

The Solarian Celebration

Book 3 of the Alliance Conflict

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Chapter 9

Disaster!

Absolute disaster!

Absolute, unmitigated disaster!

Well, there was a mitigation, but Clowy really didn't like it.

"It's okay," Ella said as calmly as possible. "We'll just go wig shopping."

Clowy was crying unreservedly. Tears were streaming from her large gray eyes in buckets and the rain shower showed little signs of letting up. This was the latest, and by far the worst, insult in what had turned out to a rather poor start to the trio's vacation in Solar City.

The moment they exited hyperspace in the Solaria system, Jack defrosted the two Alliance officers in the stasis tubes. The six beings then spent the remaining few hours of the flight through the solar system retelling stories about their particular role in the two battles of Influenla.

The mini-freighter *Jackal* landed on Solaria without incident. Despite the increase in traffic, Jack's usual berth was waiting for him. So too was a crew to unload his cargo and take it directly to the office building. Several of the items on the ship were overdue.

Lexxi and Clowy used their celebrity status to breeze through customs and immigration. Jack, Ella, and the other two Solarians were inspected a little more closely, but nowhere near the thoroughness of a normal arrival. As a result, both Jack and Ella were able to sneak hundreds of hours of pirated human videos through the security check.

The crew said their goodbyes and split into three groups. Robert and Anna, the two military officers, went to the Solarian government building for debriefing. Ella, Clowy, and Lexxi headed to a hotel beside the spaceport.

Jack remained with the mini-freighter and watched it being unloaded. This was his third and final load from the Spindle Station in Influenla and his contract with the Hiriculan government was completed. He didn't have any immediate plans, but he figured that the Hiriculan Ambassador Bline would be arriving soon for the celebration. With luck, the ambassador would pay handsomely for his new information.

Ella offered to have both Lexxi and Clowy stay at her family's home. However, it was on the far eastern outskirts of Solar City – far away from the shopping malls, entertainment complexes, and vibrant night life located nearer the spaceport. Further, the spaceport was only two hovertram stops from central tram station, and more importantly Settlers' Monument. The monument was the focal point for the up-coming celebration.

Settlers' Monument was a tribute to the Solarians' exodus from their home world just before it was blasted by severe radiation. It shows a picture of the transport ship they used during the evacuation and has a star chart that indicates the approximate location of Old Solaria*.

(*The name of the home-world was lost, so the government ceremoniously named it Old Solaria.)

In preparation for the celebration, the Solarian government constructed a new monument beside the old one. It featured full-sized statues of the 3 Advranki and 2 Altians responsible for finding Old Solaria. It also has a large monitor that cycles through the scans of the planet that the *Buzzkill* took during its visit to the system.

The threesome eschewed Ella's house and checked into the Spaceport Hotel and Resort. The hotel was perfectly located in the heart of the entertainment district and only a few paces from the spaceport and hovertram station.

Clowy and Lexxi were told that their hotel rooms would be paid by the Solarian government and that they would be put in the suites located on the first floor. Ella wasn't quite so lucky. The hotel clerk initially denied her a room because she was a Solarian. The rooms, she was politely informed, were reserved only for off-world guests.

Ella then tried to use her status as shipmate and friend of the guests of honor. However, the clerk continued to deny her a room. Ella briefly wished that the human Paul Smith was standing beside her. She doubted that she would be mistreated once he flexed his muscles.

However, Paul wasn't there. Ella switched directions and asked for the manager. When he arrived she said, "Hello, I am Ella Birdsong. My father is the famous artist Fletcher Birdsong. If you give me a free room for the celebration, my father will paint your atrium."

Ella's offer was very, very good. She could immediately see that the manager found it irresistible. The cost of the an original piece of Fletcher's work was worth 50 or perhaps even 500 times the amount of a hotel room for three weeks.

The manager wouldn't take her word for it though. Ella had to call her father and have him personally talk to the manager. The manager wouldn't agree to the arrangement until he received a firm commitment. Fletcher agreed to paint the atrium the following day.

The clerk checked them in one at a time. He gave Ella room 122. He then assigned Lexxi to room 124. However, when the clerk processed Clowy, he realized that all of the first floor suites had been taken. He had inadvertently given Clowy's room to Ella by mistake.

The clerk said, "I am terribly sorry, but the only room we have available is 213. It is a very nice room. I am sure that such a wonderful being as yourself will be able to survive with these accommodations."

Clowy was angry and started to tear up in one eye. However, after the nice compliment the clerk had given her, she had little choice but to accept the room. They grabbed an available electro-cart and pushed their bags through the hotel's main aisle to Ella's room. The plan was simple. They were going to go to each room, unload the respective baggage, and then leave for an evening meal.

However, there is a slight turn in the hallway just before room 122. Lexxi wasn't paying attention and slammed the cart into the wall. The cart tipped over and spilled their baggage all

over the floor. Several of their bags opened, spewing clothes and personal items across the entire hallway. The noise was astounding in the small confines of the hallway.

The loud noise made the occupants of rooms 121 and 123 open their doors and peek out into the hallway. The occupants saw the commotion, and the beings causing it, and entered the hallway.

Carank exited room 121 and spoke first. He said, "Hello my former crew mates. I think you are supposed to store your luggage in your respective rooms."

Lorano didn't wait for any of them to reply. He said, "Ella, I like your planet thus far. I will have to thank your government for inviting me to Earth 2."

Ella's smile disappeared. She really didn't want to deal with Lorano today on top of the luggage crisis. She responded, "I thought you dropped the whole Solarians are tiny, blue humans shtick when you met an actual human."

Lorano replied, "I'm sorry. You're right. This is probably Earth 3. We came to celebrate that fact that we found Earth 2."

Meanwhile, Lexxi opened her door and began throwing all of her belongings into the room. It didn't seem to matter whether it was individual article of clothing or a suitcase. One of her two remaining sealed suitcases popped open upon landing and spewed its contents onto the growing mess in the middle of the room.

Ella looked away from Lorano and saved a retort. She knew she couldn't win an argument with him. Instead, she viewed Lexxi's growing pile and said, "Lexxi, Solaria has a clean hotel room law. You will have to clean that up before tomorrow. Housekeeping will report the mess to management and your items will be confiscated."

Lexxi said, "Tomorrow's problems are for tomorrow's me. Why should I concern myself with her issues?"

Lexxi verified that all of her belongings were inside her room and closed the door. She reached back into the room, grabbed her giant earphones, and placed them around her neck.

Ella gathered her items that had spilled in the hallway and carefully put them back in her suitcase. When she had everything repacked, she placed her luggage in her room.

Ella looked at Lorano and asked, "How is the room?"

Lorano replied, "I don't know. It seems a little loud on this level. I am considering switching to a different floor."

Lorano noted that Clowy hadn't opened her room yet. He asked, "Clowy, why aren't you moving your items into your room?"

Clowy responded, "Whose room?"

Lorano looked at her strangely and responded, "Clowy, where is your room?"

Clowy said, "Oh, my room is on the second floor. They ran out of rooms on this level."

Lorano continued looking at Clowy. He said, “Let’s switch rooms. Carank and I just arrived and I haven’t unpacked any of my bags yet.”

Clowy smiled and readily agreed. She carried her luggage into the room and set it down while Lorano carried his out of the room and put it on the electro cart. The last item he put on the cart was Lexxi’s spare make-up kit.

Lexxi immediately recognized it and yelled, “Where did you get that?”

Lorano responded, “We found it exactly where you discarded it.”

Lexxi jumped for the kit and grabbed it off of the electro cart. She opened it and pulled one of the vials out of the bag. She looked at it and screamed when she saw that there was a worm inside.

Lorano yelled, “Stop, you’ll open a can of worms!”

Carank used the momentary confusion to grab Lexxi from behind and pin her arms to her side. Lexxi squeezed the jar and held it as tightly as possible.

Ella reacted next and jumped on Carank, knocking all three of them to the floor. Lorano now had a clear path to the make-up kit and dove under the cart to retrieve it. Clowy jumped on Lorano’s back and tried to pin him on the floor.

Lorano reacted by pushing up and accidentally slamming Clowy into the bottom of the electro cart. All of his luggage fell off the cart and hit Ella. Now free, Carank pinned Lexxi on the ground with his torso. He grabbed Lexxi’s hand with both of his and wrestled the vial out of her fingers.

Lorano crawled the remaining distance and grabbed the rest of the make-up kit. He stood up and yelled “Stop. Everyone, just stop for a moment.”

Everyone else stood up, dusted themselves off, and straightened their clothes. However, Clowy was still under the electro cart when she tried to stand and she banged her head against the bottom of the cart. Ella reached down and helped Clowy to her feet.

Clowy started crying. Lorano looked at her and also started crying, though briefly. He cried three tears from his left eye, then started frowning. Then in rapid succession he smiled, frowned, cried a single tear from his right eye and briefly smiled again. Clowy reacted to each of Lorano’s non-verbal gestures and was now smiling as well.

Everyone else stopped what they had been doing and stared at Lorano and Clowy. Carank spoke first. He said, “I think that was the first time I have seen an Altian micro-emote. What did that mean?”

Lorano replied, “It is extremely difficult to translate since it really isn’t a language in the traditional sense of the term. Suffice it to say that I apologized for accidentally hurting her.”

Carank looked directly at Lexxi. She looked like she was about to launch another attack. Carank also noticed that her make-up had been scrubbed from half of her face and had been

replaced by a giant bruise. In addition, she had a dark green rug burn on her neck. He realized that in his haste to retrieve the vial he must have pushed her across the floor.

Carank retrieved his communication pad from the floor and cleverly positioned it in front of him. He couldn't believe that rolling around on the floor with Lexxi had excited him. He had certainly never considered her a potential mate before. He shrugged it off as a simple response to physical exertion.

Carank said, "Lexxi, I am sorry that you were hurt in the scuffle. We needed your vials to hold the results of a very important experiment we are working on. The vials can only be opened in a sealed laboratory." It wasn't the entire story, but it was technically true.

Lorano added, "Carank will be happy to take you shopping and buy you a replacement."

Carank couldn't believe it. Lorano had stolen his line.

Ella shook herself. Her back hurt where one of the suitcases landed on her. She wanted to yell at the scientists, but she knew that she had to remain calm. Finally, she settled on, "So, what are you two doing tomorrow?"

Lorano responded, "Carank and I rented an air car. We are going to fly about 400 kilometers (250 miles) due east of here to see the ruins of the old Altian energy pyramid."

Lexxi replied, "It's old; and ruined. That is why they call it a ruin. That has to be one of the dumbest things I have ever heard anyone do on a vacation. Well, filling make-up vials with worms also ranks high on my list of stupid things to do."

Lorano responded, "You're welcome to come with us. Fresh air and physical activity can be mentally stimulating." He was proud of himself. He actually managed not to say, "And you certainly need both."

Carank said, "Ella, do you recall any of the ancient history surrounding the pyramid?"

"Not much," Ella responded. "I know that the Altians visited Solaria shortly after the settlers arrived. They built three energy pyramids and presented them as gifts to the settlers. Two were located in Solar City and the one that you mentioned was much further away."

She continued, "One of the Solar City pyramids was badly damaged by a hurricane I think. It was later torn down to make room for a shopping mall. The stones were used to construct a retaining wall. The other one was converted into a maze."

Lexxi interrupted, "Maybe you two should visit that one instead. If you need physical activity, I can't think of a better than wandering through a maze. Wait, yes I can – getting lost and starving to death."

No one responded, so Ella continued, "As you probably already know, the third pyramid was constructed in a bad location and the surrounding area was never settled or developed. That pyramid was rarely if ever used and was eventually just abandoned."

Lorano was lost in thought for a moment and meant to say something to himself. However, he accidentally said out loud, "Why were the Altians here?"

Clowy responded, “I know. They came to Solaria to build energy pyramids. They were gifts for the settlers.” She smiled brightly.

Lorano shook his head and said, “Thank you Clowy.”

Carank said, “What are the three of you doing tomorrow?”

Ella responded, “We are going shopping, then we have an appointment at a beauty salon. In the evening, we are taking my father to dinner.”

Carank replied, “Let’s all meet for dinner tomorrow – Lorano’s treat.” Carank figured he should repay Lorano for forcing him to pay for the make-up kit.

Clowy finished putting her belongings into room 123 and the three females left for dinner. Carank returned to his room. Lorano put his luggage back on the cart and rode the electro lift to the second floor. He settled into room 213.

The next morning the trio went to the nearest shopping plaza. Lexxi led the other two through the mall and straight to a store that sold her brand of make-up. It was clear that she had researched their path on the websphere.

Lexxi viewed the various sizes and contents while she waited for the clerk. She had lost a type 2 travel bag, so she figured that she should replace it with a type 4. The type 4 was a full size kit and included 38 shades of lipstick and matching fingernail polish.

It also contained a huge variety of blush, eyeliner, cover, and a portable ultra-violet inductance system for rapidly drying nail polish. It was roughly double the cost of the type 2. However, since Carank was paying, she decided to splurge.

Clowy looked at the price and frowned. She said, “That is really expensive. It’s just about three week’s salary.” She paused for a moment and asked, “Is it any good?”

The clerk finished with the previous customer and asked, “How can I make your day truly wonderful?”

Lexxi replied, “I want to purchase three type 4 make-up kits. One for each of us.”

The clerk frowned at them and said, “Ooooooh, I don’t know. You three don’t look like type 4’ers to me. That may be too much make-up for you to handle.” She pulled out a type 1 kit, pushed it toward them, and turned away to help another customer.

The clerk finished helping the other patron and turned back to Lexxi. Her facial expression seemed to say ‘oh, you’re still here’.

The clerk said, “Nooobody is buying the type 4 anymore. Evvverbody is upgrading to the type 5. The type 5 comes with a self-attaching, fully programmable, three-way mirror and expanding tray. Plus, the kit contains an additional 24 shades.”

Lexxi said, “Okay. Give us the fives.”

The clerk’s face brightened and she smiled. She said, “Excellent choice. I can tell you three are discerning shoppers.”

Lexxi held out her arm so the clerk could take a sample of her DNA. Clowy and Ella followed suit. The clerk aimed a photonic laser beam at their arms and burned off a tiny sample of their skin. She then verified that there was enough information to create the make-up.

The clerk said, “Okay, I have everything I need. One last thing, you need to choose the color of your make-up case.” She held up a color chart.

Lexxi asked, “What colors do you have in stock?”

The clerk said, “Only brown, but there is something wrong with the color.” She held up a brown case for effect. It looked dreadful, almost discolored. It certainly didn’t match the color chart.

The clerk continued, “All of the other colors perfectly match the color chart. I don’t know what happened to this color. However, we are getting a new shipment from Altian-1 in three days.”

She paused for a moment and asked, “What color would you like me to reserve for you?”

They studied the chart. Lexxi said, “Silver.” Ella said, “Silver.” Clowy looked at the chart and said, “I really like the brown.”

Lexxi motioned to the clerk to reserve a third silver case. She then asked, “When will the entire kit be ready?”

The clerk checked her chart and said, “It should be ready on Thursday, or Saturday, or the following Saturday. Be sure to keep your receipt. It has your tracking number on it.”

Lexxi was stunned. She said, “On Advranki Prime they can get the DNA sequencing developed in about an hour.”

The clerk gave her a condescending look as possible for a Solarian. She replied, “We do have some ready-made cosmetics on the children’s counter over there. Perhaps you would find those more suitable to your timetable.” She pointed to the area for effect even though they were standing right next to it.

Lexxi admitted defeat and said, “I will see you in a few days.”

The clerk said, “Have a delightful day.”

Lexxi replied, “Don’t tell me what to do.”

They wandered through the shopping plaza until it was time to go to the spa. Ella chose a spa that was conveniently located in the same general area as the mall. Even though the advertisement for the salon specifically mentioned that they catered to extra-terrestrials, the owner admitted that they rarely had visitors from other planets.

Lexxi was nervous and wanted to leave, but the staff was very nice and convinced them that despite their lack of experience, they knew exactly what to do. Since the trio was already checked in, they decided to stay. They ordered the full spa package – facial, pedicure, haircut, massage, and hair revitalization treatment.

About three hours later they left the spa and headed to a restaurant for a quick snack. It was already early afternoon, so they didn't want to have a full lunch as they had evening dinner plans with the scientists and Ella's father. They found a nice place and took seats next to the window.

Clowy said, "My hair feels funny" and started scratching her scalp.

The hair treatment product that the beautician chose worked terrific on real hair. Both Ella and Lexxi's hair looked fabulous afterward. Clowy's hair looked tremendous initially.

However, Clowy is an Altian. Altians are naturally hairless on their heads and faces. When long(er) hair became the fashion trend for females on Advranki Prime and Solaria, the Altians copied the look by inventing a method to grow real hair and implant it onto their scalps.

Clowy scratched another time. Her entire head of hair fell off and landed on the floor. Clowy looked down and looked at her hair. The visual didn't immediately register in her mind. She slowly reached up and touched her head. Her bald head finally registered in her consciousness and Clowy started crying.

"It's okay," Ella said as calmly as possible. "We'll just go wig shopping."

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The terrain surrounding the pyramid was much rougher than expected. As a result, the only suitable landing area for the air car was about 2 kilometers (1.2 miles) away. They hiked up and down several hills and through an abandoned quarry to reach the structure. They reached the pyramid by late morning.

Carank said, "Ella was right. This seems to be a rather poor place to construct the pyramid."

Lorano nodded in agreement. He replied, "This adds another element to the mystery. I doubt this terrain has changed much over the last 4 millennia. It looks completely undeveloped. The Altians must have known this was a marginal location when they built it here."

Carank agreed, "It just doesn't make sense. We must be missing something."

They closely inspected the side nearest them. It was clear that the pyramid was made from stone from a nearby quarry. Nearby doesn't describe it properly. The pyramid was actually constructed on top of the hill that had been used to quarry the stone. Further, there were still cut, but unused stones still sitting in the quarry.

Carank said, "Well, they certainly didn't have to transport the stone very far."

They turned their attention back to the pyramid. This pyramid looked different than the other examples of known Altian architecture they had inspected (Altian-1, Solar City, and the new planet). The three previous examples had similar slopes and craftsmanship that was spectacular. The stones were perfectly cut and shaped and fit together perfectly. The gaps were so small that one could not slide a piece of paper between them.

This was clearly different. It was significantly smaller and the slope was steeper. The stones in this pyramid were placed very, very close to one another, but not absolutely perfect like the others. Further, the stones looked like they had been painted with some type of clear-coat paint.

They walked all the way around the pyramid. They found an entrance on the north face, two levels above the surface. It was blocked by a small stone. They climbed up and inspected the stone. It was a slightly different color and wasn't the correct size or shape of the surrounding stones.

Lorano stood and patiently waited for Carank to pull the stone free. Lorano peered inside. He saw one large room. There were no corridors or sound attenuating chambers. Lorano stepped aside and let Carank look. The chamber was completely empty.

Carank crawled halfway into the room and used his communication pad to take pictures of the interior room from as many different angles as he could. Carank saw that the stone was not smooth. An energy pyramid typically had perfectly smooth interior stones to guide the soundwaves. The tiny holes would make it nearly impossible to conduct sound.

Carank kicked his legs and Lorano grabbed them and pulled him back out of the pyramid. Carank sat down on the rock next to Lorano and they began scrolling through the pictures.

Carank said, "Do you see all of the tiny holes?"

Lorano replied, "Yes. It looks like they were drilling into the sides of the stone."

Carank said, "Perhaps someone came along later and was looking for something?"

Lorano shook his head negatively and said, "No, it appears more like something was attached to the stone and was violently removed."

Carank closed his communication and replaced the stone. The two scientists carefully crawled back down to the base of the pyramid.

Once down, Lorano summarized, "This isn't an Altian energy pyramid. This pyramid must have been built by the settlers from the leftover stones from the two pyramids in Solar City."

Carank replied, "A tribute to the Altians perhaps?"

The question was rhetorical, but Lorano answered, "I doubt we will ever know."

Carank couldn't resist. He pulled the label maker out of his pocket and wrote 'Not an Altian energy pyramid' in Alliance basic.

Lorano inspected the label and remarked, "Well, that certainly could have saved us some time."

Carank said, "When we leave, we should circle the planet and have the *Buzzkill* scan this pyramid. I am curious to know whether there are any hidden chambers."

The scientists returned to Solar City and began searching for a lab to process the dirt samples they had collected from the new planet – tentatively named Lorank or possibly Carano.