

The Spindle Station

Book 2 of the Alliance Conflict

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Published by Book Baby

ISBN: 9781682228135

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Chapter 2

Victor and Crista Bullpeep were sound asleep when the priority message arrived.

...You have an in-coming emergency message from the Alliance Senate...

Victor briefly considered telling the computer to save it until morning. However, Crista had now woken up so he decided to listen to it. He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes, sat up, and said, "Computer, play the message."

...Victor Bullpeep. The Alliance Senate had decided to expand the Human experiment. Please proceed immediately to Earth and obtain enough Humans to completely fill an Alliance cruiser. Please include engineering, maintenance, and another set of pilots...

Victor groaned and lay back down in bed. The computer reenactment of the *Sunflower's* battle had been on the news nearly non-stop for the last few hours. The newscasters didn't mention that the pilots were Humans, but Victor knew the truth. He had been expecting this order since he realized the Humans had won 12 out of 12 fighter battles.

Crista rolled over, took his hand, and said, "Great, there is really nothing I can imagine that would be more fun than retuning to Earth. Perhaps this time we can get matching t-shirts that say I'm with stupid." She made a hand sign to show Victor exactly which way she thought the arrows should point.

Victor smiled and said, "Maybe I will get a bumper sticker that says 'My other car is a space ship.'"

Crista said, "I know. I will save the Humans the trouble of figuring out I am actually an alien. I will get a T-shirt that simply says Eat Me."

Victor grinned and got out of bed. He knew he couldn't go back to sleep. He checked his communication pad and noticed that he had an email from Amy Weisman. He was tempted to read it immediately, but Crista became insanely jealous every time he communicated with her. He would have to wait until she fully woke up to read it.

Instead he said, "We will need to find someone to run the archery range while we're away."

They had decided to sell both apartments near the spaceport in Solaria City and move to Human Town. Human Town is an entertainment and dining district located on the far, far southern outskirts of Solaria City. It is the last stop on the city's hovertram.

The catch or shtick to the place was before one could enter the district, one had to paint their exposed skin a legitimate Human color. Patrons could choose white, black, brown, or yellow. For those daring souls who wanted the full effect, they also sold T-shirts with slogans on them and blue jeans.

Victor and Crista had gone to dinner there about a month ago and had decided to stay. Crista recognized that while there were many Human themed restaurants in the village, apart from the walk-in theatre, there were very few Human activities that patrons could do.

Crista had petitioned the local government to allow her to open a shooting range using Human style guns. The council had soundly rejected the proposal, primarily due to Crista's illustrious past. The council reminded her that she was the first Solarian in generations to stab another Solarian. They feared what she would do with a gun in her hand.

Victor tried next. He requested both knife throwing and star throwing and was rejected. He then tried archery. The council, possibly not knowing exactly what that was, approved the request and they opened an archery range shortly thereafter.

There was little information on Solaria concerning how to actually make a compound bow or the mechanics of shooting it. Victor had solved this by simply emailing Amy Weisman and asking her. His initial email had been:

Amy Weisman,

Can you send me the schematics of a compound bow and arrows? Also, I need an instructional video of a Human showing others how shoot it.

Fortunately, Crista had proof read the communique and had suggested a few minor modifications. The end result was:

Dear Amy Weisman,

I hope you are well. From your last email, it sounds like everything at Victory Games is going fine. Keep up the great work. On a personal note, Crista and I have decided to try archery. Can you send me the schematics of a compound bow and arrows? Also, I need an instructional video by an expert showing us how shoot it.

Victor had given Amy's designs to a nearby manufacturing firm and they reproduced the bows and along with several different types of arrows. Victor strung the bows as light as possible so that a Solarian could draw it back. The customer watched the instructional video, then rented a bow and was allowed to shoot a quiver of 10 arrows.

The range had been an instant hit, primarily because it coincided with the release of a Human movie about a girl who hunted game with a bow and was apparently hungry all of the time. Victor hadn't seen the movie yet, but he heard it was good.

Crista responded, "What about your old business associate Jack Dogbarks?"

Victor said, "No, I really don't trust him. Besides, I heard that he got some lucrative contract from the Hirculan government hauling cargo to an outpost on the edge of unchartered space. I don't think he would be willing to give that up."

Crista replied, "Wow, how did he get that?"

"Apparently he just strolled into the Hirculan embassy after the Solarian government signed the contract for the new office building and asked if they needed anything hauled. It sounds like it was pretty bold move with a great payoff."

Crista replied, "You sound jealous."

Victor replied as sarcastically as possible, “Oh no. I have the much better deal. I get to return to Earth and pretend to be Human again.”

Crista laughed and finally said, “True. You certainly did. I guess we can ask my younger brother to run the archery range.”

That settled, they packed nearly all of their belongings into several large suitcases and prepared their apartment for a long absence. Victor hid his remaining contraband Human videos in the apartment. There was little point of taking it with them only to have to sneak it past security again when they returned.

When everything was ready, Victor called a ground car to take them to the spaceport. It was going to be very expensive from this distance, but Victor really didn't want to try to shove his entire luggage set onto a hovertram. Plus, he feared that he would get off at one stop and his luggage at another.

The ground car took them to the spaceport and dropped them at the *Vista*, their mini-freighter. Victor paid the exorbitant fare and made a mental note to try to bury the receipt in his expense report. The Alliance travel expense auditor was very thorough, so this task would probably be more difficult than capturing 50+ Humans.

Crista began hauling luggage onto their ship. Victor went to the control room and opened a power feed from the space port. He began performing the pre-flight checklist on the hyper drive generator and primary and secondary power generators. Most mini-freighters didn't have a secondary generator, but the *Vista* was especially equipped with one for the express purpose of transporting Humans.

Victor stopped Crista on one of her trips past the control room and said, “We will have to refill the deuterium tank and replace the polonium strips before we leave.”

Deuterium, also known as heavy hydrogen, is one of two naturally occurring isotopes in hydrogen. Deuterium is one of two key elements in the core of a hyper-drive unit. When deuterium is superheated, it gives off a tremendous amount of energy in the form a super fusion reaction. Deuterium eventually burns itself out after repeated hyperspace jumps.

Polonium is the second key element. Polonium is unstable and highly radioactive in its normal state. However, it can be converted into metallic strips by bombarding it with alpha particles to form diatomic molecules and then capturing them in bismuth. The polonium strips react with deuterium to create the fuel required for space flight.

Crista asked, “How long?”

Victor said, “At least 4 hours. I hired an engineering service to change the polonium and then calibrate the drive. They said that they would be here sometime between 12 pm and 4 pm.”

Crista looked at the time on her communicator pad. It was only 10 am. It was possible that they would have to wait up to 6 hours for the calibration service to arrive. This made her furious.

Her entire face turned visibly red. She grabbed the nearest object she could find and threw it across the ship. It made an unsatisfying thump sound as it bounced off of the hull and landed on the floor undamaged. This seemed to infuriate Crista even more and she turned and stormed off the mini-freighter.

Victor followed her out of the control room and to the end of the ramp leading out of the freighter. He watched her quickly walking away from the ship and towards the spaceport. Victor considered activating her control collar and paralyzing her. He certainly didn't want her to harm herself (or anyone else for that matter) so close to launch.

He yelled, "Stop! Come back."

Crista ignored the command. She wasn't slowing or stopping. If anything, her pace increased. Victor rubbed his thumb on the paralyze button. Crista continued walking; she was at a trot now. She was now farther away from him than she had been at any time since their wedding.

As punishment for stabbing someone, Crista had been given a control collar. It monitors Victor's nervous system. If Victor is hurt, Crista receives about 7 times the pain in the same area. If Victor dies, Crista will receive a lethal injection.

The primary drawback is that Crista has to be near Victor in order for the collar to sense his nervous system. If Crista got physically far enough away from Victor, the collar would no longer sense his heartbeat and give Crista a lethal injection.

Victor remembered the collar's distance issue and suddenly wondered exactly how far she could go before the collar would activate and kill her. He sighed and pressed the paralyze button on the hand held collar control unit.

He watched as Crista went limp in mid-step and fell awkwardly on the pavement. He released the button, but she didn't move. Victor ran over and checked her. She was breathing okay and nothing seemed to be broken, but she had knocked herself unconscious when she fell.

Victor grabbed her under her arms and dragged her back onto the mini-freighter. He called a spaceport doctor and requested that he come visit the ship. The doctor was nice enough to schedule the visit from sometime between 12 pm and 4 pm.

The doctor arrived shortly after 12 and insisted upon giving Crista a full examination. The doctor started by asking, "What happened?"

Crista responded, "I was walking on the spaceport pavement when I lost control of my legs and fell. When I woke up I had a terrible headache." Crista glared at Victor, but she otherwise seemed calm and collected again.

The doctor declared that she was okay physically except for the aforementioned headache. He took out a neural amplifier and placed it over her head. He identified the blood vessels that had been damaged and zapped them with a proton burst to repair them. Crista's headache ceased immediately after the treatment.

The engineer arrived roughly three hours later and examined the hyperdrive unit. He drained the deuterium tank, replaced the polonium sheets in the reactor core, and refilled the tank with a fresh batch of deuterium.

He calibrated the entire unit, performed a virtual test jump, and declared the system okay to use. He also calibrated the power generator and checked the main drive unit. Finally, he declared the *Vista* ready to fly.

After the engineer left, Victor went to the control room and started the pre-flight checklist. After a few minutes, Crista joined him and asked, “Why did you paralyze me?”

Victor replied, “I can’t stand to have you out of my sight.”

Crista snorted in derision and said, “Why, give the real answer this time?”

Victor said, “Because if you get too far away the control collar loses my heart rate monitor signal and thinks that I am dead. It will activate and give you a lethal injection.”

Crista thought for a moment and said, “How far away can I go?”

Victor said, “I have no idea. I really don’t want to find out though.”

This answer seemed to satisfy Crista, at least for the moment. Victor figured they would have the conversation again at a later time though.

He smiled and said, “Changing subjects, I just received an email from Amy Weisman.”

He had technically received it nearly 16 hours ago, but had forgotten about it until just now. Victor activated his communication pad and opened the message. Crista was overcome by curiosity and leaned over close to Victor to read it over his shoulder.

Victor,

I have great news! Our researchers just discovered that if you reverse the process to supercool atoms, you can actually superheat them. I just wanted you to know that we are going to patent the process to create portable heaters. This will be a fascinating new revenue stream for us. I look forward to seeing you again.

Sincerely, Amy Weisman, CEO Victory Games

Crista said, “Didn’t Lorano say that was bad for some reason?”

Victor looked confused and said, “Lorano says lots of things. I usually tune him out after the second sentence. Do you recall anything specific?”

Crista replied, “No. I just remember Lorano saying that teaching Humans how to superheat atoms was bad.”

Victor replied, “Oh yeah. I remember. They could build ion cannons or something. However, they don’t know how to refine polonium or capture deuterium, so it really doesn’t matter.”

Victor contacted traffic control and was quickly granted clearance to leave. This was fairly typical for Solaria; there were rarely more than a few ships requesting permission to leave at the same time.

He eased the mini-freighter off of the landing pad and gently guided it through the roughly 1 hour ride through the atmosphere. He was being cautious because he wanted to be sure the newly calibrated generator and power system were operating correctly.

They cleared the atmosphere and made a short series of micro jumps to the edge of the Solarian system. Victor announced, "We are clear of the gravity well."

Crista plotted the hyperspace jump from Solaria to Conron, entered the coordinates into the computer, double checked, ran a simulation and declared that they were ready to jump.

Victor said, "Engage the hyperdrive."

Crista could have simply have pressed the button, but she still liked to hear the command from Victor. Crista pressed the button and they disappeared from Solaria. Victor closely monitored the hyperdrive for the next 20 minutes. Eventually, he was satisfied that it was okay and they both departed the control room.

They entered their quarters and removed the hidden panel that led to the passageway between the inner and outer hull. On nearly all types ships in the Alliance this area was usually empty. However, years ago Victor had converted it into a space garden. They walked around the ship and noted the state of the garden.

Crista summarized, "Well, it isn't a total disaster I suppose."

The garden had overhead lights that were programmed to shine for 10 hours a day. Plus, the garden was automatically watered at the start of each day. However, the garden was overgrown and many of the fruits and vegetables had become over-ripe and spoiled. So, Crista's summary was fairly accurate.

Victor responded, "Yes. Nothing died at least. A few days of pruning and it should be back to normal."

The jump from Solaria to Conron lasted 8 hours and they spent almost the entire time cleaning up the worst sections of the garden. They had made significant progress and were still in the garden when the computer hailed them.

...We have exited hyperspace and have come to a full stop beside the hyperspace corridor. We are being hailed by traffic control. Please return to the control room at your earliest convenience and respond...

Victor wiped the majority of dirt off of his clothes and returned to the control room. He spoke to the traffic cop and received clearance to take a direct route to the Conron – Earth hyperspace lane at a speed of .03 light.

The two hyperspace lanes were relatively close to each other. It was almost as fast to fly the distance in real space as it was to micro jump. Victor decided to use the sub-light engines

because he wanted to test the sub-light engines one more and for an extended period of time before leaving Conron – and a repair facility.

Crista entered the control room a few minutes later. She asked, “Do you have a plan for capturing the Humans?”

Victor sighed and said, “Not yet. I’m sure we will think of something. The first batch was pretty easy. I mean those first 20 literally just walked into the hold of the freighter and trapped themselves.”

Crista said, “Well, what about the hold?”

“Good point,” Victor replied. “There restrooms are still intact; so is the kitchen. At least they won’t starve.”

Crista replied, “Okay, but we don’t have any beds or furniture. How are we going to put 45 Humans into that tiny hold? They will be packed in like, like, some aquatic creature into a tiny container.”

Victor replied, “Well, they can just sit on the floor.”

Crista said, “For 11 days. You are going to have 45 Humans sit on the floor for 11 days. They will riot and break through the force field. I don’t want to be someone’s lunch.”

Victor knew she had a valid point. He supposed the Humans would sit nicely for 3 or 4 days, but he doubted he could keep them captive for 11 days without beds or chairs or entertainment.

Victor waved his hands in the air and said, “Don’t worry, we will think of something. For instance, we could always use Human beds and furniture. We will just have to find a way to attach the beds to the deck.”

The trip took just under a day to complete at the steady rate of .03 light. There were no problems with the power generator or thrusters. Victor deemed the repair and calibration a success. He was tempted to speed up, but they were now nearing the Conron – Earth hyperspace corridor.

As they made the final approach to the hyperspace corridor, they were hailed by traffic control. Technically, they were hailed by an automated defense system that was guarding the entry to the hyperspace lane to Earth.

On each side of the corridor was a large asteroid. It had been converted into a weapons platform and boasted an impressive array of missiles and ion cannons. One cannon was strong enough to vaporize a fully shielded battleship and the two asteroids combined had 16 of them. The asteroid also had 80 missile launchers and could automatically reload 10 times.

...Approaching ship, the hyperspace lane is currently closed. Please reverse course. If you approach any further, you will be vaporized for your safety...

Victor responded, “This is the *Vista*. It is on the list of ships allowed entry to Earth.”

The forts had been facing toward the hyperspace lane, but after Victor's response they rapidly spun 180 degrees on their axis to face the *Vista*. This rapid spin feature had been designed by Lorano. He had placed plasma jets around the exterior of the forts. This feature allowed the forts to track any ship on any trajectory in mere moments. There was a small drawback to the design though. In order to get an accurate shot, the forts had to spend about 3 minutes stabilizing themselves at the new coordinates.

...Ships are no longer allowed to enter because the hyperspace lane is closed...

Victor tried again, "Yes or No. Are we on the list of ships allowed to enter?"

...Yes. But, a new order was given to not allow any ships to pass and to vaporize them for their safety...

Victor wasn't entirely clear how vaporizing his ship would keep him safe, but he continued, "Okay, I am sending you a new order from the Alliance Senate specifically ordering the *Vista* to go to Earth."

...Received and authenticated...

"Then these newest orders show that the new orders were not supposed to overwrite your existing orders. The original list of ships should stand intact." Victor concluded.

...Fine, you can pass this time. However, I am going to get clarification. If you destroy yourself, please do it safely...

The mini-freighter was now in the exact middle of the hyperspace corridor. Crista calculated their first jump, entered it into the navigation computer and double checked it for accuracy. Just for fun, she ran a simulation and got a 97% chance of failure

She looked over at Victor and said, "I suggest we not try that particular route."

Victor replied, "True. We do not want to wind up wedged into an asteroid."

Crista clapped her hands together to simulate the ship splattering into something. She said, "I can think of a few people back on Solaria I wouldn't mind sending on that route."

Victor laughed and said, "True." He paused for a moment and said, "Are you sure we are at the correct starting coordinates? Remember, Lorano said that the collar will only calculate the correct next jump point if we are physically located in the correct beginning point."

Crista nodded her head to indicate yes. She said, "We are. The starting point for the first jump is correctly stored in the transponder jump log." She paused for a moment and said, "Go ahead, activate the collar so we can get the secret coordinates."

Victor raised his hands and slapped both of his ears. The collar activated and Crista shrieked and rubbed her ears. Crista asked, "Did it work?"

Victor replied, "I don't know. Lorano said that when I boxed my ears, the collar will automatically link with the hyper-drive unit. I don't recall him saying how to tell if it worked."

Crista replied, "Just activate it. Do you remember the code?"

Approximately 4 months ago, Victor, Lorano, Crista, and Carank had been sent to Earth to evaluate Humans for their ability to be fighter pilots. While there, the hyperspace corridor from Earth to Conron was intentionally destroyed. They found a new route back to Conron. However, the team decided to keep this new route to Earth a secret. Lorano hid the coordinates in Crista's control collar and created a complicated activation sequence.

Victor said, "Yes. I have to hit myself in the following combination - right cheek, left cheek, forehead, top of head, nose, chin, and repeat."

Victor looked at Crista to see if she was ready. He then slapped himself on his right cheek. Crista reacted to the pain with a shout and covered her cheek with her hand. A few seconds later when the pain from the slap had dulled, she checked the navigation computer. There were a new set of coordinates loaded into computer.

Making a jump into hyperspace is relatively easy. One simply types in the coordinates of the place in space to which they want to travel and engages the drive. The navigation system then draws a straight line from the beginning point to the ending point.

Provided the navigation system knows exactly where the beginning point is, it can draw a reasonably straight line to the destination. If the actual location of the ship begins to vary in respect to the recorded location, the navigation system begins to draw lines that no longer lead to the destination. After two or three of these jumps, the ship can become lost as it no longer has a reference location to tether it to real space.

The secret coordinates were going to do just that. The navigational system will believe that the coordinates that Crista locked into the transponder is where the ship is. However, the ship will actually jump to the coordinates that the collar just loaded into the system. If they are in the wrong starting location, slapped the wrong body part, or Lorano made a mistake then they will quickly become lost in space.

Victor said, "Do it."

Crista pressed the hyperspace button and then disengaged the transponder. That was another feature Lorano had added to the mini-freighter. It wouldn't be good if their signal was detected while they were on the secret route.

The first few jumps were simply around the outskirts of the Conron system to the Conron – Uselon hyperspace corridor. They could have jumped there directly, but then they would have been observed leaving Conron headed to Uselon instead of Earth.

As soon as they exited from their first jump, Crista performed a passive scan of the immediate area. She shut it off after 2 minutes because there was a chance that they could be detected if someone was actively scanning the precise area where they were located. The chances of detection were miniscule, but they didn't want to stay any longer than absolutely necessary.

She announced, "Well, we are still in the Conron system and are exactly where we're supposed to be."

She quickly entered the next set of coordinates and locked them into the transponder. Victor slapped his left cheek to obtain the next set of secret numbers. Victor waited a moment for Crista to rub her cheek. He then said, “Go” and Crista pushed the hyperspace button.

They repeated this process 9 more times over the course of the next 10 days in ship time (or 19 days in real time). They were on the far outskirts of the Waylon system and aligned with the entryway to the unrecorded Waylon – Earth hyperspace corridor. Lorano had discovered this corridor months earlier using the gravity charting missile technique.

Crista ran a passive scan and announced, “That’s odd; the *Sunflower* is here.”

Victor said, “Here. Are you sure it is here? Are you sure we are here?” Victor’s voice was a little panicked. He took several breaths to calm down.

Crista said, “If the *Sunflower* is here, then the Humans are here.”

Victor replied, “True, but how does that help us?”

Crista said, “Maybe we could take some of the Humans back and they could help us capture the new ones.”

Victor replied, “Or, they would just run off when we land and we would have to replace them in addition to the 45 we already have to get.”

Crista said, “We could fly over there and ask, I suppose.”

Victor did a quick calculation and said, “It would take 2 days to travel there at .04 light. We can’t micro jump because it would mess up the sequence in the navigational computer.”

“Yes, and Lorano isn’t here to reprogram it.” Crista continued, “How about if we send them a message and see if they can jump over here.”

Victor agreed and said, “Good idea. A message can get there in just under 2 hours. We need to send something that doesn’t identify us, but gives them a reason to come here. It should be secretive and coded.”

Crista smiled and said, “I know exactly what to send.” She took a moment to collect herself and said, “Computer, send the following message to the *Sunflower* – Come here and bring the Humans.”