

BRYAN DAVIS

**ASTRAL
ALLIANCE**

— BOOK THREE —

AT THE SPEED OF MIND



At the Speed of Mind
Volume 3 in the Astral Alliance series

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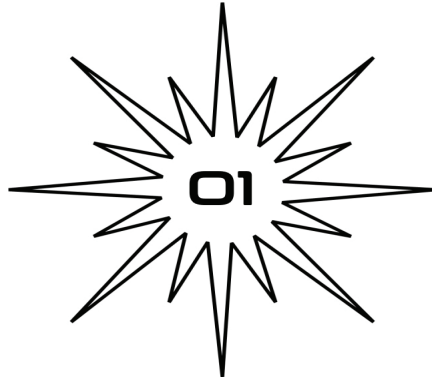
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Part

01

Delta Zero



Light flashed throughout our ship, the Nebula Nine. Sharp tingles buzzed through my body followed by numbness. Everything around me blurred in the radiance, and nothing moved, as if time itself had halted. Even Perdantus, perched on my shoulder, stayed perfectly motionless, not a feather out of place.

During those plodding seconds, a rush of thoughts flooded my mind. We had expected some kind of time shift when traveling from the Gamma Five Zeta station to its counterpart orbiting Delta Zero, so no surprise there. We also knew to be ready to zoom out of the arrival docking bay as soon as possible, not knowing who had control of the station, perhaps an enemy.

Then our mission came back to the forefront—learn where Omen had established glowsap mines on the jungle planet, forcing children to suffer through the dangerous slave labor. We had to set them free.

And maybe, just maybe, I could find my father. The dragon's eye ruby in my locket glowed, a sign that he was still alive, but I didn't know much else. After the Gamma Five station's transmission ray disintegrated him when he sacrificed himself to save me, I could only guess that it sent him to the Delta station, but, since he wasn't aboard a ship, I had no idea if the arrival process restored him.

After what seemed like a full minute but was probably only a few seconds, the light blinked off. The scene around us clarified. Our ship sat in a dimly lit docking bay, much like the bay we had left at Gamma Five. The reintegration gun mounted on the wall still pointed at the ship, no longer active since it had finished restoring us.

Perdantus fluffed his feathers and spoke in his chirping language. "That was a rather bizarre experience that I do not wish to repeat."

"I know exactly what you mean," I replied in Alpha One, my native language. I reached to my shoulder and ran a finger along his chest. "Let's hope it's all over."

Jillian, still seated in the copilot's chair directly to my left, looked out the front viewing window. Since she was my father's twin sister, I could always see his face in hers—the same high cheekbones and narrow chin that sketched that pensive expression, though her shoulder length auburn locks, pulled back into a ponytail, didn't match his short graying hair at all. "Far from over. The bay doors are closed. No zooming out of here until we can open them."

"How is that possible?" I asked. "Don't the doors have to be open for transport?"

"Maybe it closed while we were sitting here getting our bearings. That's the normal arrival routine. The doors close, and air fills the bay. And we should switch to speaking Humaniversal. Nobody in the Delta system speaks Alpha One."

"Good point," I said in Humaniversal. "Emerson, any sign of life in this Zeta station?"

"Negative." Emerson, the ship's computer, always switched to whichever language we were speaking. "I am picking up encrypted transmissions as well as the warmth of machinery, but there are no life forms within my sensor range."

From the weapons seat behind me, Zoë spoke up. "The lasers are ready to fire if you see any hostiles. Maybe there aren't any carbon life forms, but we've seen robotic shooters before."

I swiveled in my chair to look at the rear of the ship's bridge. "Does anyone have a reading on breathable air?"

Crystal, sitting at the navigator's station across from Zoë, stared at her console screen, twirling her blonde locks with a finger, her pale face a stark contrast to Zoë's much darker skin. "Air is spewing in from somewhere, and it's pretty good stuff. Looks like nineteen percent oxygen. Not bad at all. In about twenty seconds, the pressure will be high enough to keep a human's skull from imploding."

"Then I can go out and look for a manual way to open the bay doors."

"No, Mophead," Jillian said. "That's a job for someone who hasn't had a near-death experience lately, and I think I'm the only one on board who qualifies."

Oliver, sitting at the physician's console, raised a hand. "I haven't nearly died lately." He grinned, his cheeks no longer pale and sunken like when I first met him at the iron works factory, and his dark brown hair neatly trimmed, unlike the rat's nest he wore as a slave.

"I need you and your healing powers to stay on board in case I get my hide perforated by some kind of ..." Jillian looked at Zoë. "What did you call it?"

"Robotic shooter," Zoë said.

"Right. A robotic shooter."

I touched one of my bracelets. "But it'd be much easier and safer for me. With just a flex of my muscles, I could charge my legs and jump to the ship before the doors open enough to suck the air out. And a spark of electricity from my hands might short out the mechanism and make the doors open. Or, even better, I could use one of my Starborn powers to move the latch with my mind. I probably couldn't do it from inside the ship, but maybe I wouldn't have to step off the ramp. Almost zero danger."

"Yeah, yeah," Jillian said in a mocking tone. "I'm the super-powerful Megan Willis who should do all the dangerous stuff because

I'm Starborn, and everyone should sit back and watch because they're not needed when I'm around." She blew through flapping lips. "Well, honey, I'm your aunt, and since my brother ... your father ... is missing, I'm in charge of your safety. You need to avoid swimming with sharks for a change and sit this one out."

I gazed at her sincere expression. She truly was worried about me. Although I was still the best option for the job, I could stand down. It probably wasn't all that dangerous for her to do it.

Crystal tapped on her screen. "The air's perfect now, and whatever was spewing it has stopped."

"Good." Jillian pressed the button to open the front ramp and rose from her chair. As the ramp lowered, she checked her belt. "I've got a spool line, a grappling hook, a knife, and a laser blaster. I think I'm set."

"Except for a pressurized suit," I said. "The moment you open the bay doors, the vacuum will suck all the air out."

"I knew that." Jillian winked. "Just checking to see if you're on your toes."

"Sure, Aunt Jillian. Thanks for the alertness check."

She walked to a cabinet at the side wall and withdrew a suit and air tank. As she put them on over her clothes, she looked at the ceiling. "Emerson, I'm sure you've done long and short range scans by now. Give us all the data you've got."

"As expected," Emerson said, "this Zeta station is in orbit around a planet that has a considerable amount of jungle-like vegetation growing on its surface in its equatorial regions. Those regions span much farther north and south than on Alpha One. Rivers and mountains abound, providing literally thousands of suitable places for bramble bee mines."

Remembering my flight over those dense jungles a short time ago, I pressed my lips together. "That's not good. We'll have too many places to search."

"As I said earlier," Emerson continued, "I detected transmissions. Although they are encrypted, I can pinpoint their sources, which should provide places to begin your search."

"How many sources do you detect?"

"At the moment, seven."

I sighed. "Could be worse, I guess. Better than thousands."

Jillian, now wearing a helmet, spoke into the suit's microphone, making her voice come through the ceiling speakers. "I'm ready."

I pointed out the open front ramp. "If this station's design is the same as the one at Gamma Five, you should find the handle on the left side of the left door panel."

"Gotcha." Jillian plodded down the hatch's ramp. "I'm going to latch my hook onto the ship's front ring, so if something goes wrong and you have to scoot, look for me dangling from there."

"Just don't let the vacuum jerk you loose."

Jillian turned left and walked out of sight. "Trust me, honey. I don't want to join Raven in the frigid rigid club. I'll be clinging to the spool line like a python to a pig."

"Well, nothing's going to go wrong. When the pressure stabilizes out there, just detach your line from the ring and walk up the ramp to the airlock chamber. Haven't you done a spacewalk before?"

"Enough times to know that something always goes wrong."

"Don't be such a pusillanimous pessimist."

Jillian huffed. "Oh. Good one. And I say to you, don't be such a supercilious sophist. You're not the only one who's opened a dictionary around here."

As I reached for the console, I sang, "I love you, Aunt Jillian. I'm closing the airlock barrier now." I pressed the button. The interior panel lowered from the ceiling. The moment Jillian opened the bay doors, we would need the airlock to protect us from the vacuum of space. I turned the camera to put her on the front viewing screen. Jillian reached her silvery gloved hands toward a gray horizontal latch handle at her eye level. "We're watching your progress."

"Here goes." Jillian set her feet and grabbed the latch. A loud click reverberated, and a light flashed, blinding us for a moment. When it

cleared, Jillian was no longer on the screen. She had probably already rushed toward the ramp.

The door panels began sliding apart. As air rushed out through the growing gap, I engaged the engine. "Aunt Jillian, let me know as soon as you're on the ramp. I'll pull out at impulse speed when the opening's wide enough." I looked at Crystal. "Work with Emerson to plot a course to the closest transmission source."

"On it." Crystal studied her screen, her eyes narrowing. "Blazes! We're up to nine sources now. But I got a lock on the closest one. Looks like it won't take long to get there."

"Keep me posted." With the doors almost fully open, the Nebula Nine would have no trouble passing through the gap. Since Jillian was still out of the camera's view, I looked at the ceiling speakers. "Jillian, are you on the ramp?"

Only light static replied.

An icy chill ran along my spine. "Aunt Jillian? Are you there?"

Again the speakers emitted only static.

"Emerson! Check for life forms outside the ship and on the ramp."

"There are none," Emerson said.

I shot to my feet, making Perdantus flutter down to my console. "What? Where did she go?"

"My sensors indicate that she disappeared thirty-two seconds ago."

"Disappeared? How could that happen?"

"I will analyze the video for possibilities, but I need to interrupt the process to tell you that we are being hailed on an unsecured frequency. Shall I allow a connection?"

The cold chill spread across the rest of my body. I looked at my shipmates. Everyone stared at me wide-eyed, Crystal with her mouth hanging open. They were scared. So was I. But I had to stay strong. "Yes," I said firmly. "Patch it through."

When a click sounded from the speakers, I cleared my throat. "This is Captain Megan Willis of the Alliance ship Nebula Nine. Who is calling?"

The speakers emitted a calm male voice. "Well, Megan, it's good to finally talk with you. My name is Omen, and I have heard many interesting tales about you. The fame of your escapades has risen to mythic proportions."

I crossed my arms in front. "State your business, Omen."

"Very well. It seems that I will have to defer pleasantries until another time. As you know by now, you are missing a crew member."

My cheeks warmed. "You took Jillian?"

"I did. Since I have control of the Zeta technology, it wasn't a difficult task. But have no fear. She is safe ... for now."

I breathed a silent sigh of relief. "What do you want?"

"Simple. I want you to leave."

"Why? Are we bothering you?"

"Not yet, but I know you plan to disrupt my business."

"What makes you think that?"

Omen shifted to a sarcastic tone. "Oh, maybe it's the fact that you killed Thorne and ruined his business. You also killed Admiral Fairbanks and burned his ship. And to top it all off, you murdered Camille and Raven and buried their training camp. That's a lot of destruction for a girl your age."

I smirked. "I guess news travels fast."

"It does when I have spies who are loyal to me. Money loosens many lips. And I have plenty of money."

"Money earned from the labors of slave children."

"Spare me the morality drama, Megan. I simply don't care who gets hurt, even children. They're just beasts of burden to me."

My rage burned. Curses stormed through my mind, but I kept them in check. "If I leave, how do I get Jillian back?"

"I will send her to another bay that has a ship in port, and from there, I will transport her to the Gamma Five Zeta station. Once you are all gone, I will lock down this Zeta to keep you from returning."

I ached to ask if he knew where my father was, but it would be better to stay quiet in case he was on the planet and Omen didn't know about it. "Prove to me that Jillian is still alive."

"I will send a live video stream. Prepare to display it and send me a live feed of your bridge. That's the only way I'll let you see Jillian."

When I reached for the control that would send the bridge camera's feed to him, I paused. Why was he so insistent about seeing our bridge? Maybe if I left the outgoing video feed off to get his reaction, I could figure it out.

I switched the front screen to accept the incoming feed. A man appeared—dark hair, three-day beard growth, piercing eyes, maybe thirty years old. In any other context, I would have considered him handsome, but now he looked like a devil.

He smiled. "Ah, there you are, exactly as I pictured you—strong, self-assured to the point of cockiness, and—"

"Cut the crap!" Crystal shouted. "Show us Jillian!"

Omen chuckled. "Very well."

As the camera view shifted to one side, I squinted at the scene. How could Omen have reacted to seeing me? I didn't send our camera feed through the connection. Did he somehow have a way to get the feed without me allowing it?

The incoming feed's camera stopped panning, putting Jillian in the center. Still wearing the pressure suit, she carried the helmet under her arm, her expression looking as angry as a hundred hornets. She glared at Omen. "So, what do you want me to say, you ghastly ghoul?"

"You have said enough." The camera shifted back to Omen. "As you might imagine, Jillian would attack me if she could, but I have three armed guards watching her every move. She is helpless."

Jillian called from offscreen, "Megan, don't leave. You need to stop this madman, no matter what happens to me."

Omen nodded toward someone. "Silence her, but not permanently. I still need her." A sizzling noise buzzed through the speaker.

I winced. Poor Jillian! How could I leave knowing she was suffering like that? And how could I trust Omen to keep his word to send her back to Gamma Five? If I were to go and if he were to shut the Zeta station down, I wouldn't be able to return to check on her.

Omen furrowed his brow. "You're plotting something, Megan. I can see it in your eyes. Whatever your plan is, it won't work. I have already initiated the countdown to send your ship back to Gamma Five. Obviously, you can depart from the bay if you choose, but then I will kill Jillian myself the next moment. If your ship stays where it is, I will send it to Gamma Five and then proceed to also send Jillian back to you. You have two minutes to decide."

"Two minutes." I closed the transmission channel and looked again at my shipmates. "Thoughts? Hit me fast and hard. No holding back."

"We should leave," Crystal said, "and figure out how to come back the normal way. Emerson already pinpointed where we are in space."

"How long will that take in a wormhole?" I asked.

"Only Emerson could calculate that."

I looked at the ceiling. "Emerson?"

"It depends on a multitude of unknown factors, but I would say approximately eight weeks."

"Eight weeks! By then, the time shift could be enormous again."

"That is one of the unknown factors. After eight weeks, many years could pass by here, and I don't know where the time shift begins in the space continuum."

"So, basically, it'll be forever till we can return."

Oliver raised a hand. "We have five one-person space gliders on the ship. Plenty for the four of us."

"Good idea. Perdantus, you're with me." When he flew to my shoulder, I hurried to the cabinet and grabbed a pressurized suit, a laser blaster, a sheathed knife, and a belt for the blaster and knife. "Everyone get a suit and a weapon, then on my six."

"I don't have a suit," Perdantus said. "Only my feathers."

"That's your birthday suit. The suit you were born in. Good enough for me." As I jogged toward the ladder with the others trailing, I called out, "Emerson, how much time do we have left?"

"One minute, five seconds."

"Put a note in your permanent storage to leave behind for Lyric. Tell her what's happening here."

"Acknowledged."

"Can you transfer yourself to my glider?" I asked. "I want to take you with me."

"Affirmative, but the computer on that vessel is not as equipped as the one on board the Nebula Nine. My functionality will be more limited."

"Better to have part of you than none of you." I grabbed both sides of the ladder and slid down to the lowest level, forcing Perdantus to flutter alongside.

When my feet hit the floor, he flew ahead. "Will I have to ride in your helmet again?" he asked.

I jogged toward the glider bay. "No. The suits are a precaution. You can perch on my leg if you're more comfortable that way."

"Definitely."

When we arrived, we hurriedly put our suits on with the weapons attached to our external belts, though we left our helmets off. We climbed into the gliders, me in the command craft with Perdantus on my knee, my helmet at my side. The moment I closed the glass shield over me, I pressed the button that opened the glider bay door. "Everyone follow me."

I flew the glider from the room, then out of the arrival bay. I pivoted the glider and looked back at the Zeta station. Once the other gliders had joined mine in a row, I toggled the communications port to speak through the channel to Omen. "We decided to stay put where we are. Send the Nebula Nine back to Gamma Five."

Omen's voice came through my glider's console. "Wise choice."

In the Zeta station's arrival bay, light shot from a disintegration gun and bathed the Nebula Nine in glimmering light. Within seconds, she was gone, and the light faded.

I switched the comm link to a group channel. "Can everyone hear me?"

"Loud and clear," Oliver said.

"Yup," Crystal added.

Zoë chimed in. "Wall to wall, Sister."

"Crystal," I said, "Do you happen to remember the coordinates of the closest source?"

"I fed them to Emerson. I think he's got you covered."

"Emerson? Are you aboard?"

His voice emanated from the console speaker. "I am here, but I feel like I've lost most of my mind. Still, I do have all nine sets of coordinates. I am putting them in this glider's navigation system now."

A vector map appeared on my screen. "Got it. Everyone follow me."

I turned my glider in the direction of the planet and pushed the throttle. We zoomed single-file toward an area of green vegetation near the equator.

"We will arrive in two minutes, seven seconds," Emerson said. "Because of the inferior abilities of this craft, I don't have a way to scan the surface for detection devices. We could be discovered."

"We'll have to chance it." I glanced at Perdantus, perched on my knee, his claws embedded in the material. "Any thoughts, my friend?"

He fluttered to my shoulder and gazed behind us. "I am concerned about Jillian. In our hurry, you were not able to ask Crystal if Omen was telling the truth. In fact, you have not checked to see if you have the lie-detecting ability yourself. In theory, you should have all of the Starborn powers."

"Good point. I should've done that." I spoke toward the console's microphone. "Crystal, did you get a read on Omen? Was he telling the truth?"

"Funny you should ask. I couldn't read him at all. I was wondering if my power's on the fritz."

"Wait a second." I pulled the thin chain around my neck and set the attached locket on my palm. Unable to detect any glow, I pressed my thumb on the locket's tiny back panel. When it popped open, the ruby's light told me again that my father was still alive, but its glow was usually more vibrant than this, especially when I used my Starborn powers. Maybe they weren't working here for some reason. "Perdantus, you warned me about this possibility. I don't think I have any powers. How did you know?"

"It was merely a guess. Since Omen enslaved children who might be Starborn, he had to realize that their gifts could be his undoing. I wonder if he has some way to neutralize their powers."

"Like Raven did. She was able to radiate negative energy."

"Yes, but Omen seems to be able to do it on a larger scale. From a distance, so it seems."

"Maybe a device on the planet's surface broadcasts a disabling signal, or maybe he has a disabling device on the Zeta. Or both."

"Before you ask," Emerson said, "I am unable to scan for such a signal. The scanner on this craft has a range that spans only the usual Alliance frequencies."

"Understood, Emerson. Thank you." Now that we were closing in on the surface, I studied the treetops—green and dense with hardly any gaps in the foliage. "When I was talking to Omen, did you pick up the location where his signal was coming from?"

"Affirmative. There was an odd delay, as if the signal had been relayed from somewhere else. In any case, the source point is not the same as our current destination, but it is relatively close. This glider could arrive there in about twenty minutes."

"Maybe it's better to check out the one we're heading to first. Wherever Omen is, he's likely to have more defenses. Better to keep away from danger for the time being."

“Acknowledged.”

Now gliding above the treetops, I spotted a break in the canopy and dove through it. As I descended toward the forest floor, the thrusters underneath the craft blew leafy debris all around until I settled. Soon, the other three gliders joined mine, barely fitting in the gap among the tree trunks.

“Secure your gliders,” I called as I recoded my own glider’s security on the console. “New codes, just to be safe. You can tell each other your codes, but no one else. And put your earbuds in.”

Knowing from my previous visit that the air quality here was good, I opened my glass shield. Perdantus flew out and perched on the glider’s front edge. “The odors are interesting. A blend of holly berries and ...” He took a long sniff, then sneezed. “Glowsap. It almost always makes me sneeze, as do quite a number of other smells.”

“Glowsap?” I climbed out of the glider and began taking my suit off, switching the weapons belt to my uniform. “Can you track it?”

“Not yet. I’ll have to fly around to see where the odor is most concentrated.” He flew upward and began flitting from branch to branch.

Oliver, Crystal, and Zoë joined me, all wearing only their normal Alliance uniforms with their blasters on their belts. “I saw zoa trees like we had on Delta Ninety-eight,” Oliver said. “If they run the mine like we did, they’ll also need a water source.”

Crystal crossed her arms in front. “I don’t think any stream around here will have the kind of clay we used. This place is way more tropical. They might make the containers somewhere else and transport them here.”

I think I located the source of the glowsap aroma,” Perdantus called from a high limb. “Follow me.”

“Wait,” I said, raising a hand. “Comm check. Oliver?”

He touched his ear. “Yep. I hear you.”

“Zoë?”

“Coming through.”

“Crystal.”

“Not yet.” Crystal tapped her ear bud. “Try again.”

“Crystal?”

“There you are. Your voice is a little frosty, though.”

“Frosty?”

She nodded. “Yeah. Frosty.”

“Whatever.” I waved at Perdantus. “Lead the way.”

He flitted to another limb. “This direction.”

I laid my suit in my glider, closed the glass dome, and followed, the others close behind. The dense forest forced us to dodge trees, duck under hanging vines, and step over protruding roots, all the while listening for Perdantus’s chirps of “Over here” and “Now turn left” and “Now turn right.”

After a few minutes, we arrived at a bigger clearing next to an arched cave entrance. A low buzzing noise emanated from deep within, as if the cave were whispering.

Crystal sidled close and spoke quietly. “Bramble bees.”