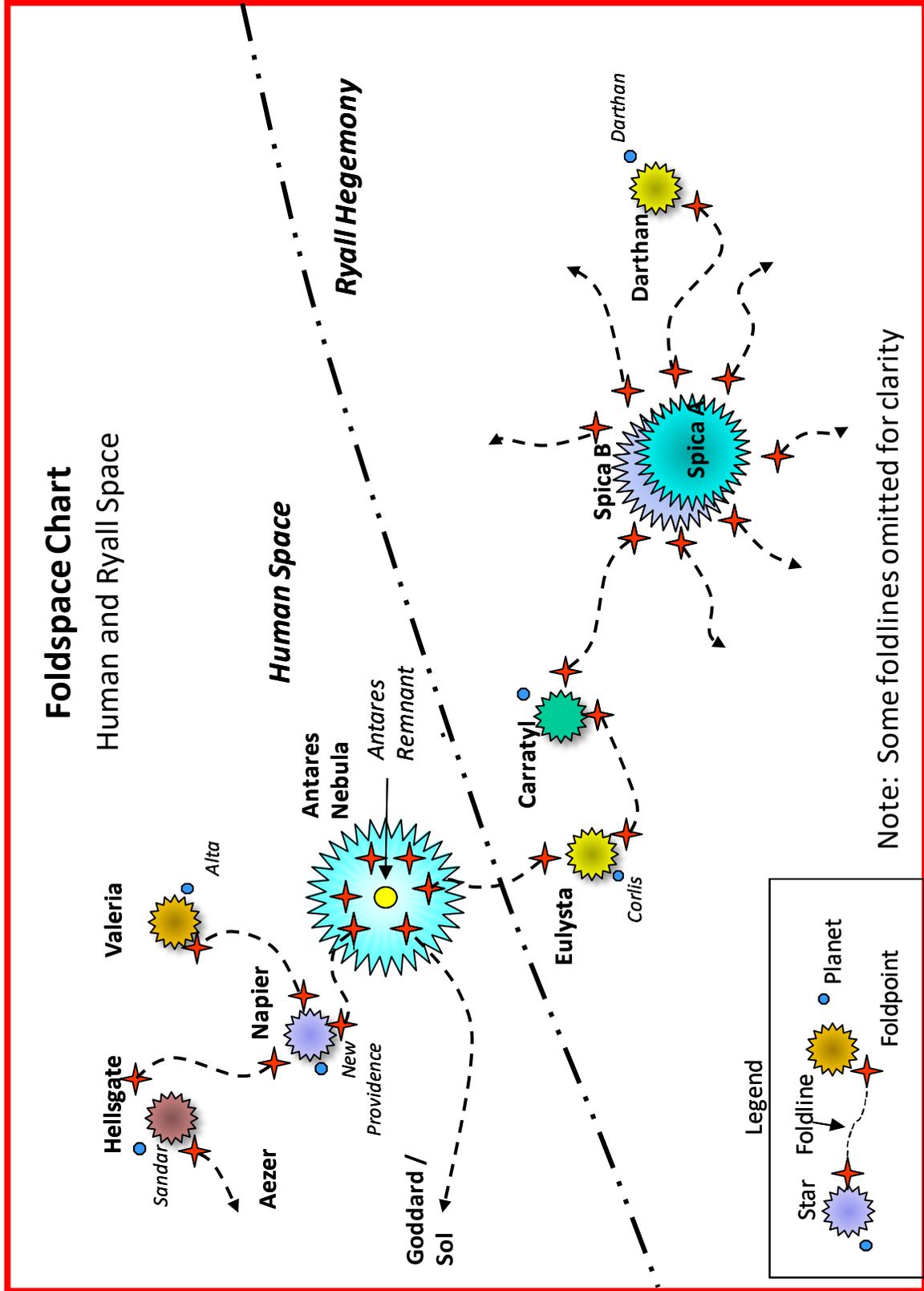
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Antares and Spica Foldspace Clusters



PROLOGUE:

THE BIRTH AND DEATH OF A STAR

The star was a relative newcomer to the galactic scene. It had begun life as a vast cloud of interstellar hydrogen which over the millennia had collapsed in upon itself, pulled together by gravitational attraction. As the cloud coalesced, the gas at its center grew hotter. After a while, the interior began to glow with a visible light. Then one day, the temperature at the cloud's center reached the level where hydrogen fuses into helium. On that day, a new star blazed forth to illuminate the blackness of the interstellar night.

For millions of years the star shone with a luminosity equal to that of several thousand of its lesser brethren. Indeed, the star's radiance made it a beacon visible across the length of the galaxy. However, such profligacy is not without its costs. Where smaller suns took as long as 10 billion years to consume their available supplies of fusible hydrogen, the giant star managed the same feat in less than a single gigayear. About the time the first apelike prehumans ventured forth onto the savannas of Africa, the star ran low on hydrogen fuel, and as quickly as it had flamed alight, the nuclear fire at its heart was snuffed out.

The end of fusion brought with it a resumption of the contraction that had molded the primordial cloud. As the core fell inward, its temperature rose precipitously. Within seconds, the temperature at the star's center reached the point where helium fuses into carbon. The nuclear fire flamed anew, this time powered by the helium ash of the previous cycle. Since the new fire was hotter than the old, the star wasted energy even more lavishly than before. It expanded as well, providing a larger surface area from which to radiate the vigorous new energy to surrounding space. Along with the expansion came cooling of the star's outermost layers, and a change in color. Where before the star had radiated a brilliant blue-white light, its visible surface was now a bright yellow-green color.

The star continued on the quick burning helium-carbon cycle until the time when the first agricultural settlements began to appear on Earth. Then, having depleted its supply of helium, the inner fire failed, triggering yet another cycle of contraction and heating. This time it was the turn of the carbon atoms to provide the star's new source of energy. Once again, the new fuel produced more energy than previously, forcing the star's surface to expand to provide sufficient area to radiate the heat. By the time the star stabilized at 400 solar diameters, its hue had shaded down from yellow-green to a deep red-orange.

The star was well into its dotage when the first human telescopes were turned its way. The first starships to arrive at the star made note of this fact a few centuries later when they recorded more neutrinos than expected pouring forth from the star's fiery interior. It was obvious even then that the star had not long to live. Still, a stellar lifetime is a very long time, and no one truly expected the end to come as quickly as it did.

At 17:32 hours on 3 August 2512, the star exhausted the last of its carbon fuel. Within seconds, the old cycle of contraction and heating began again. This time things were different, however. For now, the star's core was rich in iron, and iron cannot be fused to produce energy. Rather, fusing iron nuclei rob energy from their surroundings. With its core hopelessly chilled by iron fusion reactions, the star gave up its ages-old fight with gravity. The core began its final collapse.

As billions upon countless billions of tons of matter fell inward, they gave up the potential energy they had stored through the millennia. This "energy of position" reappeared as heat, causing the temperature at the center of the star to rise rapidly toward infinity. Some of this heat was radiated into the middle layers of the star's atmosphere; which, unlike the core, were still rich in unburned hydrogen. A furious thermonuclear reaction resulted. In the blink of an eye, the star began to produce as much energy each

second as it had previously radiated away in its entire lifetime.

The end came quickly as the star exploded in the most titanic explosion ever witnessed by human beings.

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CHAPTER 1

It was high noon when the commercial shuttle touched down at Homeport Spaceport. Even so, the Antares Nebula was clearly visible in Alta's deep purple sky if one knew where to look. It had been three years since the nova had first burned bright in the Altan heavens, and while Antares was no longer the eye-searing spark it had once been, the supernova's power and its relative proximity assured that it would be visible in daylight for several years to come.

Fleet Captain Richard Arthur Drake unstrapped from his seat and stood to remove his kit bag from the shuttle's overhead baggage compartment. Around him, four dozen fellow passengers did the same. Then each man and woman queued up in the shuttle's center aisle and waited patiently for the landing bridge to be maneuvered across the shuttle's wing and attached to the midships airlock.

Drake was of medium height, with a lean, muscular figure. His hair, which he wore in the close-cropped style of a military spacer, was black with a touch of gray around the edges. A tiny network of worry lines emanated from the corners of his green eyes, and a whitish scar cut one of his eyebrows into two unequal sections. As he moved slowly down the aisle, he did so with the smooth motion of one who has learned to maneuver under widely varying conditions of acceleration and gravity.

The crowd was slow to disembark. As each passenger reached the storage lockers just forward of the midships airlock, he or she would stop and sort through the carry-on luggage, blocking the aisle in the process. Normally, Drake would have found his patience running short at the continued delay. Not today. After six months spent breathing the reconstituted effluvium that passed for breathing gas aboard a starship, he was more than happy to merely stand and inhale deeply of the virgin air that wafted in through the open airlock.

Eventually, he found himself across the landing bridge and inside the terminal building. He threaded his way through the waiting crowd and was about to board a slide walk for the main terminal building when a familiar voice called out: "Richard!"

Drake turned at the sound and was nearly overwhelmed by the fragrant bundle of femininity that flew into his embrace. Arms wrapped around his neck and warm lips pressed hungrily against his mouth. He responded in kind for long seconds before breaking free of his assailant with a grin.

"Excuse me, Miss, but do I know you?"

"You'd better know me," Bethany Lindquist replied with mock severity. "We've got a date at the altar, remember?"

"Do we?" he asked. "The last time I asked, you said that you didn't want to set a date because..."

"You knew what I meant! Now stop teasing me before I forget that you ever asked me."

"Yes, Ma'am, except as I remember, *you* asked *me*."

"Then your memory is faulty, sir. Now then, aren't you happy to see me?"

"You know I am, Beth. Here, stand back and let me look at you." Drake thrust his fiancée out

to arms' length and feasted on the sight of her. Bethany was nearly as tall as he was, with a well-proportioned figure and an easy, graceful stance. Her heart shaped face was framed by shoulder-length auburn hair. Her green eyes had a slight slant to them that complemented her high cheekbones. She was smiling broadly, which produced dimples in her cheeks. After long seconds of mutual inspection, he pulled her close again and sighed. "My God, you're more beautiful than I remember!"

"Thank you, kind sir. May I say the same about you?"

"You may. How the hell did you know I was coming, anyway?"

"I have my spies."

"I'll bet you do. But seriously, how did you know? I didn't know myself which ship I would be on until a few hours before I left Felicity Base."

"First of all, they're holding a Parliamentary briefing concerning the Helldiver Project at the Admiralty tomorrow. I knew you would be attending."

"That's supposed to be a secret."

"Not to me. I'm an invited participant."

"You are?"

She nodded. "I'm the official representative of the terrestrial ambassador, remember?"

"Ah, yes. Now I remember why we can't get married. Something about your duty to your uncle..."

"Hmmm, do I detect a hint of annoyance in your tone, m'love?"

"More than a hint," he muttered.

"How sweet!"

"Don't change the subject. How did you know I'd be on this shuttle?"

"My uncle told me."

"How the hell did he know?"

"He has an office on Parliament Hill now. He hears things."

"He could have been wrong, you know. What if I hadn't come through that door just now?"

Bethany shrugged. "Then I would have met every arriving ship for the next month if I'd had to." She snuggled close and kissed him again. "Oh, Richard, it's so good to have you home!"

"Good to be home," he replied with his nose nestled in her fragrant hair. After a long moment in which no one spoke, they released each other by mutual consent. Drake sighed deeply and said, "Well, shall we go in search of the rest of my luggage?"

"Suits me," Bethany replied.

They avoided the slide walk, preferring to walk arm in arm down the long concourse. Drake found himself whistling under his breath. As they walked, he became aware of the warmth of her

beside him, and of the general acuteness of his senses. He watched the bustle around him with newly sharpened vision.

Overhead were several large holoscreens. Some were used to display launching and arrival information; others directed travelers to various destinations within the spaceport, while still others displayed the latest news concerning the recently completed election. Drake ignored the latter. He'd had all the "news" he cared for on the long flight down from Felicity Base.

They came to the end of the concourse and turned left into the main section of the spaceport terminal building. A large holocube stood at the point where several slide walks spilled their loads into the cavernous terminal. Inside the cube stood a creature from out of a nightmare.

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The basis for interstellar travel was established by Bashir-ben-Sulieman in 2078. Sulieman, an astronomer working out of Farside Observatory, Luna, spent his life measuring the precise positions and proper motions of several thousand stars. After two decades of work, he reluctantly concluded that existing gravitational theories did not adequately explain the placement of various stars within the galactic spiral arm of which Sol is a member. Sulieman became convinced that space is not only curved locally around planetary and stellar masses as Einstein had maintained, but that it is also folded back upon itself in long lines stretching across thousands of light-years. He theorized that these *foldlines* originate in the massive black hole that occupies the center of the galaxy, and that they stream outward in complex patterns along the spiral arms. He further theorized that whenever such a foldline encounters a star, it is focused much as a lens focuses a beam of light; and if that focus is sufficiently sharp, a weak spot, or *foldpoint*, appears in the fabric of the space-time continuum.

Twenty years after Sulieman's revelation, scientists positioned a spaceship within one of the two foldpoints known to exist within the Solar System and released copious quantities of energy in a precisely controlled pattern. The energy release caused the ship to be instantaneously transported along the foldline to the system of Luyten's Star, some 12.5 light-years distant from Sol.

There was no holding the human race back after that. Over the next several centuries, the leakage of population into space became a flood. The pattern of the migration was determined almost entirely by the shape of *foldspace*, as the aggregate of foldlines and foldpoints came to be called. While some stars were found to possess only a single foldpoint, others were endowed with two, three, or more. The biggest, most massive stars were found to be especially fertile centers of foldpoint production; and therefore, the systems of these stars became the crossroads of interstellar travel. The red-orange supergiant star Antares was the champion foldpoint producer throughout human space. Its six interstellar portals made Antares the linchpin of a network of related star systems known collectively as the Antares Foldspace Cluster.

When Antares exploded on 3 August 2512, the immediate effects were felt far beyond the confines of the Antares system. The release of so concentrated a burst of energy jolted the very fabric of space-time; and with it, the structure of foldspace for hundreds of light-years in every direction. In some systems, foldpoints underwent radical changes of position, while in others; foldpoints appeared where none had previously existed. In still other star systems, preexisting

foldpoints disappeared without a trace.

The F8 dwarf star known as Valeria had been doubly unlucky. Situated 125 light-years from Antares, the Val system was what foldspace astronomers called a *cul-de-sac*, a star with but a single foldpoint. When Antares exploded, Valeria's foldpoint had simply disappeared. Thus, it was that the human colony on Valeria IV (Alta to its inhabitants) had found itself isolated from the rest of human space for a century and a quarter. Then, early in the year 2637 (Universal Calendar), Antares had burned bright in the Altan sky, signaling the arrival of the leading edge of the nova shockwave. Simultaneous with the passage of the nova shockwave, Valeria's foldpoint had reappeared high in the system's northern hemisphere.

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"What's this?" Drake asked Bethany, gesturing toward the display.

"Part of the government's 'Know Thy Enemy' campaign," she replied. "They've got them in most public places. Push the button and it will spew out all manner of interesting facts. Here, listen." As she spoke, she stepped forward and pressed a stud that jutted from the base of the holocube. The image came to life and seemed to peer down at them. At the same time, a sonorous voice began to speak.

"The creature you see before you, sir or madam, is a Ryall, and the mortal enemy of all humanity..."

The image in the holocube was that of a creature designed along the lines of a six-legged centaur. The legs were short, less than half-a-meter in length, and culminated in wide pad like feet. Their shortness was amply compensated for by the creature's fore body – a vertical torso topped by a long, flexible neck that carried the alien's head to the height of a man's. The head was wide at the back, showing considerable cranial bulge, and narrow at the front where a toothy snout jutted forward some fifteen centimeters. The eyes were set wide apart, such that the creature had trouble looking straight ahead. In the hologram, its head was cocked to one side, as though scanning the faces of passersby. The mouth was partially open, showing two rows of conical teeth and a triply forked tongue. On top of the head were two flaps of skin stretched taut by rigid, spike like projections. Of nostrils or any equivalent, there was no sign.

Two heavily muscled arms attached to the fore body at the same point as the neck. The creature's hands consisted of four slender fingers flanked by two opposable thumbs. At the opposite end of the main body, a meter-long tail dragged the ground. The Ryall's hide was scaled, the scales shading from gray-green on top to light beige beneath.

The lecturing voice continued. "... Although the Ryall bear a passing resemblance to both terrestrial and Altan reptiles, they are neither. Indeed, they do not fit particularly well into any of our normal taxonomic categories. They are warm-blooded and the females suckle the young – although on a mixture of blood and nutrients rather than milk. In spite of these mammal-like traits, they also lay eggs. Note the vestigial webs between the fingers of each hand, and again between the short digits on the feet. The Ryall evolved as aquatic animals and did not leave the water for the land until quite recently in their past. Experts tell us that they were forced from the water by another sentient race on their home world, a race the Ryall call the swift eaters. It is

this incident in their history that we believe makes them so territorial that they have attacked us without provocation. That being the case, the only thing left for us to do is..."

Drake did not wait to find out what the narrator had in mind. He nudged Bethany and said, "Come on, we've better things to do than listen to this."

She glanced at him and smiled slyly. "Maybe we can ask the taxi driver to take a shortcut into town."

#

Richard Drake was jolted awake by a low-pitched hooting from somewhere outside. His first thought was that it was the cry of a night hunting calu beast. Then, as he came more awake, he remembered that there had not been a calu sighted in Homeport in more than a century.

"What is that?" he asked softly in the blackness.

Bethany stirred beside him, stretching as she came awake. After a moment's silence, she said, "I must have fallen asleep. What time is it?"

Drake glanced at the disembodied red numerals that floated in the darkness where he remembered the nightstand to be. "Nearly twenty hundred. What's that noise outside?"

Bethany sat up in bed and listened. "Oh, that's just the space raid siren. They announced a drill this morning on the news."

"How do you know it isn't a real raid?" he asked.

"Hmmm," she responded. "You don't think the Ryall would have the bad taste to launch an attack during a scheduled drill, do you?"

He laughed. "I'm sure they would if they could. However, they would have to get past the Sandarians first. Since we haven't heard of any major Ryall successes in the Hellsgate system, I think we're safe for the time being."

"Depolarize the window, Richard. I want to let the night in."

"Where's the control?"

"On the nightstand, beside the clock. The large round knob next to the light switch."

Drake fumbled for the control, found it, and turned it full in the clockwise direction. As he did so, one whole wall of the bedroom disappeared as the floor-to-ceiling window went from 100% opaque to fully transparent.

Beyond the window lay a clear, calm night. Across the Tigris River, the lights of Homeport shone brilliantly in subdued colors, while Antares hovered low in the western sky. The nova shed a light the color of a mercury vapor lamp and suffused the countryside with a pale silver glow. Directly in front of them, nova light reflected from the surface of the river to produce a broad band of silver across which a small pleasure boat moved upstream in silence.

Bethany rolled onto her stomach and propped her head on a pillow. "Isn't the night beautiful, Richard? Look what the nova's done to the river!"

Drake reached out and let his fingertips trace the soft curves of her spine. "You're the one who is beautiful."

In the distance, the soft ululation of the siren slowly drifted down toward the limits of audibility.

"I guess that's it," she said. "I wonder how much use these drills will be if we're ever raided for real?"

"Not much," he replied. "They're mostly to get people in the proper mood. If you are roused out of bed in the middle of the night to seek shelter, you're more likely to put up with the extra inconveniences a war economy requires."

"I always suspected as much. Not to change the subject, but are you hungry?"

"Famished," he replied

"Then opaque the window and turn on some lights. I will make us a snack. We can eat out on the balcony and watch the nova set."

"If that is your wish, my love."

"It is. Hurry, it will be down in an hour."

Drake rolled over and reset the window control, followed by the overhead lights. They dressed quickly. Bethany busied herself in the kitchen while he set the table on her balcony. Fifteen minutes later, they were enjoying a late supper of roast beef, cril greens, and coffee. The coffee was nothing like the bitter Earth original, but rather an Altan product that the founders of the colony had decided was the closest local substitute. As they ate, they watched Antares sink toward the western horizon.

They watched in silence for long minutes before Drake turned to Bethany and asked, "Will you marry me?"

"It seems to me that I've answered that question more than once," she replied.

"No," he persisted. "I don't mean marry me someday. I mean marry me *now*, this very minute! We'll call up city hall and register our vows, then roust the nearest city magistrate out of bed."

"We shouldn't have to roust anyone out. It's only 20:30 hours."

"Even better. We'll have the whole thing over in an hour."

Bethany caressed his cheek with her hand. "I'll do it if you insist, Richard, but I would rather wait. I've had a lot of time to think about it these last six months, and I've decided I want a big church wedding."

He shrugged. "Fine. I'll see if I can't reserve a church for next weekend. Surely, the boss will give me the time off if I tell him why I want it. You can invite your uncle and friends, and I will invite everyone at the Admiralty who has ever spoken to me. We will even throw in fifty or so strangers to fill out the crowd. I guarantee a minimum attendance of two hundred!"

She laughed. "You don't understand, Richard. I don't want a *big* wedding in a church. I want

a wedding in a *big church!*”

“You’re right, I don’t understand you.”

“It’s simple really, darling. I have decided that I want to be married in Notre Dame Cathedral. You know, the one in Paris, France.”

“You want to be married on Earth?”

She nodded. “I thought it would be a nice touch.”

“I’m not sure Notre Dame exists any longer.”

She shrugged. “Then Westminster Abbey, or St. Peter’s Basilica will do just as well. Or even the Little Chapel by the Road. Just as long as we’re married on Earth.”

“Has it occurred to you that we may never find Earth again?”

“I have confidence, Richard. We’ll find it because we must.” Bethany got up and stretched. “Now then, if you are through eating, sir, I think it’s time we went back to bed.”

“What about the nova? There are still fifteen minutes before it sets.”

“We can see Antares anytime, and it isn’t every night a woman receives a proposal of marriage.”

“Or avoids it so skillfully,” he said, glancing one last time at the setting star. When he turned his attention back to the table, he discovered that he was speaking to an empty balcony. Lifting a napkin from his lap, he dropped it on the table, stood, and followed her inside.

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2. Procyon's Promise - ^{US}\$7.50

Three hundred years after humanity made its deal with the Life Probe to search out the secret of faster-than-light travel, the descendants of the original expedition return to Earth in a starship. They find a world that has forgotten the ancient contract. No matter. The colonists have overcome far greater obstacles in their single-minded drive to redeem a promise made before any of them were born...

3. Antares Dawn - US\$6.00

When the super giant star Antares exploded in 2512, the human colony on Alta found their pathway to the stars gone, isolating them from the rest of human space for more than a century. Then one day, a powerful warship materialized in the system without warning. Alarmed by the sudden appearance of such a behemoth, the commanders of the Altan Space Navy dispatched one of their most powerful ships to investigate. What ASNS Discovery finds when they finally catch the intruder is a battered hulk manned by a dead crew.

That is disturbing news for the Altans. For the dead battleship could easily have defeated the whole of the Altan navy. If it could find Alta, then so could whomever it was that beat it. Something must be done...

4. Antares Passage - US\$7.50

After more than a century of isolation, the paths between stars are again open and the people of Alta in contact with their sister colony on Sandar. The opening of the foldlines has not been the unmixed blessing the Altans had supposed, however.

For the reestablishment of interstellar travel has brought with it news of the Ryall, an alien race whose goal is the extermination of humanity. If they are to avoid defeat at the hands of the aliens, Alta must seek out the military might of Earth. However, to reach Earth requires them to dive into the heart of a supernova.

5. Antares Victory – First Time in Print – US\$7.50

After a century of warfare, humanity finally discovered the Achilles heel of the Ryall, their xenophobic reptilian foe. Spica – Alpha Virginis – is the key star system in enemy space. It is the hub through which all Ryall starships must pass, and if humanity can only capture and hold it, they will strangle the Ryall war machine and end their threat to humankind forever.

It all seemed so simple in the computer simulations: Advance by stealth, attack without warning, strike swiftly with overwhelming power. Unfortunately, conquering the Ryall proves the easy part. With the key to victory in hand, Richard and Bethany Drake discover that they must also conquer human nature if they are to bring down the alien foe ...

6. Thunderstrike! - US\$7.50

The new comet found near Jupiter was an incredible treasure trove of water ice and rock. Immediately, the water-starved Luna Republic and the Sierra Corporation, a leader in asteroid mining, were squabbling over rights to the new resource. However, all thoughts of profit and fame were abandoned when a scientific expedition discovered that the comet's trajectory placed it on a collision course with Earth!

As scientists struggled to find a way to alter the comet's course, world leaders tried desperately to restrain mass panic, and two lovers quarreled over the direction the comet was to take, all Earth waited to see if humanity had any future at all...

7. The Clouds of Saturn - US\$7.50

When the sun flared out of control and boiled Earth's oceans, humanity took refuge in a place that few would have predicted. In the greatest migration in history, the entire human race took up residence among the towering clouds and deep clear-air canyons of Saturn's upper atmosphere. Having survived the traitor star, they returned to the all-too-human tradition of internecine strife. The new city-states of Saturn began to resemble those of ancient Greece, with one group of cities taking on the role of militaristic Sparta...

8. The Sails of Tau Ceti – US\$7.50

Starhopper was humanity's first interstellar probe. It was designed to search for intelligent life beyond the solar system. Before it could be launched, however, intelligent life found Earth. The discovery of an alien light sail inbound at the edge of the solar system generated considerable excitement in scientific circles. With the interstellar probe nearing completion, it gave scientists the opportunity to launch an expedition to meet the aliens while they were still in space. The second surprise came when *Starhopper's* crew boarded the alien craft. They found beings that, despite their alien physiques, were surprisingly compatible with humans. That two species so similar could have evolved a mere twelve light years from one another seemed too coincidental to be true.

One human being soon discovered that coincidence had nothing to do with it...

9. Gibraltar Earth – First Time in Print — \$7.50

It is the 24th Century and humanity is just gaining a toehold out among the stars. Stellar Survey Starship *Magellan* is exploring the New Eden system when they encounter two alien spacecraft. When the encounter is over, the score is one human scout ship and one alien aggressor destroyed. In exploring the wreck of the second alien ship, spacers discover a survivor with a fantastic story.

The alien comes from a million-star Galactic Empire ruled over by a mysterious race known as the Broa. These overlords are the masters of this region of the galaxy and they allow no competitors. This news presents Earth's rulers with a problem. As yet, the Broa are ignorant of humanity's existence. Does the human race retreat to its one small world, quaking in fear that the Broa will eventually discover Earth? Or do they take a more aggressive approach?

Whatever they do, they must do it quickly! Time is running out for the human race...

10. Gibraltar Sun – First Time in Print — \$7.50

The expedition to the Crab Nebula has returned to Earth and the news is not good. Out among the stars, a million systems have fallen under Broan domination, the fate awaiting Earth should the Broa ever learn of its existence. The problem would seem to allow but three responses: submit meekly to slavery, fight and risk extermination, or hide and pray the Broa remain ignorant of humankind for at least a few more generations. Are the hairless apes of Sol III finally faced with a problem for which there is no acceptable solution?

While politicians argue, Mark Rykand and Lisa Arden risk everything to spy on the all-powerful enemy that is beginning to wonder at the appearance of mysterious bipeds in their midst...

11. Gibraltar Stars – First Time in Print — US\$7.50

The great debate is over. The human race has rejected the idea of pulling back from the stars and hiding on Earth in the hope the Broa will overlook us for a few more generations. Instead, the World Parliament, by a vote of 60-40, has decided to throw the dice and go for a win. Parliament Hall resounds with brave words as members declare victory inevitable.

With the balance of forces a million to one against *Homo sapiens Terra*, those who must turn patriotic speeches into hard-won reality have their work cut out for them. They must expand humanity's foothold in Broan space while contending with a supply line that is 7000 light-years long.

If the sheer magnitude of the task isn't enough, Mark and Lisa Rykand discover they are in a race against two very different antagonists. The Broa are beginning to wonder at the strange two-legged interlopers in their domain; while back on Earth, those who lost the great debate are eager to try again.

Whoever wins the race will determine the future of the human species... or, indeed, whether it has one.

12. Gridlock and Other Stories - US\$6.00

Where would you visit if you invented a time machine, but could not steer it? What if you went out for a six-pack of beer and never came back? If you think nuclear power is dangerous, you should try black holes as an energy source — or even scarier, solar energy! Visit the many worlds of Michael McCollum. I guarantee that you will be surprised!

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