

# **GIBRALTAR EARTH**

A NOVEL BY

Michael McCollum

**SCI FI - ARIZONA**

A Virtual Science Fiction Bookstore and  
Writer's Workshop on the INTERNET

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## The Rock of Gibraltar

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## PROLOGUE

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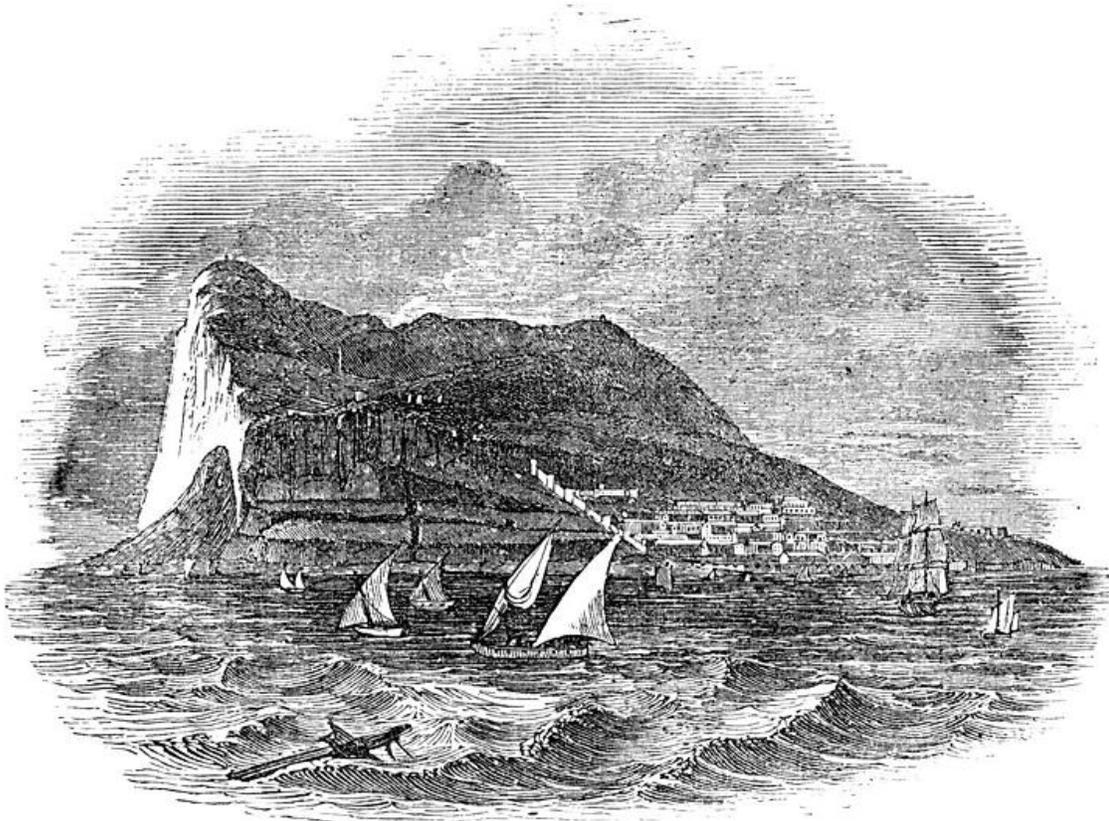
*“It is said of the British Empire's acquisition of the Indian subcontinent that they did not so much conquer India as win the prize in a fit of absentmindedness. Although exaggeration, there is a modicum of reality in the statement. For the truth is that the greatest jewel in Victoria's crown was won in large part through a streak of luck – bad luck for the indigenous peoples and good luck for the inhabitants of what otherwise might have been just another sleepy island nation.*

*“Nor can we modern humans make any great claims for our own recent acquisitions. Oh, we speak loudly of our own prowess, and celebrate the memories of the brave men and women who sacrificed their lives to our cause. Still, we should not lose sight of the undeniable fact that we were lucky, perhaps far luckier than we deserved. I therefore ask you, my fellow citizens of Sol, to join me in an exercise in humility. Consider for a moment all the things that might have gone wrong--”*

*From a Victory Speech by the  
Right Honorable Jonathan Ambrose  
To the World Parliament  
12 October 2356*

**PART ONE: ENCOUNTER AMONG THE STARS**

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## Chapter One

---

Captain Dan Landon of the Survey Ship *Magellan* sat strapped in his desk and gazed at the large holoscreen that dominated the far bulkhead. It was filled by a blue-white planet bordered by a patch of ebon sky. Stretched out before him to the curving planetary limb was a panorama of fleecy-white clouds and seas of royal blue. To the right lay a sprinkling of green islands; each surrounded by aquamarine shoals. At the top of the screen, just coming into view, was the jagged coastline of one of the major continents. Soon they would be sweeping over amber plains blackened by herds of six-legged beasts, mountain ranges capped by snowfields, forests of deep green, and a river network that was equal to the Nile, the Amazon, and the Mississippi combined.

In the two generations since humanity had won free to the stars, the race had found but twelve worlds sufficiently like the Mother of Men to be considered even marginally habitable. This was the thirteenth, and so far, the best. Preliminary results gave it double the highest habitability index previously recorded. A solid month of orbital scanning, laboratory tests, and on-the-ground exploration had revealed a paradise. For that reason, Landon scowled as he watched the scenery float by far below. A life spent in the service of the Stellar Survey had left him with a philosophy that mirrored the organization's unofficial motto: "If things are going well, you have obviously overlooked something!"

As he gazed at New Eden, the crew's unofficial name for their find, he wondered what they were overlooking. Even after a month of study by a thousand talented specialists, they had only scratched the surface of what there was to know. A world was just too large and too varied a place to be surveyed by a single shipload of scientists. To understand New Eden completely would be the work of generations. Where lurked the microorganism that would ultimately prove fatal to humans, the environmental factor that would render colonists sterile, or the million-and-one other deadly possibilities that would turn this beautiful new world into a pestilential hellhole?

Landon knew that his current black mood was a defense mechanism against the high hopes that New Eden had spawned in him. It was easy to remain detached when the system to be surveyed consisted totally of sterile rocks and gas giants, as most of them were. There was no love in his breast for the usual dust balls, volcano fields, and oceans of hydrochloric acid. However, to find this beautiful world and then lose it because of some innocuous-seeming environmental factor would be too great a disappointment. Better to keep expectations low until they knew more about it. Sighing, he moved to retrieve a bulb of steaming hot tea from its microgravity holder.

There was a quiet rattle as the cabin around him shivered. Landon froze for a long second as his brain analyzed what he had sensed largely on a subconscious level. A chill had gone up his spine as it sometimes did when he was thrilled or frightened. Yet, it had not been just him. There had been a subdued clatter from the storage lockers that lined every unused centimeter in his cabin. The holoscreen had flickered with static, hadn't it?

The introspection took less time than it takes to gulp. A moment later, his hand reached out of its own volition and slapped down on the intercom plate inset into the desk.

"Report!" he snapped as the duty officer, a pimple-faced ensign, stared back at him.

"Don't know, Captain," the boy squeaked. "We are getting reports from all over the ship. Wait a second. Scout Three is reporting that they felt it, too!"

Scout Three was Jani Rykand's ship, en route back from exploring the larger of the two moons

of the planet. The fact that she was ten thousand kilometers from *Magellan* eliminated the thought that whatever had happened was a problem only with his ship.

“Sound general quarters, Mr. Pendergast.”

“Aye aye, Captain.”

Landon was already out of his seat, pulling himself hand over hand toward the control room as the alarms began to bleat. A thousand past drills provided him with a mental picture of the organized bedlam that was taking place all over the ship. Before the alarms lapsed into silence, he was strapped into his control console at the heart of the big survey craft, surrounded by dozens of screens, none of which told him what he wanted to know.

“What was it, Doc?” he asked a white-haired man in his personal screen after keying for the ship’s chief scientist.

“Whatever it was,” Raoul Bendagar replied, “it wreaked holy hell with our instruments. Half of them lost calibration at the same precise moment we felt the shock.”

“You must have some idea,” Landon persisted.

“Wait a second while I check something,” Bendagar answered. He stooped to manipulate a screen on which a series of glowing red lines were superimposed on a polar coordinate grid. “Well I’ll be damned.”

“Don’t keep me in suspense.”

Bendagar glanced up at the captain, a look of shock on his face. “We just experienced the Grand Hooting Monster of all gravity waves, Captain. No wonder it knocked everything out of alignment.”

Landon frowned. He knew that gravity waves existed, of course. For more than a century, a trio of satellites had orbited between Earth and Mars at a precise one thousand kilometers from one another. They used laser beams to maintain their spacing to twelve digits of accuracy, forming a vast right triangle that detected the microscopic distortions caused by the collapse of distant stars and other more catastrophic events. The largest gravity wave ever detected had distorted space by an amount less than the width of a proton. This one had been heavy enough to rattle Landon as he sat in his cabin.

“Come off it, Doc. Couldn’t have been.”

“The instruments recorded a distortion wave traveling from Equipment Lock Two to the boat deck at the speed of light. Call it what you will, but I say it was a gravity wave.”

“Captain,” the communicator on duty reported, “Scout Three has a sighting report.”

“Put her through.”

As usual, Jani Rykand’s features were framed in a tousled copper explosion of hair. Unlike most women who lived and worked in microgravity, she refused to bob her mane, or to keep it bound in a hair net. On her, it looked good.

“Report!”

“Something weird going on out here, Captain. I am getting energy readings from a point thirty degrees aft of my orbital path.”

Landon glanced at Bendagar.

“We’ve got them, too,” the chief scientist reported.

“What do you make of it, Scout Three?”

“Hirayama’s got the scope focused on it, Captain. It looks like a couple of ships.”

“Patch your view through to us,” Landon snapped.

An instant later, Jani Rykand’s features dissolved to show the blackness of space. In the background were the usual constellations of stars, subtly or drastically altered from the familiar constellations of home by the hundred light-years *Magellan* had crossed to reach this world. At first, there was nothing to see. This changed when a violet flash of light sparked the darkness. It put Landon in mind of summer lightning back home in B.C. Except this lightning managed to illuminate two shapes in the blackness, one of which glowed for long seconds after the bolt.

“Give us a tighter view, Hirayama,” the captain ordered. Onboard the scout the geologist who was operating the scope controls moved to comply. The distant stars jerked back and forth a few times as the telescope zoomed to maximum magnification. When it stopped, there was no doubt that they were looking at two vessels and that one of them seemed intent on destroying the other.

The prey was the larger of the two, a squat cylinder – it looked remarkably like the pressurized cans in which ground coffee was shipped to prevent vacuum damage. The ship was obviously intended to be spun to produce artificial gravity. Its tormentor was a thin cylinder with a variety of mechanisms jutting from a central core. While they watched, the attacker again sent a beam of violet to splash against the hull of its larger prey. They watched as a geyser of plasma spewed away from the strike in a wide-angled vacuum expansion cone.

“All recorders to maximum,” Landon ordered without being aware of it. “Hirayama, track them!”

Even with the telescope focused on the battling duo, it was obvious that the larger ship was doing everything in its power to escape. It jinked one way, then the other, always trying to stay ahead of its tormentor. The effort was futile. The small warcraft matched each violent maneuver with one of its own, hanging onto its prey like a small terrier harrowing a large bull. Every few seconds another violet beam would splash across the hide of the larger craft, leaving an ugly, glowing scar in its wake. Yet, if the small ship were attempting to disable the larger, it was having little luck. After each hit, the target changed course and tried to flee.

“They’re headed this way!” Jani Rykand’s excited voice said over the intercom. Sure enough, the larger ship had changed course and was now headed directly for the scout. As the observers aboard *Magellan* watched, the squat cylinder became a perfect circle and began to grow on the screen. Whatever drive principle the two unknowns were using was not obvious. There were no flares or other emissions to suggest they moved by means of reaction engines.

“Scout Three, take evasive action!”

“Any particular ideas?” the young woman pilot asked. “They both look as though they can fly rings around this tub of mine. My God, look at them come!”

She was right. Both ships were growing at an unbelievable rate on the screen. Soon Hirayama was backing off on the magnification to keep them in view. It took less than a minute before both ships were within naked eye range of Scout Three. The larger prey flashed past at a range of ten

kilometers with the small war craft in hot pursuit.

Then it happened.

Dan Landon had been dividing his time between the view from Scout Three and several long-range views of the battle from *Magellan*'s own telescopes, which showed only an occasional spark of violet against the ebon backdrop of space. As it passed the scout, the warship fired another of its violet beams. The beam reached out and momentarily bathed Scout Three in a violet corona of light. The signal from the scout cut off abruptly.

"Scout Three!" Landon screamed. "Report. Jani, how badly are you damaged?"

The answer was obvious on the screen. Where a moment earlier there had been a tiny human spacecraft too small to be seen against the blackness of space, now there was a tiny speck of radiance, a glowing cloud of plasma that cooled as it expanded.

Landon felt a sudden surge of rage. His vision was clouded by the memory of a laughing face framed in wild red hair. Then, as quickly as it arrived, the rage was gone. He felt nothing as he watched the larger ship again foreshorten until it was a half-lit circle of light expanding on the screen. It was the same as the view from Scout Three's cameras, but with the difference that this time, *Magellan* was drawing the battle to it.

"Prepare message probe."

"Captain, we can't do that," Pendergast said beside him. "We are too deep in the planet's gravity well. The generators will never stand the strain."

"Load message probe, damn you!"

A moment later, Pendergast reported, "Message probe prepared for launch."

Crammed with power reactors and a stardrive generator, a message probe was a small, unmanned starship. *Magellan* carried a dozen of the five-meter diameter spherical craft. They were used for sending reports back to Earth. Not only did they obviate the need to return home after each system; they were insurance against the loss of valuable data should the ship meet with an accident.

Landon watched the oncoming pair while monitoring a display that showed their speed, course, and relative bearing. Since no one had ever expected to fight a space battle out among the stars, *Magellan* was ill equipped to defend itself. The ship's entire armory consisted of rifles, machine guns, and a few heavier weapons to take care of pesky carnivores. Still, they had one potential weapon onboard that might prove useful in stopping an alien marauder.

The two craft came on, with the smaller continuing to chew away at the larger. The damage was beginning to take its toll. Chunks of the prey were being shot off as a cloud of gas and vapor issued forth from dozens of rips in the hull.

Dan Landon set up the probe's coordinates himself, not trusting anyone else to do it. As the warship neared the distance from which it had destroyed Scout Three, Landon keyed the control that would send the tiny unmanned starship racing for Earth. Except, its target was not Earth this time. Landon sent it directly toward the alien warship.

Ensign Pendergast was right. They were far too deep inside the planet's gravity well for a stardrive generator to remain stable. The message probe disappeared from its launching cradle and

moved a hundred kilometers at superlight velocity. Those few nanoseconds of operation were sufficient to overload the probe's generators. They exploded, hurling the probe back into normal space. The excess energy was converted to velocity. The rapidly expanding cloud of debris that returned to normal space moved at 0.6c. There was no time for the unknown warship to react. An instant after the cloud of debris appeared, one or more of its particles struck the small warship, turning it into a star that rivaled the system primary for a few seconds.

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Lieutenant Harlan Frees had joined the Stellar Survey because he did not relish the thought of taking over the family business in Woomera. The life suited him. To Frees, the opportunity to lead a party aboard the surviving alien craft seemed too good to be true.

"Report, Scout Two," Landon ordered as Frees's command hovered just beyond range of the slowly tumbling alien craft. Immediately after *Magellan* had destroyed its tormentor, the large ship had put on a burst of speed to escape the scene of the battle. It had apparently been too much for the craft's tortured engines. Moments later, the squat cylinder had gone ballistic. After checking the point where Scout Three had been destroyed, *Magellan* went in pursuit.

"She's not human, Captain. No orbital shipyard anywhere near Sol ever built this thing," Frees reported. He had ordered his vessel in as close as he dared. In front of him was a vast gash where one of the warcraft's beams had struck a slashing blow. In the compartment beyond floated a body. It was badly mutilated, but enough survived to know that the being had possessed two arms too many.

"Get a shot of that," he ordered Ensign Grimes, his copilot.

"Yes, sir."

"After you get the body, do a slow pan. Show them the extent of the damage."

"Yes, sir."

While Grimes took care to document the alien ship, Frees looked for a place to dock. The alien ship's slow tumbling motion was a problem. They would have to latch on and use their own drive to halt it before anyone could explore. Otherwise, there was too much risk of an accident.

Frees found what he was looking for and gently nudged the scout forward. He became conscious of a strange stink in the helmet of his vacuum suit, and then realized it was his own fear producing the odor. He wondered if Grimes smelled the same thing inside his own closed environment.

Scout Two made contact without incident. Two minutes later, they secured their ship to the derelict with a cable. Five minutes after that, they had the tumbling motion halted.

"You have got the conn, Mister," Frees ordered as he unstrapped. "If you see anything other than us moving about in there, blow the explosive bolts and run like hell for the ship. Got that?"

"What about you, Lieutenant?"

"Don't mind me or anyone. Anything with four arms comes into view, you get out of here."

"Aye aye, sir."

Frees moved to the after compartment where the rest of his boarding party waited. The three were sealed inside vacuum suits and looked slightly ludicrous with a collection of weapons

strapped to their chests. Firing a gun in microgravity was a tricky business. The recoil could send you caroming off in the wrong direction, not to mention the possibility of a ricochet puncturing a suit. Nevertheless, considering what had happened to Scout Three, the captain had ordered the boarding party armed.

“I’ll lead the way,” Frees told Able Spacers Goldstein, Valmoth, and Kurtzkov. “Monitor this frequency and the emergency one at all times. Everyone set?”

He received several clenched fists, the gesture that substitutes for a nod in a vacuum suit, in response. After checking to see that Grimes was prepared in the cockpit, he turned the valve that spilled cabin air directly to space. This was one time, Frees reasoned, when they might not have time to cycle through the airlock in the normal manner. When both inner and outer doors were latched open, each man floated through the short airlock tunnel and entered the alien ship.

They encountered corridors that were two meters square and lined on two sides with equipment lockers. This confirmed that the ship was designed to be spun to produce artificial gravity. In ships designed for microgravity, the lockers would have covered walls, deck, and overhead. During fifteen minutes spent exploring the dark, they discovered several members of the crew. There were more of the four-armed beings that looked like beetles with fur. Another species had bulging eyes and thin manipulators that seemed to have evolved from something like a lobster’s claw. Whether the bulging eyes were natural or the result of explosive decompression was not immediately obvious.

Frees was examining one of the dead when a radio call came echoing to him through the metal corridors. “Come look at this, Lieutenant. We’ve found a section with air behind it.”

“Stand by.”

Frees pulled himself hand over hand to where the able spacer shone his light on a closed pressure door. The door was similar to that found on a human spaceship, although the proportions were different. So, too, was the control inset in the door’s face. It glowed in a script composed primarily of dots and swirls. Kurtzkov braced his legs against a ledge that stuck out into the corridor and tried to lever the door open with his own strength. The hatch did not budge. That was hardly surprising if there were air on the opposite side.

“Are you sure it isn’t jammed?” Frees asked as he floated to join the two spacers.

“Don’t think so, Mr. Frees. None of the other hatches we came through was.”

“Right. Valmoth, get back to the ship and break out the portable airlock. We have atmosphere on the other side of this bulkhead.”

Rigging the airlock took twenty minutes. The biggest problem was finding a point to anchor the lock in order to control the blow-off load when it was pressurized. The lock was just big enough for two men in vacuum suits. Frees and Kurtzkov crowded together and let the other two seal them in before getting to work on the hatch. A quick flash of light from Kurtzkov’s drilling laser and the airlock filled with air.

As soon as his suit collapsed around him, Frees reached out to touch the hatch control. Pressing one contact had no effect. He tried the other. The pressure door swung silently back on its hinges.

Inside, Frees swept his flashlamp around the darkened room. In one corner, a figure lay

huddled in a tight ball. At first, Frees thought it another corpse. Only after a moment did he notice the unblinking yellow eyes that stared at him and the quick panting breath.

“Tell the captain that we have a survivor,” he told the two spacers still in the vacuum portion of the ship.

Slowly, carefully, he moved toward the shivering mass of flesh. The being jumped and whimpered when Frees reached out and touched it on a pointed shoulder. Slowly, gently, Frees and Kurtzkov unrolled it.

“Damn, Mr. Frees. It’s a monkey!”

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### NOVELS

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#### **1. Life Probe - <sup>US</sup>\$7.50**

The Makers searched for the secret to faster-than-light travel for 100,000 years. Their chosen instruments were the Life Probes, which they launched in every direction to seek out advanced civilizations among the stars. One such machine searching for intelligent life encounters 21st century Earth. It isn't sure that it has found any...

#### **2. Procyon's Promise - <sup>US</sup>\$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.

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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.

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This collection covers the *Art of Science Fiction* articles published during 1998. The book is 67,000 words in length and builds on the foundation of knowledge provided by Volume I of this popular series.

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The Astrogator's Handbook has been very popular on Sci Fi – Arizona. The handbook has star maps that show science fiction writers where the stars are located in space rather than where they are located in Earth's sky. Because of the popularity, we are expanding the handbook to show nine times as much space and more than ten times as many stars. The expanded handbook includes the positions of 3500 stars as viewed from Polaris on 63 maps. This handbook is a useful resource for every science fiction writer and will appeal to anyone with an interest in astronomy.