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*To my mom, who is no longer with us,
but who was my biggest fan while writing this book*

*And to my dad, who watched all the late-night
action and science fiction movies with me when I was growing up,
inspiring me to write this book*

FOREWORD

Earth Times Journal
Today's Date: July 8, 2200

This is Nigel Diggs reporting on the history of hilaetite (pronounced hill-a-e-tight) crystals, the adoption of intergalactic Treaty 5274, and the treaty's impact on the Planet Earth. As you may know, hilaetite crystals grow similar to living organisms, like a fungus, but they are not alive in any sense. They are classified as rock. No planet is able to reproduce them or grow them domestically, and once a crystal is picked, no new one ever grows in its place. Once removed from their host rock, they stop growing. For these reasons, fifteen years ago, in the year 2185, all known deposits of hilaetite crystals in the galaxy had been depleted.

But let's take a step backwards and give you a little history. By 2140, all diseases and cancers on Earth and throughout the galaxy had been wiped out through the discovery of hilaetite crystals. Hilaetite crystals were discovered in a small number of places throughout the galaxy and used in different forms for medicinal purposes.

These crystals were also very volatile and could cause massive explosions without being mixed with any other elements or compounds, thereby leaving behind no aftereffects, unlike the old nuclear weapons used on

Earth. So planetary governments began using them in their weapons systems. The possibilities were endless. The larger the hilaetite crystal, the more power it had. It was thought that weapons could be developed that could destroy entire planets given a large enough crystal.

PROLOGUE

Two men stood in the blinding snow and raging, bitter cold wind. They were dressed from head to toe in saber-toothed bear hide suits from the planet Andromeda—the best and most expensive cold-weather suits in the Milky Way galaxy. Only snow goggles protruded from slits in their headpieces. Any exposed skin would be frozen solid in seconds.

From the cockpit of his spacecraft, Sloan watched the two men on the video screen. *Men will put themselves through anything if the price is right*, he thought. Sloan turned toward the pilot. “Will the scanners give me a video feed anywhere on the planet?”

“Anywhere that the chip goes,” the pilot replied.

Sloan turned back to the screen and leaned his tall, solid frame back in his seat. The chip would go everywhere the two men went. He had inserted the audio-visual chip into the latch of the small case strapped over the shoulder of one of the men, Johnson.

Sloan leaned closer to the com. Johnson’s shouts were barely audible over the howling wind.

“No wonder this planet is uninhabited,” Johnson said. “They say this is the climate everywhere, year round! How far

are we from the coordinates? I want to get this done and get out of here!”

Martino looked down at the transponder screen in his hand. “About half a click!” he shouted. “That way!” He motioned with his fur-clad arm.

Johnson continued to shout. “It better not be much farther! We won’t last much longer out here!”

Sloan watched the men intently. If they didn’t get moving, they would freeze to death before they accomplished his objective. What an inconvenience that would be; he would have to get new men and start all over. He watched the men struggle with each step, their heavy boots weighted down in the knee-deep snow. As far as Sloan could see on the video screen in any direction, the landscape was the same, hill after hill of nothing but snow, broken up occasionally by a few mountains, also mostly covered with snow. Ice mountains, as he had heard them referred to, made of ice and rock. That’s what he was looking for.

The transponder beeped. Sloan watched as Martino scanned the landscape in front of him.

“I think that must be it!” Martino shouted, and he pointed to the faint outline of the mouth of a cave appearing through the snow.

It was a small opening in the side of one of the ice mountains. *Perfect*, Sloan thought. Its location relative to the wind was keeping it from filling up with snow, just as he had been informed. That was the only reason it was accessible.

He watched as the two men trudged the last few steps through the snow and into the cave. The opening was narrow. Once they were through it, the cave was probably ten feet tall at the highest spot, Sloan estimated. The walls looked like they were more ice than rock.

“Finally, we’re getting somewhere,” Sloan said, more to himself than to the pilot.

Once the men were inside the cave, the wind and blowing

snow subsided. Sloan could still hear the wind through the com, but he could hear the men more clearly now, speaking in normal tones. Martino pointed down the long, dark cave tunnel. The transponder was still pointing that way. The men reached into their packs and pulled out their light cylinders. Once activated, the greenish light extended about ten feet down the tunnel.

Johnson said, “I wonder why Sloan wouldn’t tell us what we’re after? Just, ‘You’ll know it when you see it.’ What’s that supposed to mean?”

“He’s paying us ten quads each to figure it out,” Martino replied. “And I have a pretty good idea.”

Sloan grinned slightly, satisfied with himself. By agreeing to pay the two men a mere fraction of what he would make, he got them to risk their lives in one of the harshest climates in the galaxy, without telling them where they were going, what they were after, or what it was for. Who else could have done that but him?

Johnson turned toward Martino. “Do you think we can trust Sloan? He gave me the creeps, the way he stared at us when we met.”

“At this point, we don’t have much choice,” replied Martino. “Besides, I brought along a little insurance.” He pulled a small plasma gun from inside his coat.

One side of Sloan’s mouth turned up in a cold grin. “Thanks for the warning,” he whispered.

Johnson said, “I don’t like this at all. Something doesn’t feel right.”

“Come on,” Martino replied. “When you’re sitting in the sun spending your quads, it’ll feel right.”

Sloan watched the men slowly press on. Their feet slipped constantly on the uneven floor, slamming into protrusions, and they struggled to keep their balance.

After making their way deep into the cave, the men came around a bend where the tunnel opened up into a larger

cavern. They held up their lights. Sloan couldn't quite see the farthest side of the cavern, but he could tell that this was probably the end of the tunnel, or at least the end of the portion of the tunnel that was large enough to walk through.

Martino looked at the transponder. "This is it. Do you see anything?"

Johnson slowly moved his light cylinder from side to side. As he moved it to his right, something glared bright against the cave wall.

Sloan leaned closer to the screen. "Can we increase the brightness? I can barely make out anything down there."

The pilot shook his head. "I'm sorry, sir. That's the best I can do."

Sloan's heart began to speed up as the men drew closer to the brightly shining object. It was a large clear crystal, about twenty-four inches in circumference, growing out of a protruding rock about two feet off the ground. It was rounded but not smooth, with many flat edges. Sloan edged his face even closer to the screen. This was it. Finally, they'd found what he had come for. His latest plan was coming to fruition—a plan that would make him rich beyond imagination. But that was just the icing on the cake. Power was the real goal. In the end, he would control the two most formidable military powers in the galaxy. That would give him even more power than he now possessed, and he would use that power to control and manipulate anyone he wanted to, anywhere, beyond anything he had ever achieved. He nodded his head slightly and smiled.

Johnson spoke in an awed voice. "A hilaetite crystal. And it's huge."

Martino stared at it. "I had an idea we might be after a crystal, but I never thought it would be this big. This might be the biggest one ever found."

Johnson said, "Rumor has it that the Vernitions first uncovered some twelve- to fifteen-inch crystals way back

when, but I never heard of anyone finding any even close to this size. Unbelievable! No wonder Sloan wouldn't tell us what we were after. I'd hate to think what would happen if the wrong people knew about this thing. This baby could be sold for medicinal processing for a fortune."

"And would be worth a hundred times more as a weapon," Martino added. "Can you imagine what type of weapon a crystal this size could power? No wonder Sloan's paying us each ten quads. That's chump change compared to what this thing's worth."

"But hilaetite crystals were mined out decades ago," Johnson said. "No one has found a single crystal for years. Earth, Craton, Vernius, and a half a dozen other planets have the technology to locate crystals ten times smaller than this and they haven't been able to locate any. How did Sloan find this one?"

"The less we know, the better," replied Martino.

"Do you suppose there's more in here?" Johnson asked. "These things usually grow in bunches, and Sloan only gave us the coordinates for this one. The rest could be ours."

"No," Martino replied. "It's not unheard of for a single one to grow, and if there were more, I'm sure Sloan would be having us snatch them up, too."

"What if we keep this one?" Johnson said. "We tell Sloan we couldn't find it. He'd never know."

Martino gave Johnson a hard stare. "Double-cross Sloan? I don't think so. You're the one that said he gave you the creeps. The man looked as fit as a Cratonite, and I'm sure he's packing the latest weaponry. If half the stories about him are true, I don't want to be the one who crosses him. Let's be happy with our ten quads."

"Good decision," Sloan whispered. He knew that his ability to manipulate came most often through fear. He liked how he could use his reputation to instill fear into those he

needed to use, and when necessary, he didn't mind setting a new example.

Johnson set down the case. "Sloan said everything we need is in here."

Martino removed his mittens, flipped the latch, and slowly opened the case. It was empty, except for heavy padding on all sides and a small, separate compartment in the front. Martino reached into the front compartment and pulled out a thin, pencil-sized laser cutter. He examined it critically. "This looks like new technology since my last job, but I believe it will work just fine. You hold the crystal steady, and I'll cut it off. Whatever you do, don't drop it."

Johnson took off his mittens, blew into his cupped hands, and then placed both hands on the crystal. Martino twisted the end of the laser cutter, and a red beam shot out. He slowly worked the beam around the crystal in precise strokes. With every stroke, he cut deeper into the ice and rock.

Sloan watched intently, but his sources had been right—the man knew what he was doing. He could see the skill in Martino's workmanship.

If Martino so much as nicked the crystal, that would be the end of him, and if it was more than a nick, the end of the entire planet, with a crystal that size.

Sloan turned toward the pilot. "You better take us up another couple hundred feet."

"Are you sure you know what you're doing? Is this safe?" Johnson was asking. "I've heard plenty of stories of hilaetite crystal miners being blown sky-high. This thing's big enough to take out the entire planet. One wrong move and we're finished."

Martino didn't look up, but kept on working the laser. "Why do you think Sloan hired me for this job? I used to be a hilaetite crystal precision miner. When the machinery couldn't remove a crystal, they called people like me in to take care of it. Risky business, but it paid well."

“Not as well as this job’s going to pay,” replied Johnson. “If we live through it.”

“Shut up and pay attention to the crystal,” Martino said. “Why did Sloan hire you?”

Johnson replied, “Maybe he hired me to keep an eye on you.”

Martino, finishing the final few cuts, did not respond. The crystal fell free into Johnson’s hands. Sloan again leaned close to the screen as Johnson very slowly and gently placed the crystal in the case. It fit snugly in the padding. Martino closed the lid, which had the same padding on the underside, and latched the case. Sloan sat back in his seat, folded his arms and smiled.

Martino straightened up, picked up the transponder, and punched a few buttons. “That should reverse the coordinates and direct us back to the evacuation point. Sloan will be waiting for us.”

“I hope,” added Johnson.

Martino picked up the case. “With this baby on the line? He’ll be there.”

As the two men started walking toward the narrow tunnel that would lead them out of the cave, the picture on the screen began to vibrate. Sloan tried adjusting the screen, but then he saw the two men holding their lights up and slowly turning completely around, as if looking for the source of the vibration. It must have been something in the cave. Sloan could see nothing within the range of the light. After a few seconds, the picture vibrated a second time, and a few seconds later, a third time. With each vibration, he could see the floor and walls shake harder.

“Let’s get out of here!” Martino said.

Both men bolted for the tunnel.

Just as they reached the opening, a huge hairy creature crashed through the back wall of the cavern. Among the flying ice and rock, Sloan could make out a rat-like head and a

mouth full of teeth. It let out a hissing sound that caused the cavern to shake even more, bringing down more ice and rock.

With that, the men broke into a lumbering run. Sloan's eyes widened and he pulled back from the screen. His heart began to race, not out of fear for the men, but for fear of losing the crystal. He could hear a low growl mixed in with vibration after vibration, faster and faster. The beast was closing the gap. The picture on the screen shook. The vibrations gave way to thuds, as the weight of each step drew the beast closer and closer. Flying chunks of rock and ice filled the screen, with intermittent glimpses of the creature crashing through the sides of the tunnel.

"Faster! Faster, you fools!" Sloan shouted at the screen.

"Should I take us in closer to prepare for evacuation, sir?" the pilot asked.

"No, not yet." Sloan's eyes never left the screen. "It's still too risky. They're bouncing that case around like it's a rubber ball. At least Martino has the box and is in the lead. He just needs to outrun Johnson."

The picture on the screen began to steady. Sloan could see some daylight. They must be approaching the entrance, where the tunnel floor was smoother and wider. Sloan kept his eyes fixed on the screen. "Okay, move us down one hundred feet, but keep us a hundred yards or so from the cave. She could still blow. That distance should give us enough time."

Johnson's foot caught hard between two rocks, and he fell face first. Sloan grimaced. He could hear Johnson's ankle snap. Martino, who was starting to open up some distance between himself and Johnson, paused and looked back.

"Don't stop!" Sloan snapped, still looking at the screen. "This is your chance to get away while that thing has a meal."

Johnson lifted his hand toward Martino. "Help me," he pleaded.

The creature bore down on Johnson, and Sloan got a full view of it for the first time. It had a long tube-like body

covered with coarse, dirty white hair. It ran on ten stubby legs, each ending with paws containing four or five very long and sharp claws. The creature's head looked like that of a giant rat, with a long snout. Large, crooked teeth protruded from its open mouth, dripping with saliva.

Martino pulled out his plasma gun, aimed it at the beast, and squeezed. Nothing happened. He looked at it, made an adjustment, aimed, and squeezed again. Still nothing.

Johnson shouted, "It's too cold for a plasma gun. Help me up! Quick!"

Johnson scarcely finished the sentence before the jaws of the beast clamped down on him. The scream that came from Johnson made the hair on the back of Sloan's neck stand up. He had heard a lot of dying screams, but this was one of the most hideous.

Martino turned and ran out of the cave. Sloan knew Martino had little time. At the pace the creature was devouring Johnson, it wouldn't take long for it to finish off its appetizer and go after the second course.

When Martino exited the cave, he had to slow to almost a walk. Sloan shook his head in disappointment, but he knew that was probably Martino's only option. The snow was still knee deep and blowing as fiercely as when the two men had entered the cave. Sloan watched intently. Martino made his way through the snow, glancing down at the transponder.

The creature was finished with Johnson and was now chasing Martino. With its short stubby legs, it was just as slow in the deep snow as Martino. *He might have a chance*, Sloan thought. *That thing isn't built for wandering outside.*

Sloan turned toward the pilot. "He's clear. Take us in for evacuation."

The pilot replied, "Yes sir, but the wind is too strong to land. We'll have to make it a hover-evac. Fifty feet's about as close as I can get."

"All right," Sloan said. "Make it so."

Sloan made his way rapidly down to the cargo bay, zipping up his heavy coat. He looked down at Martino through the open door and lowered the ladder. Everywhere he looked it was white. White snow on the ground, white snow on the mountains, white snow in the air. The ladder was swinging wildly in the wind. As it whipped by, Martino leaped up and grabbed it. He pulled himself up until his feet could rest on the lowest rung. He turned his head. The beast was no more than ten yards from him now, growling and occasionally letting out its hideous hiss.

Sloan watched Martino climb toward the open hatch, the wind still whipping the ladder. The beast raised the upper half of its body and lunged for the ladder. The spacecraft rose ten feet just in time, and the beast missed, its head crashing down into the snow. It let out a vicious hiss and stared up at Martino, mouth open. Never had Sloan seen teeth like that—large, jagged, almost stacked on top of one another.

The wind continued to blow and swirl. Sloan thought, *Hang on, Martino. Hang on. I've come so far. One slip and you'll be the next meal for that creature, if the crystal doesn't blow us all up.*

As Martino reached the top, Sloan bent down on one knee. He leaned over the open hatch, held out a gloved hand, and shouted, "Let me take the case?"

"Go ahead," Martino replied. Martino lowered his head and lifted one hand off the ladder to allow Sloan to remove the case from over his shoulder. Sloan watched as Martino reached for the handholds on the floor of the cargo bay. He grasped, but nothing was there.

Sloan stood up, staring at Martino and shaking his head. He had removed the handholds earlier.

Martino looked up at Sloan and his eyes widened. "Give me a hand."

Instead, Sloan turned and knelt by the case. He flipped open the latch and slowly and gently opened the lid, then

reached in and touched the crystal. “Well done.” He closed the lid and moved the case away from the open hatch.

“Now pull me up,” Martino said, “and we can finish the transaction.”

Sloan stood and walked over to the open hatch. Martino was still hanging onto the last rung of the ladder with one hand, his feet a few rungs down. His other hand reached up to Sloan.

Sloan bent one leg as if he was starting to kneel down to lift up Martino. Then, with a quick solid thrust, Sloan smashed his boot squarely into Martino’s face. Martino’s head snapped back, blood pouring from his nose. His free arm flailed and both feet slipped off the ladder. Sloan watched. He’d thought that one good kick would do it, but Martino was a little tougher than he had expected. Martino swung out over empty air, clinging to the ladder with one hand. Before he could swing himself back, Sloan stomped on the hand holding the ladder. Martino’s finger bones crunched. Martino lost his grip. He snatched at the ladder one last time with his good hand, but all he caught was air. Sloan leaned out over the opening and watched Martino get smaller and smaller, falling through the white snow, falling toward the snow-covered ground, falling into the waiting jaws of the creature below.

Sloan flipped a switch on the side of the hatch. The ladder ascended up into the spacecraft, and the hatch door closed. Sloan then pressed the com button on the cargo bay wall. The spacecraft’s pilot came on. “Yes, Mr. Sloan?”

Sloan replied, “Take us out of here.”

“Where to, sir?” the pilot responded.

Sloan paused for a moment and then replied, “Earth.”



The Planet Earth is no longer divided into countries, but rather into five geographic regions, called sectors. Scientific advances have enabled space travel to all parts of the Milky Way galaxy. Many of the stars in the galaxy were found to contain solar systems similar to the solar system of the Earth's own Sun, with inhabited planets. The inhabitants of some of those planets were hostile and had developed weapon systems far beyond those of Earth. As a result, the world leaders of Earth agreed to set aside all religious and political differences in order to protect their planet. By 2145, through the development of a new planetary defense system, Earth had avoided any takeover by other planets and developed a united society.



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CAUGHT BETWEEN LOVE AND REVENGE, JAKE HAS ONE CHANCE TO LIVE UP TO THE MAN HIS UNCLE WAS.

Jake Saunders became a Legion soldier to honor the memory of his war hero uncle, who was brutally murdered when he was still a young teen. Fast forward a few years, and Jake and his best friend Cal have been tasked with escorting Cal's older sister Diane to an ambassadorship on a far-off planet. To Diane, it's the opportunity of her career, very likely a lifetime post. For Jake, it's a lifetime of heartbreak. He has loved Diane since they were kids, and every step closer to that ambassador assignment is a step closer to goodbye.

But somebody wants to play Earth against its interstellar enemy—and whoever he is, he's working with the person who killed Jake's uncle. Jake has waited for years to exact revenge, but he never thought the chance would come with such high stakes. Can he keep his friends and home planet safe while meting out justice to a murderer?



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