

17 Planets: The Captain

A.R. Alexander

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17 Planets introduces a fascinating, diverse universe filled with inhospitable planets, strange technologies, power-hungry politicians, and enhanced human beings.

An interplanetary organization seeks to control people, resources, and worlds in A. R. Alexander's science fiction novel *17 Planets*.

In the far future, humans have left Earth behind to establish civilizations and political organizations on seventeen planets across multiple star systems. They have even eradicated illness by installing a device, the Ajna, in each person's brain at birth. Now, however, a criminal empire has found a way to use the Ajna to control the population. The various political factions are both ignorant of the empire's scheme and unwilling to interfere with its business. The only people who can stop the plan are a ruthless pirate, Elizabeth, and a by-the-books general, Ed, who have a hard time trusting each other. Both are dedicated to their jobs and make little room in their lives for anything else.

The worldbuilding is quite detailed; there are maps, charts, and an explanation of the history and technology of the solar systems. Each system has its own history and customs; these often clash in interesting ways, even when people need and want to work together for a common cause. Most people, however, have their own agendas, and they are often willing to go to extreme measures to achieve it.

Each chapter starts with a stark, evocative sketch of the planet it takes place on. But the cast is unwieldy, and there are so many worlds to explore that many are individually underdeveloped. When it comes to people's motivations and planetary environments, the book is too expository, flattening an otherwise fascinating, diverse universe of inhospitable planets, strange technologies, power-hungry politicians, and enhanced human beings who have yet to realize the cost of their life-saving implants.

Political scheming consumes a large portion of this first series title, with people spending a good deal of time arguing and debating; their conversations are intriguing but leave other elements unexplored. Their discussions are most often interrupted by action scenes wherein Elizabeth shows off her multiple talents. But while Ed is absent for much of the story's first half, his return initiates upheavals that jeopardize his and Elizabeth's mission—and their hearts.

With a cliff-hanger ending that represents threats against multiple worlds, *17 Planets* is a sweeping science fiction novel in which some lie to gain power—and others lie to protect people.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (July 12, 2023)

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