

The background of the cover is a stunning astronomical image of a nebula. It features intricate, wispy patterns of gas and dust in various shades of blue, from deep indigo to bright cyan, with some purple and magenta highlights. The central region is darker, creating a sense of depth. A single, bright, multi-pointed star is visible in the upper right quadrant. The overall effect is ethereal and cosmic.

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BRYAN PROSEK

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CamCat Publishing, LLC
Brentwood, Tennessee 37027
camcatpublishing.com

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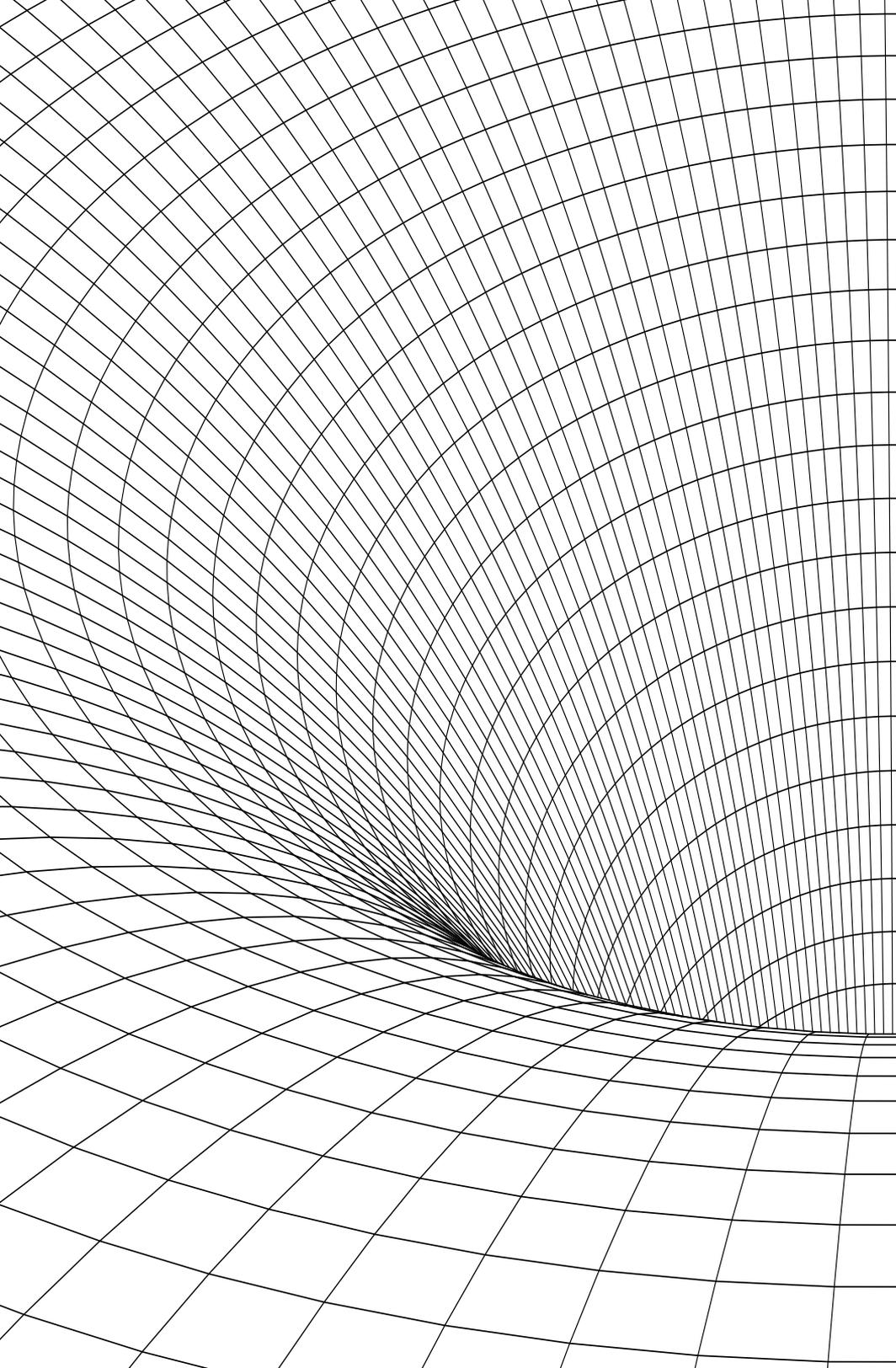
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Hardcover ISBN 9780744305548
Paperback ISBN 9780744305630
Large-Print Paperback ISBN 9780744305708
eBook ISBN 9780744305692
Audiobook ISBN 9780744305739

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data available upon request

Book and cover design by Maryann Appel

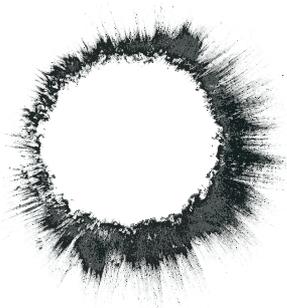
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EARTH TIMES JOURNAL

March 14, 2187

This is Felipe Zapatero reporting on the discovery of a new planet in the Andromeda galaxy. As you know, the Andromeda galaxy, from which the Milky Way's planet Andromeda derives its name, is the closet galaxy to the Milky Way. In a statement released by the Presidential Mansion, scientists believe that the planet can sustain life. More importantly, because of the geological makeup of the planet, it is theorized that the planet could contain large quantities of hilaetite (pronounced hill-ay-ee-tight). Since it has been two years since the last discovery of a hilaetite crystal deposit in our galaxy, the need to find a new source of the crystal is becoming more important. Sources within the Legion say their hope is that the new quantum light fighter program will soon allow the Legion to develop the technology to reach the new planet that is being called Permidium.



PROLOGUE

Thirteen Years Prior to Romalor's Attack on Sector Four Headquarters

Alec Saunders flipped on the autopilot switch in the quantum light fighter and glanced at his copilot, Olga Vetrov. “This machine is smooth. I like it.”

“Yes,” Olga said. “EarthNX has outdone itself in designing this bad boy for the Legion. It’s the first spacecraft to combine the fuel capacity and endurance of a military transport, the weapons array of the best tactical fighters, advanced shields, and quantum light drive.”

Alec leaned back in his seat. “And the hope is that the program will eventually produce a ship that will reach Permidium.”

“But until then, the edge of the Milky Way is as far as we’re going,” Olga said.

Alec stretched his arms. He wished they could go farther, but they were in the first manned vessel to go this far. With the planet Andromeda being the most remote planet in this region of the galaxy, nobody had had the desire to explore beyond it or had the ability to get there until now.

Olga continued. “The last unexplored region of the galaxy. We’ll be famous, you know.” She turned toward Alec. “Something you’ll be able to tell that little boy of yours someday. It’s Jacob, right?”

Alec smiled. “We all call him Jake.”

Jake was Alec’s pride and joy. Having lost his wife during childbirth, all he had was Jake. The memory of losing her was still painful. He didn’t like to think about it. He looked straight ahead out the cockpit window. He loved how the stars seemed to zip by when traveling at quantum light speed. It helped take his mind off the struggles of raising a child as a single parent who was often absent. He felt more comfortable in space than anyplace else. He belonged there. He always thought he could live in space, just the stars and him.

Olga smiled. “I’ve seen pictures, He’s a cute little guy. How old is he now?”

Alec had to bring his mind back to the present. “He’ll be two in July. It wasn’t easy leaving him for this mission.”

That was the truth. His priorities changed when Jake came along. He realized that there was much more to life than being a Legion soldier and exploring space.

“I’m sure it wasn’t,” Olga agreed. “Who’s keeping him?”

Alec checked their heading and adjusted the auto pilot setting. “My brother, Ben, and his wife, Jane.”

The com buzzed.

Olga looked at the controls in front of her. “Sector Four headquarters is hailing us.”

Alec leaned forward. “Put it on the screen.”

Olga worked the controls, and the video screen in front of them activated. Alec could see a lady, whom he immediately recognized, seated at a table marked with the Legion seal. Behind her was a room full of Legion officers and privates sitting at various computers, some in groups and some alone. Still others were standing and talking or just observing. The camera was focused on the middle-aged, heavyset lady.

“Commander,” Alec said, “is everything all right?”

“Yes, Captain,” she replied. “I just wanted to check in with you one final time before we lose visual communication. How’s the ride?”

Alec smiled. “Pretty sweet. I need to get one of these babies for myself.” He patted the controls lightly.

The commander smiled. “You do that.” She paused. “So, I take it you’ve had no troubles? Did everything go okay at Andromeda?”

Olga responded this time. “No issues with the flight or with the spacecraft, Commander. And refueling went smoothly at the planet. They seemed eager to help.”

The commander leaned back in her seat. “Well, we did promise to share our intelligence with their government immediately, no matter what we find.”

“I guess they have more at stake than any other planet since they’re the closest to this region of space,” Olga said.

Static lines cut across the video screen and the images jerked and distorted.

“I think we’re starting to lose video, Commander,” Alec said. “Switching to audio only.” He worked the controls and the screen went dark.

Olga pressed the com. “Commander, we’re now entering uncharted space. Not a star in sight. Turning on long-range scanners.”

Alec looked out the window again. The complete darkness felt eerie. So different from the shooting stars that he’d seen not long ago.

Alec pressed the com. “We could lose audio at any moment. We’ll be completely dark then. Headquarters won’t be able to track us and we won’t be able to relay any data.”

“Understood,” the commander replied, her voice breaking up. “That’s what we expected.”

Olga interrupted. “Captain Saunders, I’m picking up a reading on the long-range scanners.”

“Can you tell what it is?” Alec replied. “A ship? Planet? Something else?”

“I can’t tell for certain. It’s too large to be any spacecraft we know, but not quite large enough to be a planet.”

“Okay,” Alec said. “Keep your eye on it.”

The commander’s voice crackled over the com. “Is the reading far enough away to be coming from the Andromeda galaxy? It could be Permidium. We’ve never scanned a planet at that distance. It could look deceptive on the scanner.”

“Negative,” Olga responded. “According to my readings, the object is still within our galaxy.”

Alec worked the control panel. “Affirmative. I’m starting to pick up some faint sensor readings. It is definitely in our galaxy, and it’s mobile, so it’s not a planet.”

He could feel the excitement start to build. His stomach started to churn. This was what he’d hoped for the moment he was selected for this mission.

This was what he had trained for. A new discovery.

The commander’s crackling voice came over the com again. “I’m not picking up everything you’re saying. You’re breaking up. But it sounded like you said the object is mobile. In what direction is it heading?”

Alec looked at his sensors again, then at Olga as he pressed his com. “Straight at us, Commander.”

Alec paused, looking at the instrument panel in front of him.

No response from the commander came, or none that was audible. “Let’s try hailing it when we’re in range.”

“I’ve already started sending messages in case their scanners go farther than ours. No response yet.”

“We’re almost close enough for a visual,” Alec said, turning to face forward. “Dropping out of quantum drive in three, two, one, now.”

Olga immediately flipped the video switch. “Switching the view to exterior.”

“Whatever it is, it’s dropping out of light speed as well,” Alec said, glancing at the video display.

A bright light filled the screen. Putting a hand over his eyes, Alec turned his head. Even with doing that, a splitting pain shot through his forehead. He separated two fingers to peek. Olga was in obvious pain as well, with her palms clasped to her forehead.

As Alec regained his composure, he lowered the display resolution to dull the light. They were close enough now to see the object more clearly. It was a massive spaceship. And the entire vessel emitted a clean, white light. It was like nothing he had ever seen.

The commander's voice was barely audible. "I repeat, do you copy me? I can still hear you, but you must not be receiving my transmissions." Alec couldn't make out what she said next but was able to discern one last sentence over the com static. "Headquarters will keep the coms open here to listen."

Olga worked the controls rapidly. "Still no response to our hail. What kind of spacecraft is it and where's it from?"

Alec didn't know the answer to either question. He checked the sensor readings again.

"That can't be," he said.

Olga turned quickly toward him. "Why? What can't be?"

"According to the sensor," Alec said, "ninety percent of the object consists of hilaetite."

"That's impossible!"

Alec frowned. "Impossible based on our technology. But apparently not based on theirs."

Suddenly, Alec heard a voice in a language he didn't understand. But the voice wasn't coming over the com. It was coming from space. From all around them. Amplified.

He peered at Olga. "Did you hear that?"

"Yes, but I couldn't understand it."

"Me neither. It must not be a language programmed into the translator chips."

Olga continued to work the audio com controls. "They aren't responding to any language we have in our program." She spoke faster

now. Alec could hear the fear in her voice, just as he could feel the same fear himself. “I’m transmitting a message in every language in our database, letting them know that we mean no harm. But they won’t respond!”

The voice came again. This time, even louder.

Alec monitored the sensors. His heart raced as he wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead. His voice was just short of a shout, even though Olga was seated next to him. “They’re powering up weapons, whatever those weapons are. I’m raising shields.”

This wasn’t the excitement he was planning on. This was too much. If the ship contained that much hilaetite, he doubted their shields would do much good against the arsenal that it must possess.

Olga looked at Alec. “They must expect us to understand them, but since our responses are inaudible to them, they must think we’re taking a defiant stance.”

“So, let’s not power up our weapons,” Alec said.

“And I’m thinking we’d better get out of here.”

“Agreed.” Alec turned back toward his controls and powered up the subluminal engines. They began moving.

He heard the voice a third time. The decibel level was even higher. He winced and put his hands over his ears to stifle the sharp, piercing pain. But that did no good against the high pitch. He turned toward Olga, and she was doing the same.

Finally, the sound subsided, and Alec checked the sensors again. They showed the other ship’s weapons at full power. As he reached for the quantum drive control, every system on the control panel went dark, then every other light in the quantum fighter blacked out. As Alec looked up at the viewing screen, a burst of bright light emanated from the spacecraft and shot straight at their fighter.

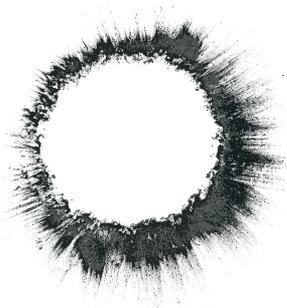
“Oh no,” Alec said.

That light was the last thing he saw.

EARTH TIMES JOURNAL

July 12, 2209

This is Nigil Diggs and today is the one-year anniversary of the Battle of Craton, in which the Legion prevailed and halted Craton's attempt to use its new hilaetite-powered weapon against Earth. Over the past four days, we have talked about the heroes of the battle, but what about the villains? What ever became of them? Well, we all know that Romalor Leximer, the ruler of Craton, was killed in the battle at the hands of Jake Saunders. Edgardo Ramirez, president and CEO of EarthNX Corporation, was sentenced to life in prison. Marco Veneto, the president's chief Legion advisor, was also killed in the fight. Finally, there was Mr. Sloan. Nobody ever did figure out who he was, where he came from, the extent of his role in the plot, or where he went. The mysterious Mr. Sloan is still at large.



1

ANNIVERSARY DAY

Sloan stood straight and tall on the bridge of the lead pirate ship, his hands clasped behind his back, staring at the floor-to-ceiling viewing screen. In his suit and tie topped off by a black trench coat, he stood out from the crew of the ship. He was an imposing figure. That, along with his reputation, would put fear into the entire crew, as well as their captain. That put a grin on his face. He was confident that he was in control of not only this ship, but the fleet of spacecraft as well as the entire mission.

A small bluish dot was coming into view on the screen, growing larger as Sloan's ship approached. *This plan is a masterpiece*, Sloan thought. He had been putting the plan in place for almost a year, and on this day, Earth would finally belong to him.

An overweight, bald male sat in the captain's chair. Sloan continued to look at the screen as the man spoke in a scratchy voice. "We're approaching Earth, Mr. Sloan. Should I give the command to cloak, sir?"

That voice, so common in the captain's insectoid species, irritated Sloan. He also didn't like their yellow-pigmented skin. And what was

the purpose of the black dots down each side of their face? Were insectoids born with those or did they put them there? At least there were a couple humans on the ship's crew, and even a Cratonite. That gave Sloan some confidence that things might get done correctly.

Given his distaste for the insectoid appearance, Sloan didn't turn around when he responded to the captain. "Cloak as you come out of light speed. Didn't you listen to the Permadiums who installed the device on your ships? You can't cloak at light speed. That will fragment the spacecraft." He turned to look at the captain. "But wait for my order to drop to subluminal."

Idiots, Sloan thought. *They are going to blow themselves up and kill me in the process before the battle even starts.* Maybe he should have led from one of the Permadium ships, where he would have been safer. No, he needed to be here with the pirate ships. The Permadiums knew how to fight as a unit. These pirate ships were from all over the galaxy. They only knew one-on-one dogfighting. That would come in handy later in the battle, but right now they needed to work as team, as one unit. They needed him.

Sloan turned back to the monstrous screen. He now could make out the familiar blue-surfaced ball painted with white brush strokes that distinguished Earth from every other planet in the galaxy. He wanted to reach out through the display and grab the ball in one hand and crush it. "Have you heard from the Permadium vessels? Are they in place?" He didn't address the captain by name or title. He didn't want to give him that respect.

"Yes, Mr. Sloan," the captain said. All four Permadium vessels are in position, cloaked next to each of the four defense stations. Is there any way Earth can detect them?"

"Not with any technology in this galaxy." Sloan smiled again. *The Milky Way galaxy has never seen cloaking technology*, he thought. He recalled how he had persuaded the Permadiums to develop cloaking in the first place. With their planet located in the Andromeda galaxy, he knew the technology would never reach the galaxy he truly wanted to possess.

And the things the Permidiums could do with a spacecraft made 90 percent out of hilaetite. The destructive power of such a ship even impressed him, a little. The entire ship was a weapon. His only regret was that he didn't design the hilaetite ships first. But that really didn't matter; he had the Permidiums in the palm of his hand. A simple promise that he may or may not be able to keep was all it took. All other life forms were such fools and so easily manipulated.

This time Sloan turned and looked at the captain. "As planned, once the Permidium vessels take out the defense stations, half of your ships will hit Sector One headquarters and half will hit the headquarters of Sector Four. The other pirate squadron will take the headquarters in Sectors Two and Three." He stepped toward the captain. "Who is leading that squadron?"

The captain cleared his throat. "Abigor, sir. From Maul."

Sloan's eyes narrowed and his brow furrowed. "Maul? I've never heard of a planet Maul."

"Mr. Sloan," the captain said, "it's not really a planet. Maul is actually the remnants of a dead star near the edge of the galaxy. A harsh place to survive. I guess that's what made him a bloody scary pirate. He'll do anything to get what he wants."

Sloan stepped closer. "And you picked him to lead the squadron?"

The captain pushed back in his seat and turned his head slightly as if bracing for a slap or punch. "Well, sir, you see," the captain stammered, "he kind of picked himself. Nobody tells Abigor what to do."

Sloan stretched his neck, putting his head closer to the captain, and stared at him. "For your sake, you better hope he follows my orders."

Sloan turned again to face the display, shaking his head. He should have known the pirates couldn't follow a chain of command. He had thought that by putting the insectoid captain in command of them, he could rely on his orders being passed down through the ranks and obeyed. He didn't want to have to deal with the pirates at every level. Dealing with one was quite enough.

Sloan watched as the planet Earth slowly filled the viewing screen. “Have we reached the coordinates?”

“Your accuracy is amazing, sir,” the captain replied. “We will in ten seconds, nine, eight—”

Sloan interrupted the countdown. “Prepare to drop out of light speed and cloak as you do.”

“—three, two, one,” the captain finished before turning his attention toward the helmsman. “Now!”

The helmsman kept his eyes on the controls. “Done, sir. We’ve successfully cloaked. Just outside the Sector One defense station.”

“And the other ships?” Sloan asked the navigation officer.

“All in position and cloaked, sir,” the navigation officer replied.

“Excellent,” Sloan said with a smirk. It was finally time to put his plan into motion. He turned back toward the screen. “Split the display and patch us into the other three lead ships. I want to see what’s going on at each Sector headquarters once we start.”

Private Samantha Simons sat alone at her post behind a slew of computers and video displays in the observation room in the Sector One central command building. Unlike most other privates who viewed watch duty almost like punishment, Sam stayed alert. She knew that the nine years of peace and quiet on Earth since Romalor had attacked Sector Four headquarters had made many in the Legion complacent. But not her. She took her job very seriously.

Sure, like everyone, she didn’t fear a direct attack on the planet by pirates, even though Earth was technically at war with them. The pirates didn’t possess the technology or means to carry out such an attack. But Sam had read all the reports from nine years ago, once the true reports were released. Nobody back then feared any sort of attack either.

So, she remained at the ready.

Sam took a sip of coffee, keeping her eyes fixed on the screens and monitors. A small blip on the radar monitor caught her eye. It was just outside the defense station. *I've never seen the radar do that before*, she thought. She quickly replayed the recording of the last minute of the radar and saw it again. Sam enlarged the video screen covering that area of space but saw nothing. She replayed that recording as well. Still nothing. She was probably just seeing things or wanting to see things. Maybe she took watch duty a little too seriously. No, she would follow procedure. She would inquire about any anomaly that she detected.

Sam pressed the com. "Sector One Defense, this is Sector One Central Command. Do you copy?"

A voice came over the com. "Go ahead, Central Command."

"Have you noticed any irregularities in space just outside the station?" Sam asked.

"Central Command, what kind of irregularities?"

Sam wasn't sure how to describe it. "Did anything show up on your radar monitor or viewing screen? I detected a blip on the radar a few minutes ago."

"A blip? I'm sorry, can you repeat?"

Now she started to feel embarrassed. Had her mind just created all of this out of boredom? Maybe she should just drop it. No, she had to follow through. That was protocol. "I thought I detected an object momentarily appear on my monitor, just outside your station. I'm sending you the coordinates now." She typed into the Legion mainframe the coordinates of the blip.

There was now a sharp tone in the voice coming over the com. "You thought you detected? Central Command, can you please clarify. Did you or did you not see something?"

Why won't they just answer? she thought. Sam tried to keep the irritation out of her voice. "That's what I'm trying to determine, Defense. Did you see anything on your screens? At the coordinates I just sent?"

After some silence, the answer came with nothing more. “Negative. Sector One Defense Station out.”

Well, they aren't much help, Sam thought. She leaned back in her chair, her short legs allowing just the tips of her boots to touch the floor.

The next step in following the proper protocol when something was detected was to contact your superior. But maybe she saw nothing. Maybe she should just let it go. But did someone see something and let it go nine years ago? She pressed another com. “Captain, this is Private Simons in Central Command. I need to report a possible anomaly.”

Sloan turned toward the captain. “Open a channel to the Permadium vessels.”

The captain waved toward the insectoid communications officer, who then focused on Sloan.

“Done, sir.”

Rather than walking to a com, Sloan spoke loudly, which wasn't hard for him. “The time has come. Soon Earth will be ours. You will have taken your first step in preventing this galaxy from taking over your planet.” He paused for a moment. “And I will have the first planet in my new empire.” This time he didn't smile. It was time for battle.

A computer-like, feminine voice came over the com. “This is the Conciliator of Permadium Vessel One, Mr. Sloan. We do not understand. We do not detect the transponder on this planet.”

How irritating. Now he would have to persuade her to proceed. He could picture the conciliator on her bridge surrounded by her almost entirely female crew, their translucent bodies floating on the floor, all giving their input to the conciliator because that's what Permadiums did. What an inefficient way to rule. But they were intelligent. He had to give them that. He supposed that's what you get with a planet that's

90 percent female, lots of intelligence and lots of discussion. Unlike male rulers who tended to act on impulse before thinking or seeking advice, which made them much easier to manipulate. Had he come all this way for the Permadiums to back out now? He wouldn't let that happen. He would convince them to continue as planned.

"They likely have it shielded from detection," Sloan said, "or even hidden off the planet. Remember, the entire galaxy is in on this. Once we take Earth, we'll move on to the rest of the planets. Once the other planets see Earth's mighty defenses crumble, they will be lining up to beg us not to attack."

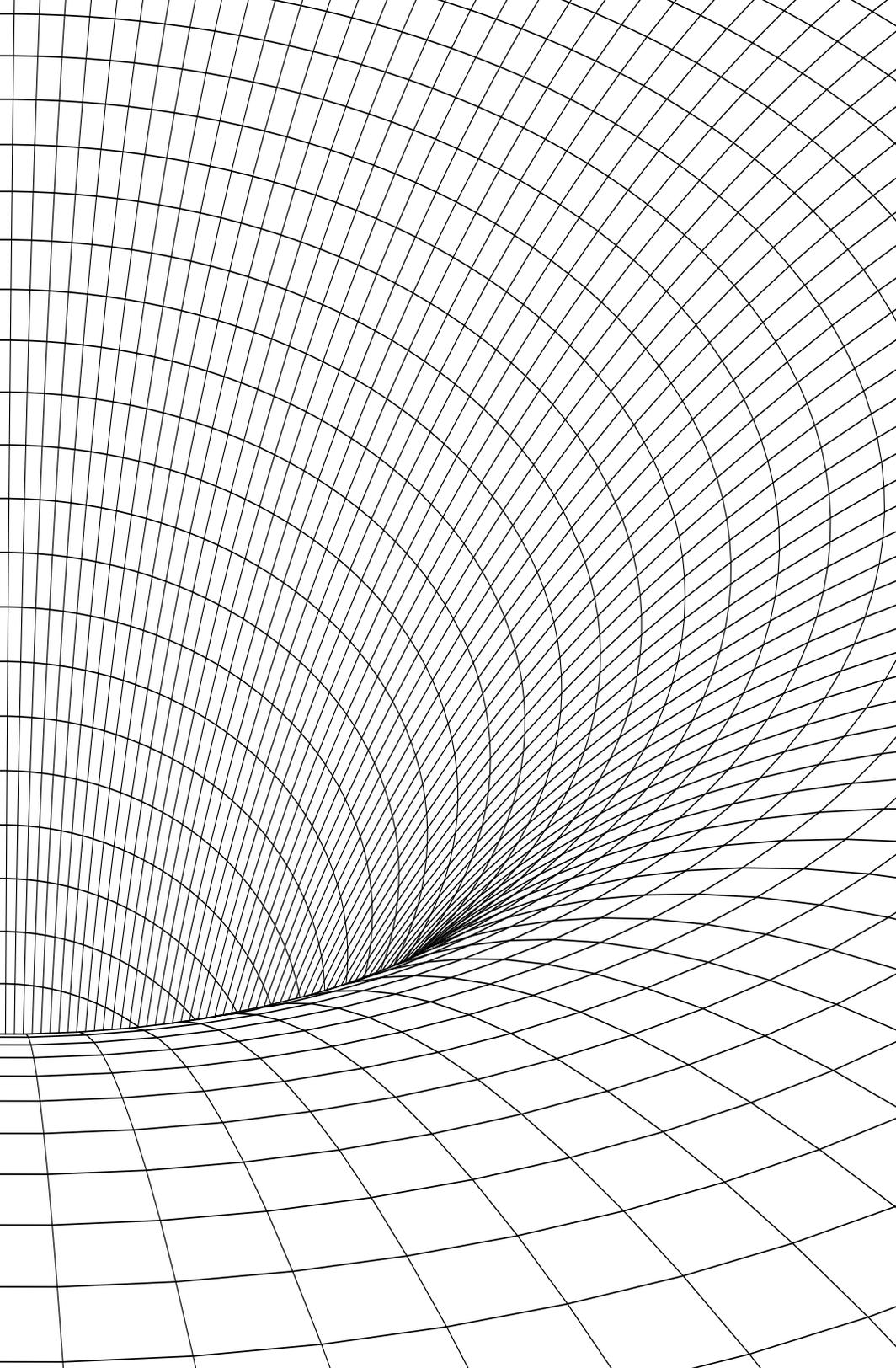
The com was silent for a moment. Sloan was irritated again by the delay, but not worried. If the Permadiums refused to attack, it would be an inconvenience and a delay in his plans, but it wouldn't stop him. He always had a backup plan.

The voice came over the com again. "Very well. Let us proceed."

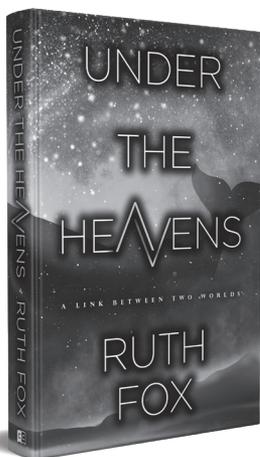
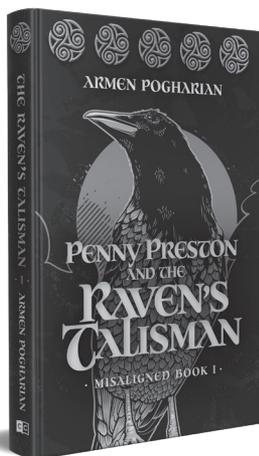
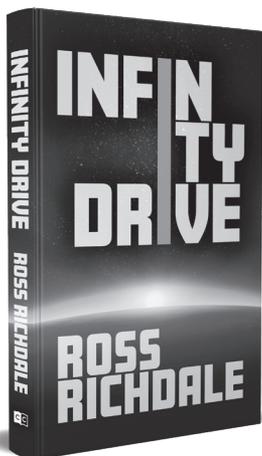
Excellent, Sloan thought. He had to fight to hold back a grin. Even with their superweapons, the Permadiums were still under his influence and control. He wouldn't fail again. He looked at the viewing screen and spoke even louder so that his command could not be mistaken. "Proceed at once!"

Seconds later, brighter than anything he had ever seen, a blinding white light lit up the display. Sloan instinctively turned from the viewing screen, ducked his head, and closed his eyes. He slowly turned back toward the screen and blinked a few times. It took a couple seconds for his sight to return. Even then, the screen looked fuzzy until his eyes adjusted. He could see everyone else on the bridge trying to regain their composure as well. As his vision cleared, he saw nothing but space where one of Earth's four impenetrable defense stations had orbited just seconds earlier.

He had heard no explosion and there was no burning debris, not even a single piece of residue. Everything was gone: the station, the ship, and the Legion soldiers posted there. Sloan then recalled what the Permadiums had said about the use of their entire ship as a weapon.

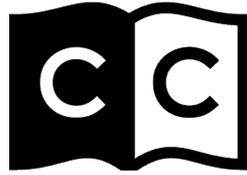


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IT ONLY TAKES ONE TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE.

Just days before Jake Saunders plans on proposing to the love of his life, Jake is called upon once again to save his home, Earth. The Earthen Legion troops and its allies think they're battling only pirates, but a new, more powerful foe from another galaxy flanks their forces and invades, in search of a weapon the planet didn't even know it had.

When Jake learns that this new enemy was responsible for the death of his father many years ago, he realizes he can finally face his true nemesis. The odds are stacked against Jake, but with the help of his friends and allies he's made along the way, he must rally the remaining Legion troops and retake Earth before it's too late. The fate of Earth and the fate of his love, rest in the balance.

*"... if you kick a tiger in the butt,
you better have a plan to deal with its teeth."*


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Cover Design: Maryann Appel
Photography: Vadim Sadovski

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Young Adult / Science Fiction
USD\$15.99 CAD\$19.99 GBPE11.99

ISBN 978-0-7443-0563-0
90000



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