

# The Earth Gambit

## Book 7 of the Alliance Conflict

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## Chapter 5

Jim Donovan looked out of the window of the space station Solar Sun and stared at the planet below. Solaria was beautiful from this vantage point. It was a little farther away from the sun than Earth; making the average temperature five degrees cooler than Earth. The difference was visible from space. The planet looked much whiter, especially at the poles and mountain ranges.

Jim reluctantly turned away from the view and said, “Gentlemen...”

He immediately realized that he should have said ‘GBAGs’ instead of ‘gentlemen’. He considered starting over. However, he didn’t want to compound the faux pas with an awkward phrase like gentlemen beings or even gentlemen and lady beings.

(Gentle Beings of All Genders)

Jim continued, “And ladies, Space Force’s deuterium levels are reaching a critical point. We cannot pursue this war any further without a fresh supply. Therefore, I have ordered our ships to maintain their current positions. They are only allowed to travel via hyperspace if there is an emergency.”

“Even Admiral Solear?” Arean asked.

“Especially Admiral Solear,” Jim replied.

“Are you going to have him pull back to Solaria,” Arean asked.

“No,” Jim responded. “Not immediately anyway. Besides, moving the fleet would just further drain our resources.”

Jim continued, “Plus, the Hiriculans do not seem to be pressing their advantage. The situation is Opron has not changed over the last four months. Our fleet stays on the south side of Opron and the Hiriculans stay on the north side. Neither side can gain an advantage.”

He noticed several confused looks, so he continued, “We were constantly attacking them. On average, every 15 minutes a Space Force ship popped out of hyperspace and attacked the Hiriculan ship nearest to it. The ship then jumped away before the enemy could respond. We did this for three straight months. It appears to have had the desired effect.”

He saw several more confused looks and realized that some of the people in the room probably didn’t know what the desired effect was. He said, “The effect of the constant attacks was that Supreme Admiral Fruid’la has become very timid and has stopped his advance.”

Jim paused for a breath and continued, “Originally, he was sending single ships, and in some cases full sub fleets throughout the system. Once he even sent ships to both Altian and Advranki Prime. Each time we repelled the advance and forced him back to his original position.”

“And now?” Victor asked.

Jim responded, “Now they are scared to leave the safety of their protective formations. Now they are just sitting on the north end of Conron and guarding the Conron – Opron hyperspace lane. They appear to be waiting for us to attack in force, or retreat, or something.”

Victor asked, “Getting back to the issue at upper appendage, what are we supposed to do? Solaria has a mining platform capable of collecting deuterium, but I doubt the government would loan it to you. Besides, neither Earth nor Solaria possesses the processing equipment necessary to refine it in the necessary quantities.”

Jim: “Lorano and Carank are working on a combination collector / refiner station that we can build with Earth’s technology. But we are still a year away at least. We need a fresh supply of deuterium now.”

Jim had intended for everyone to focus on the second sentence. Instead they focused on the first. All the heads in the room swiveled to either Carank or Lorano. Fortunately, Lorano was sitting next to Carank, so they split their gaze between the two beings.

Lorano felt the need to add, “We are working on it and have the design nearly completed. However, it will be a year before Earth is ready to mine and process deuterium.”

Everyone nodded in silent agreement. Jim was a little miffed that Lorano had basically just repeated what he had just said. However, everyone seemed to accept it when Lorano said it. Jim repeated a little more forcibly, “We need a fresh supply of deuterium now. If we do not get it soon, we will not be able to continue the war!”

Commander Russ Brand added, “We have purchased as much as we can on the commercial market. Both Altian and Advranki have slightly increased their output, but not nearly enough to support our fleet’s demand.”

Jim said, “We need to steal a shipment and do it in such a way that it cannot be traced to Space Force or Earth or even Solaria.”

Victor said, “I believe that Crista and I can steal it. We will need help though. I would like permission to recruit Ella Birdsong and Jack Dogbarks for the mission.”

“Approved,” Jim replied.

Victor nodded in understanding and added, “We need specialized tanks to haul it. This means that we will have to deliver it directly to Earth. Is that a problem?”

“Yes,” Jim said. “Our key advantage is that the enemy does not know the route to Earth. We will have to take precautions to ensure that the coordinates are not accidentally leaked.”

“Or stolen,” Lorano protested.

“Who is going to steal them?” Jim asked.

“Jack Dogbarks,” Lorano replied. “He and I have had several long talks. Jack hates the Alliance for firing him from his communications job and abandoning him on Earth. He cares only about himself. He will betray us the first chance that he gets.”

Jim nodded in disagreement and responded, “That may have been true at one time, but I do not believe it is true today. During the liberation of Solaria, he gave a marine step-by-step directions to locate a wing of enemy fighters. This was a key target and was critical to the operation’s success. The liberation may have failed without Jack’s help.”

“Still...” Lorano started.

Jim interrupted, “I firmly believe that Jack will do exactly what we want him to do.”

Lorano wanted to protest again, but Jim held up his hand; indicating that the conversation was over and the issue was decided. Lorano refused to take no for an answer and argued, “Again, I do not trust Jack. Victor, you should choose someone else for this mission.”

Jim was getting a little angry. He said, “Lorano, your warning has been duly noted. You know that I value your opinion, but in this case, I am overruling you. Jack may have been willing to betray the Alliance, but I refuse to believe that he would be willing to betray his own race. Jack is going on the mission.”

Lorano started crying. He stood up out of his chair with the intention of storming off to his quarters. Then he remembered that Clowy and the baby were there. He decided that he would rather listen to the rest of the briefing. He pretended to adjust his clothing and sat back down.

He was about to continue their conversation when Arean and Commander Roberts approached and said, “Admiral, I trust you saw my proposal?”

Jim nodded and responded, “Yes. Do you really think that the Altians forged the video?”

“I believe so. It is certainly worth investigating,” Arean said. He showed the video to both Jim and Lorano and pointed out where he thought the various flaws were.

Lorano said, “I do not see anything. However, I find the concept that the Altian Navy fabricated the video of them destroying their warships by flying them into the sun fascinating. I sincerely doubt the Altian Navy is that duplicitous, but one never knows I suppose.”

Arean said, “I would like you and Clowy to accompany me to Altian. Your input would be invaluable.”

Lorano promised to discuss it with Clowy and give him in an answer in the next few hours. It would be nice to return home. However, since they were still considered interstellar terrorists, all they would be able to do is look at their home planets from the viewscreen.

Arean turned to Jima and said, “Admiral, I have another request. If the ships really are there, I will need crew members; especially pilots. Can you station a thousand pilots in Solaria and a couple of thousand crew members?”

Jim froze. It was one thing to send a single ship to search for a missing fleet. Heck, they had done that before when they sent the *Sunflower* to find Solear’s fleet. It was quite another to station 1,000 pilots and roughly 2,000 maintenance workers, engineers, and officers in Solaria on the off-chance this fleet that was real.

Further, they only had a few transports available. Moving that many troops would be a logistical nightmare. No, too strong, a logistical bad dream. No, not that either. A logistical ... Well, he concluded, logistical nightmare probably was the correct term.

“I will see what I can do,” Jim responded. He wanted to say something more but decided there was nothing else to add. Arean certainly knew the fleet’s logistical handicaps; restating them for his benefit would serve no purpose.

When the conversation ended and Arean exited, Jim returned to the window and resumed staring out of it. Lorano approached, stood next to Jim, and stared out the window too. The view was gorgeous. He wondered why, or perhaps when, Altians stopped looking out of windows. He made a mental note to do it more often.

After a few long moments Lorano said, “I still disagree with your decision. You cannot allow Jack Dogbarks to go to Earth. I honestly believe that he will betray us.”

Jim turned slightly away from the view and partially faced Lorano. He said, “Do you remember our 49<sup>th</sup> game of chess?”

“Of course I do,” Lorano retorted. “You jumped my rook with your queen. I responded by jumping your queen with my queen, giving me a tremendous advantage. Then on your next move you slid your rook to the back row and placed my king in checkmate.”

“Yes,” Jim replied simply.

Lorano added, “I remember thinking at the time that you had misplayed; that you did not see that my rook was guarded by my queen. I could not believe that you sacrificed your queen just to get my pieces out of position.”

Lorano thought a moment and continued, “I remember you saying at the time that you sacrificed the queen to turn the game to your advantage. You said the key was to offer something so tantalizing that your opponent would put logic aside and jump at the chance to strike with what they think will be a decisive blow.”

Jim smiled and said, “It was a calculated gambit. I knew that if I wanted to win the game, I had to take a huge risk.”

Lorano thought for a moment and said, “So this is your gambit? You are willing to risk the location of Earth for a shipment of deuterium?”

“Yes,” Jim responded again. He realized that Lorano needed more of answer and continued, “If we run out of deuterium, we lose the war. So yes, I am willing to take the minimal risk of losing the war because the location of Earth is discovered against the certainty of losing the war due to a lack of resources.”

Jim added, “Besides, the new ion cannons are up and running. Earth should be able to repel any attack the Hirculans can throw at us.”

Lorano left the conversation feeling somewhat unsettled. True, his pride had been wounded somewhat by having his suggestion rebuffed. However, that wasn’t the only thing. He

had the feeling that Jim was lying during the meeting. No, not lying, he corrected himself. Perhaps not forthright was a better term. That was a lousy term too. Hiding something then.

So, if he was indeed hiding something, then what was he hiding? Lorano went to a station workbench. He logged in with a fake account and hacked Space Force's computer system. It wasn't particularly difficult since he had designed much of the computer system.

He looked at various troop deployments and construction schedules. Nothing seemed amiss. Everyone seemed to be where they were supposed to be and doing what they were supposed to be doing. He was just about to log off when he had a sudden inspiration. He queried the amounts of raw materials the navy had on hand.

He scanned down past dacite, deodorant, and detonators and finally found what he was searching for. He noted that the reserve quantity of deuterium was blank. Not zero, nor a low number, but blank. Someone had intentionally deleted it.

That seemed strange. Nothing else in inventory seemed to have been adjusted or zeroed out. He could see exactly how many packets of dextrose were in inventory. Jim had already announced that Space Force was running low on deuterium, so one would logically think that the quantity would be closely monitored and updated frequently; not deleted.

There was no logical reason to do so. Unless Jim was lying. No. That didn't make sense either. Jim had no reason to lie about the quantity. Still, something seemed wrong.

Lorano mentally replayed their brief conversation. It had been recorded on his communication pad, so he could have literally replayed it instead of doing it mentally. That somehow defeated the point though, so he continued to replay it in his mind. Jim had mentioned chess, gambit, deuterium, war, and ion cannons.

Lorano displayed the schematic of the ion cannons. Like most things designed by Humans, they were ugly. The designer had placed form over function and the result was a contraption that was overpowered, over shielded, and had a completely underwhelming cosmetic appearance.

Anyway, there were multiple shield generators on one end of the ion cannons and none on the rest. The thing could deflect a devastating attack from the front; but it would easily be destroyed by an attack from the side or rear.

Plus, the cannons couldn't rotate. If a ship was able to fly past them then they would be between the Earth and the cannons. They could then easily shoot the cannons from the rear or threaten Earth without consequence. Overall, the design was completely useless.

He sighed mightily. Clowy didn't notice so he sighed even louder. She still didn't notice so he abandoned sighing and uploaded the cannon's schematic into the battle computer. This was the same computer that he had used to create the fighter video game what seemed a lifetime ago. He created a standard Hirculan fleet and simulated an attack against Earth. The Hirculans conquered the planet. They suffered massive losses, but they won.

He reran the simulation multiple times, using different parameters such as enemy ship makeup, attack pattern, time of day, location of the Earth relative to the hyperspace lane exit, etcetera. Each time the result was largely the same; Earth lost. They put up a good fight; but ultimately, they lost.

The problem was the cannons. They did massive damage to the enemy fleet, but they were spread too far apart and they couldn't change position. If the enemy attacked in single, coordinated direction, only a few cannons could fire.

Then, when the cannons were recharging, the remaining fleet could fly past them and destroy them from the rear. If the Hiriculans were willing to accept atrocious losses, they could conquer Earth.

He reviewed the schematic of the ion cannons more carefully. Perhaps he had missed something in his initial review. Something caught his eye and he focused on it for a moment.

“Oh,” he said. He made an adjustment and said, “Computer, rerun simulation.”

“Oh,” he repeated after the simulation ended. He deleted the cannons from the gaming computer and logged off.