

Antares Victory

(A Novel)

By

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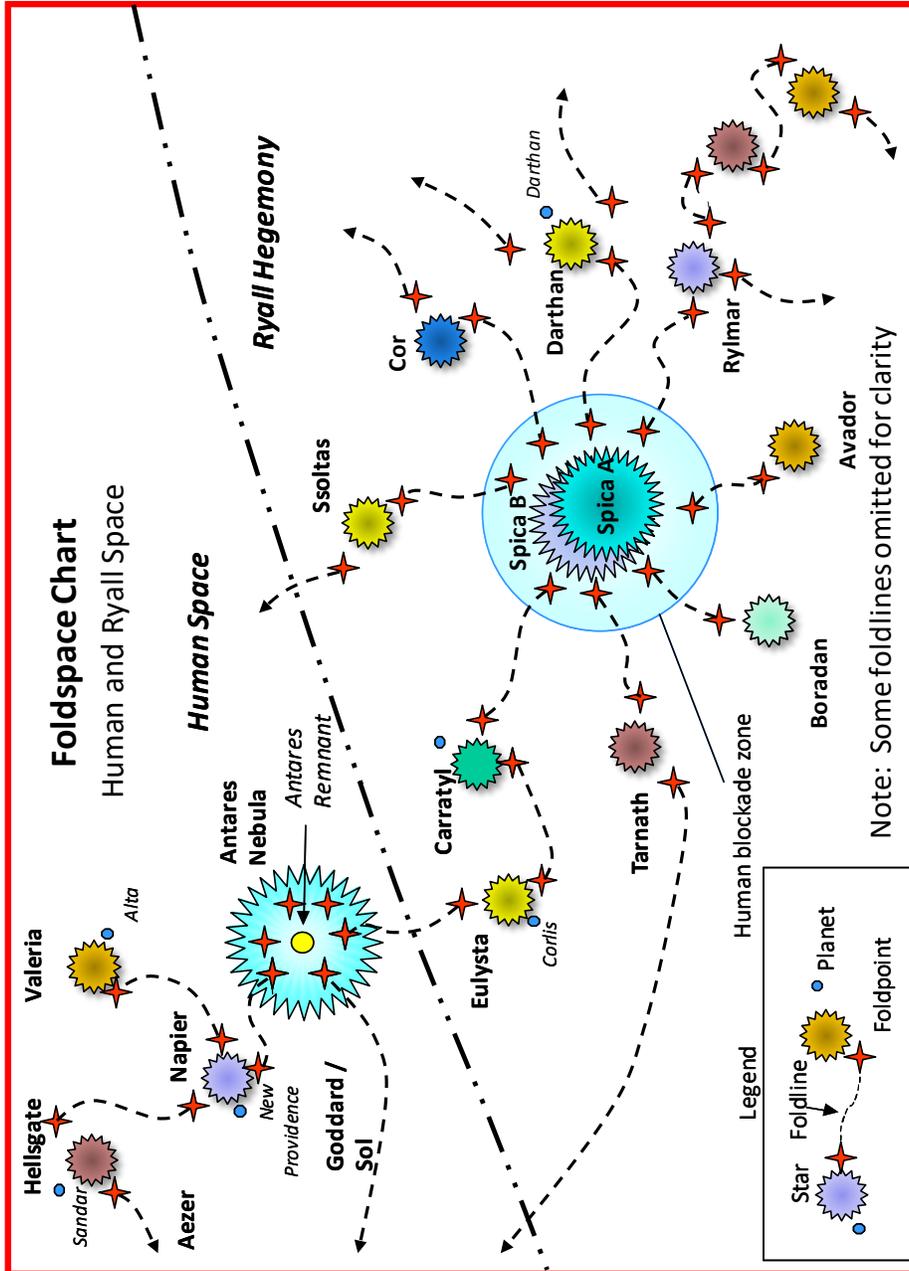
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Antares and Spica Foldspace Clusters



Chapter 1

Admiral (First Rank) Richard Arthur Drake lay strapped in his acceleration couch aboard the orbit-to-orbit shuttle and gazed at the glowing apparition that covered half the ebon sky before him. Here in the Napier system, the Antares Nebula was a hundred times larger than it was in the night skies of home.

The nebula was a lustrous ball of gas and dust as beautiful as it was deadly. Its intricate network of swirls was a gossamer spider web suspended inside the shell of a shimmering cosmic egg. Save for its seemingly solid central core, the nebula's delicate filaments were nearly transparent until they approached its outer shell, where they again took on the hue of a fluorescent glow tube. The apparition was a reminder of the enormous cruel joke that God... or Mother Nature, or Saint Murphy, or someone... had played on Drake, his wife, humanity, and yes, even the Ryall.

Six years earlier, Antares had been the brightest star decorating the night sky of Drake's home planet, Alta. The baleful red spot had dominated the winter firmament ever since colonists first set foot on the blue-white world that was in many ways a virtual twin to Mother Earth. For four hundred and thirty winters, Antares had been the real-life version of the red stars with which Altan children decorated their *fala* bushes at Christmastime, an ochre beacon hovering low over the Colgate Mountain Range each evening after sunset. Then, at 17:30 hours on the night of Aquarius 16, 2637, the ruby star had undergone a breathtaking transformation. In a matter of minutes, the dying ember blossomed Phoenix-like to become the brightest star in the galaxy.

To those who observed the newborn electric spark high above the city of Homeport, there was no mystery as to what had happened. The cause of the transformation was obvious.

Antares had been well into its dotage long before human beings discovered star travel. For thousands of years, the red supergiant star had profligately consumed hydrogen, heedless of the day when that fuel must inevitably run out. That day came in 2512 (standard calendar). With nothing left to burn, the fusion reaction that had long powered Antares' inner engine flickered, and died. With no internally generated heat to oppose the pull of gravity, the core of the red giant collapsed. Gigatons of star stuff gave up its energy of position as it slid down the gravity well, causing the surrounding temperature to jump more than a billion degrees in an instant. The release of so much energy in so short a time triggered new fusion, which generated yet more energy. The runaway reaction could not be contained.

Antares exploded into the largest supernova ever observed by human beings.

The universe is a very large place, especially when measured in terms of the veritable crawl that is light speed. The distance between Antares and Alta was such that it took the nova wave front 125 years to cross the gulf of space between them. When the first photons from the explosion finally reached the colony world, they burst forth in a phenomenon that quickly became known as Antares dawn light. However, as impressive as the giant star's funeral pyre was during those first few weeks, in one important respect, its appearance had been anticlimactic.

Scientists have long known that the cataclysmic flash that marks a supernova is merely a minor side effect of what is really taking place. In addition to outshining all other stars in the

galaxy, a supernova produces a titanic storm of particles across the subatomic spectrum. While these and many other effects are of interest only to astronomers, Antares' death had carried with it one consequence that affected the lives of everyone on Alta. In addition to vaporizing everything around it – including the hapless ships and crews then in transit across the Antares system – the supernova disrupted star travel throughout the region, cutting Alta off from the rest of human space.

The invisible pathways between the stars are the result of long lines of folded space that emanate from the gigantic black hole that inhabits the central core of the Milky Way Galaxy – and indeed, all spiral galaxies. These “foldlines” weave intricate webs of folded space as they sweep outward along the spiral arms, intersecting some stars while bypassing others. Where a foldline intersects a star, it is often focused by the star's gravity well to produce a “weak spot” in the vacuum of space. Such weak spots are called “foldpoints,” and within their planet-sized volumes, it is possible to produce a hole in space-time. A ship that positions itself within a foldpoint and then generates a precisely formed energy field will effectively drop out of the universe and be flung instantly along the foldline to the next weak point, where it returns to normal space without having traversed the intervening distance.

For half a thousand years, humanity's ships had used foldlines to circumvent Einstein's universal speed limit. Foldlines were the superhighways to the stars. Five percent of all star systems possess foldpoints; and in those systems, there are often two, three, or even four of them. Antares, in the days before its fiery death, had been the champion foldpoint producer in human space. It possessed six of the gateways, making it the major interstellar transportation hub in the sector that bore its name.

Valeria, Alta's star, possessed but a single foldpoint, a deficiency that made the Val System an interstellar cul-de-sac. Of necessity, all traffic to and from Valeria passed through the Napier System, from which Alta was first colonized. That, at least, had been the situation before the Antares Supernova. The titanic explosion had disrupted the foldline running through the Val system, causing Alta's single foldpoint to vanish without a trace.

The loss of its sole gateway to the stars had plunged the Altan colony into a century of isolation. Nor had the Altan scientists any expectation that the sudden blossoming of the supernova in their sky twelve decades later would change the situation. In this, they proved less than prescient.

For when Valeria finally pricked the surface of the supernova's expanding bubble of radiation, the geometry of foldspace underwent a dramatic transformation. Having passed beyond the Val system, the supernova shockwave no longer intersected the foldline running between the two stars, allowing Alta's foldpoint to form once again high above the system's yellow dwarf primary.

The fact that Valeria was once more connected to the rest of human space might have gone unnoticed for several years had it not been for an anomalous event a few weeks after Antares flashed violet-white in Alta's sky. While studying the newly revealed supernova, an orbiting telescope picked up a mysterious ship materializing in the vicinity of the system's long-lost foldpoint. As astronomers watched openmouthed with amazement, the unidentified ship turned

toward deep space and began thrusting as though the legions of hell were chasing it.

Drake had been a captain in the Altan Space Navy at the time. He had commanded *ASNS Discovery*, one of the three old interstellar cruisers that were stranded in the system when Antares exploded. Shortly after the appearance of the mysterious ship, the Admiralty ordered Drake to intercept the interloper at maximum boost.

The chase was a difficult one conducted at high gravs the entire way. When they finally overhauled the intruder, they found a ghost ship. *TSNS Conqueror*, one of the terrestrial space navy's mightiest dreadnoughts, proved to be nothing more than an animated hulk manned by a dead crew, with no indication of what or who had killed them.

The discovery left the Altan government with a problem. On the one hand, the arrival of *Conqueror* announced that the way to the stars was once again open. On the other, its condition was mute testimony to dangerous circumstances somewhere beyond their local sky. If *Conqueror* could have destroyed the whole of the Altan Space Navy with little or no effort, yet had itself been battered to scrap metal by some unknown enemy, what of those who had destroyed it? Were they Alta's friends or were they its foes?

Having asked the question, the government decided to send Richard Drake to find the answer...

"Task Force coming into view, Admiral," the pilot of the shuttle said from beside Drake.

Drake shook off the reverie into which he had fallen. It was a nasty habit of his whenever he contemplated the Antares Nebula, brought on undoubtedly by the fact that his own life had been inextricably linked to the nebula ever since it blazed bright in Alta's night sky.

Alta was far away at the moment, as was his pregnant wife. He missed Bethany already, not that he'd had more than a few months to be with her these past three years. Building the largest invasion fleet in the history of interstellar war had monopolized his attention, giving him the opportunity for only a few brief visits home, and one glorious vacation that had lasted an entire week. Still, Bethany had usually been within comm range, and the two of them had spent many enjoyable hours talking face to face via comm screen into the wee hours. Now more than a hundred light years of vacuum separated them, a distance that could only grow as humankind launched its maximum effort to defeat an implacable alien foe.

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Drake pulled himself aboard the Terrestrial Blastship *Victory*. In the suiting cubicle just inside the main ship lock, he found a Marine honor guard and a young man in the uniform of a commander in the Royal Sandarian Navy. *Victory* was in microgravity to ease the arrival of landing craft from the other ships in the fleet. The Marines stood rigidly at attention with their boots locked into the floor grid to keep them from floating away. The commander floated free, steadying himself with a guideline.

Drake paused just inside the inner airlock door as martial music emanated from the ship's bulkhead-mounted speakers. It was some tune that he had heard on Earth, but one that he could not name. The unfamiliar musical style indicated that the march must have been written after Alta was cut off from human space.

When the music ended, the saluting Marines all snapped their right hands down in unison. Drake pulled himself toward the officer, whom he recognized.

“Admiral Drake, it’s good to see you,” Philip Walkirk exclaimed, extending his right hand while keeping hold of the guideline with his left.

“Your Highness, good to see you again,” Drake replied as he grasped Walkirk’s hand. “I see you have come up in the world. I remember when you were a lowly ensign.”

Walkirk smiled. “It could be that I have connections at court.”

That, Drake knew, was an understatement. Four years earlier, Philip had been assigned aboard *Discovery* as an exchange officer. Drake had objected to the assignment when he first heard about it, not that he had anything personal against the young officer. The problem was that Philip was not just any member of the Sandarian Navy. His father was John-Philip Walkirk VI, hereditary king and ruler of Sandar, and Philip would one day follow him on the throne. The thought that the heir-apparent might be injured, or even killed, while serving aboard an Altan cruiser had been enough to give Drake insomnia.

Walkirk had served well while aboard *Discovery*, and had even led the Marine boarding party that captured the Ryall freighter *Space Swimmer* in what proved to be a pivotal action for the human war effort. He had accompanied *Discovery* to Earth, where events had unfolded that led inevitably to this gathering of the fleet.

Philip, he noted, had filled out in the last few years. He still had the jet-black hair, intense eyes, and the prominent nose that marked the Walkirk clan. His shoulders were broader than they had been and his voice lacked the youthful tremor that sometimes crept in when he was excited. His eyes had gained a few wrinkles at their corners, as well; but then, whose had not?

Drake was significantly grayer than he had been when the two of them first met and he had to work harder than ever at keeping his paunch under control. His green eyes tended to squint more, the result of countless hours spent in front of a computer screen working out the myriad details required for the impending invasion of Ryall space. He had not been alone in that task. Thousands of specialists across human space had worked out the plan on which they were about to bet the human race. Drake had a proprietary interest. The whole thing had originally been his idea.

At 41, he was getting to be an “old man” for a spacer, and the fact that he had been forced to leave his expectant wife a mere month before the birth of their first son had done nothing to improve his mood.

“How many are onboard?”

“Everyone, Admiral. You are the last to arrive. I am here to guide you to the briefing.”

“Then guide away.”

The young prince reversed his position and pulled himself along the guideline toward the hatch leading out of the hangar bay. Drake followed him. Soon the two of them were gliding through the corridors and passageways of the big terrestrial blastship. Unlike Drake’s original command, which was a ring and cylinder design, *Victory* was an oversize cylinder, the better to

utilize interior volume while retaining the ability to spin the ship for artificial gravity. It was an outrigger design, with many of its weapons and instruments in twin pods held stationary while the central body rotated, not unlike Drake's new flagship, *Conqueror II*. As he trailed Philip through endless corridors and passageways, he wondered how the prince could have memorized the route in the short time he had been onboard.

Around them, serious-faced men and women moved with hurried purpose. If they recognized the insignia on the two colonial officers' shoulders, they made no sign. Besides, spacers maneuvering in micro gravity had need of both hands for locomotion and none left over for saluting.

After it seemed they had traversed the entire length of the big ship, Philip guided him to a large compartment in which three hundred naval officers were crammed into every available cubic meter, placing a heavy strain on the blastship's environmental system. These were the captains and executive officers of the ships that had gathered in the Napier system in preparation for entering the Antares nebula. They did not, however, represent the whole of the invasion fleet, or even a majority of it. Task Force Spica would consist of eight major components, of which only two were represented aboard *Victory*. The fleets that made up the rest of the invasion force were assembling in half a dozen star systems across human space. They would rendezvous with the Altan and Sandarian fleets, and the sizeable Terrestrial Space Navy contingent that had been assigned to augment them, once all were inside the nebula.

Most of those present had strapped themselves into seats bolted to the curved deck, while several clumps of officers floated free to consult with one another. As Drake entered, acceleration alarms began to hoot and a disembodied voice announced the imminent return of spin gravity. Drake quickly used the "overhead" handholds to move to his position at the table that had been set up at the front of the compartment.

There he joined Grand Admiral Georges Terence Belton, who was already strapped into his seat. The admiral was reviewing his notes. At Drake's approach, he looked up and nodded gravely.

"Welcome, Drake. How was the trip from Alta?"

"Hurried, sir. I wish the lizards had given us another month to prepare."

"Hell, why not ask for another year?"

"No sense tempting the fates, sir. A month would have been sufficient."

Belton rubbed his chin, and then nodded. "You might be right. I know I would have been more prepared for this coming fight. Still, while we are wishing, we might want to ask for another hundred orbital fortresses."

"Just get us the ones we already have in time to do some good, sir."

G.T. Belton was in overall command of the Spica Operation, and Drake's boss, even though he would not be going within a hundred light years of the fleet's objective. Belton had done a brilliant job in bringing a billion disparate elements together to mount the invasion. However, like General Groves of the fabled Manhattan Project, Belton's skills were that of an organizer

more than a warrior. Now that the time had come to put his planning into practice, he would continue in overall command – as much as a sop to the politicians of Earth as for military necessity – but a younger, more vigorous commander would take over direct operational responsibility for the invasion.

After a lengthy debate in which several of the better-known candidates had counterbalanced one another out of the job, a little-known colonial officer had been chosen for operational command of humanity's invasion fleet. That officer was Richard Drake, of the Altan Space Navy.

“Ready to give the lizards a swift kick in the tail?” Belton asked as he buckled in.

“Yes, sir,” Drake replied. “And thank you for the trust you have shown in supporting me for this command.”

“You may want to hold your appreciations until you have a few engagements under your belt. Being at the sharp end of the spear can be a thankless job, especially when you have to deal with REMFs.”

“REMFs, sir?”

“Old terrestrial navy expression, Drake. Its roots are obscene. It refers to the assholes back at base who won't give the man in combat what he needs unless he asks in triplicate. You can rest assured, by the way, that so long as I am on the job, there will be a minimum of that sort of bullshit.”

“I know that, sir. I also know how many senior officers were passed over for this assignment, and how much your opinion counted in the decision.”

Belton lowered his voice until only Drake could hear him against the background noise. “Then you also know, Admiral, that there will be a thousand pairs of eyes watching your every move, waiting for you to screw up.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Are you interested to know what tilted the decision in your favor?”

“If you would care to tell me, sir.”

“Because this invasion was your doing, Drake. You Altans arrived on Earth with a map of enemy foldspace, something no one else had managed to obtain in more than a century of war. Yet, even though you presented us with the key to victory on a silver platter, not one of us saw the implications until you forced us to see them. That shows an independence of thought that will be sorely needed in the coming campaign.”

Belton spoke standard with an odd, but understandable, accent. He was a native of the legendary city of Rome, a fabled place that Altan children studied in school, but one that no Altan (to Drake's knowledge) had ever seen with his own eyes. Their first brief visit to Earth had been too hectic to visit the Eternal City, and his two trips since were consumed with planning for the invasion.

“I still appreciate the chance you are giving me, Admiral. I won't let you down.”

“Appreciation noted,” Belton said gruffly before raising his voice to his normal subdued

bellow. It was a voice that projected an image at odds with Belton's short stature and thinning hair. "Now then, Admiral Drake, are you ready to get on with the war?"

"Yes, sir."

"Let us give the engineers five minutes to put some spin on this old bucket and then we start the briefing. I will keep my remarks short to give you more time for your spiel."

"That will be fine, sir."

While Drake led the bulk of humanity's offensive fleet into the heart of enemy space, Grand Admiral Belton would establish the bases and infrastructure needed to keep the fleet supplied. As Bethany, Drake's historian wife, had remarked when he told her of his appointment to operational command, Belton was to be General George C. Marshall to Drake's George Patton. Richard knew who General Patton had been, of course. One of the ships in the fleet was named *Patton*.

He had never heard of George C. Marshall.

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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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