

The Hirculan Imposition

Book 4 of the Alliance Conflict

By Jeff Sims

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Chapter 1

Lorano and Clowy spent another 3 weeks investigating the pyramids on Altian-1. They didn't find anything else of interest. There were no other words carved into the rock or any other feature that shouldn't have been there.

They had found little else since their profound discovery that almost 4,000 years ago their ancestors had changed the name of their race from Atlantean to Altian. The name change occurred shortly after their race made contact with the Advranki. The populace at the time felt that the name Atlantean projected superiority and shortened it.

Lorano was frustrated by their lack of progress in finding a link between the humans and Solarians. He was convinced that his ancestors had, for some unknown reason, transported a group of settlers from Earth to Solaria. Then they built the settlers two energy pyramids in their soon to be capital, Sol City.

Afterward, they may have constructed a third pyramid for some indeterminate use. Lorano had briefly inspected this pyramid, but was unable to determine its use. Further, he couldn't even tell whether it had been built and used by the Altians or whether it had been built years later by the Solarians after the Altians left.

However, Lorano had more evidence that he hadn't shared with Clowy yet. A few months ago he and Carank found an uninhabited planet halfway between Earth and Solaria. The planet contained one structure, an Altian energy pyramid. Clearly the Altians had at one time occupied the planet or at a minimum visited the planet and stayed long enough to build a pyramid and a landing area.

His current issue though was that he still hadn't received a new project from the Academy of Sciences or even an acknowledgement that his current project to use gravity missiles to find the location of Old Solaria was completed. However, the most frustrating part of the whole situation by far was that Clowy needed his help to brush her hair.

Lorano carefully ran the brush through the same spot exactly three times. He had been informed that two strokes weren't enough and 4 were too many. Five was right out. He sighed to himself – he possessed the most brilliant mind in a generation (or two) and here he was, stuck brushing fake hair.

Lorano switched to a different spot, ran the brush down and said, "It appears that this site holds nothing left for us to discover."

Clowy responded, "What site?"

Lorano said, "This old Altian energy pyramid ruin. I don't think it holds any more clues to the mystery of our race's name change or the whole Human – Solarian question."

Clowy looked at her fingernails. They were colored mint lilac rose with a trace of orchid on the tips. However, Lorano had recently referred to the color simply as light purple. She missed Lexxi's perspective. She responded, "I think we should ask the Advranki."

Lorano exclaimed, “That’s it! That is an excellent suggestion Clowy. The Altians may not have any detailed information about that time period, but the Advranki probably still do.”

Clowy smiled brightly. Lorano also smiled for a moment. He said, “We are going to Advranki Prime.”

A few minutes later Lorano edged the corvette *Buzzkill* off of the planet. They exited the atmosphere and flew to the Altian – Advranki hyperspace lane. They received clearance and made the 6 hour jump to Advranki Prime.

Traffic control gave them a less than advantageous route to the planet despite the fact that they were in a military ship. As a result, they had a 12 hour voyage from the Advranki – Altian hyperspace lane to the planet.

Lorano shook his head. It seemed strange that they could traverse half of the galaxy in less time than it took to cross a single solar system. Oh well, with luck they could find some answers to the mystery on Advranki Prime.

Lorano was on final approach to the planet when he received an email. He checked and realized that it was from Russ Brand, one of the human pilots that he had helped kidnap and later got to know while stationed in Waylon. He opened the message and began reading. Clowy looked over at him expectantly, so he started over and read the note aloud.

“Thank you for the information. It will be very helpful. Concerning your question – there is an old legend about a civilization that lived on Earth about 4,000 years ago called the Atlanteans. They built a beautiful city called Atlantis in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea and supposedly taught people around the world how to build pyramids. Atlantis was destroyed by a giant tsunami a few years after it was constructed. There are some that believe the Atlanteans were aliens from another planet and that Atlantis was in fact a giant space ship, not a city.”

Lorano was completely stunned. There it was, the mystery was more than likely solved. Just as he suspected, Earth must be the home world of the Solarians; not some random planet in the middle of a radiation belt. Or, perhaps there was an intermediate step. Maybe they left Earth, went to Old Solaria, and then went to Solaria. However, he doubted it.

More than likely they went from Earth to the secret planet that he recently discovered / rediscovered, stayed there for a while, and suddenly decided to leave and go to Solaria. Lorano made a mental note – if this theory was true then he needed to search the secret planet for clues.

All he needed now was tangible evidence from somewhere. Then he could prove that Earth was in fact Old Solaria and the story about the Solarian settlers leaving a planet about to get radiated was a myth. Or, Lorano thought, a clever misdirection. Lorano exclaimed “That’s it!”

Clowy responded, “What’s that?” She reconsidered and said, “What’s it?” She smiled brightly.

Lorano answered, “I know where we need to go to find the missing link.”

“Where?” Clowy asked.

Lorano: “Earth.”

Clowy frowned and responded, “We can’t go there. First, it’s against the law, second we don’t know where it is, and third we would get killed and possibly eaten if we expose ourselves.”

Lorano waved her off. The path forward was clear; the rest was just details.

They switched to automated computer control and began their descent through Advranki Prime’s atmosphere. Lorano used the time to write a prospectus for his planned investigation. He wrote:

Academy of Sciences, please accept the following proposal for a new project.

I want to embark on a two year mission to seek out ancient worlds and extinct civilizations. I want to cautiously go where our ancestors have gone before.

Lorano read it again and added - Oh, and the Altian female named Col lo Wey no Yen pa will accompany me.

He then clicked submit and sent the request to the Altian Academy of Sciences division located on Advranki Prime. This was the fourth project request he had made in the last few months. He doubted that anyone would respond to this one either.

He was wrong. Six minutes later the request was accepted, the mission was endorsed by the Alliance Senate, and a generous budget was approved.

The landed 10 minutes later. Lexxi was standing there waiting for them. Clowy jumped out and gave her a gigantic hug. Lorano even managed to thank her for personally greeting them at the spaceport.

He suddenly had a strange thought. Clowy, to his knowledge anyway, hadn’t told Lexxi that they were coming. Curiosity overcame him and he asked, “Lexxi, how did you know that we were arriving at this time and at this landing pad?”

Lexxi replied, “Oh. I just got a call from the Alliance Senate that you were arriving. They requested that I greet you personally.”

Well, Lorano thought, they may have been given a bad route to the planet, but at least they received a personal welcome. Lexxi led them to a waiting ground car. They got in and rode a short distance to the warehouse district.

Very short - about two blocks. It actually would have been faster had they walked.

The ground car parked in front of an abandoned warehouse and the driverbot indicated that they could get out. Lorano entered the building and verified that it was abandoned. Although abandoned, the warehouse was in extremely good condition and was very well-maintained. Actually, it looked like it had just recently been cleared out and cleaned from top to bottom. Several surfaces still looked wet in fact.

Clowy asked, “What are you doing these days?”

Lexxi responded, “Well, I was getting my nails done when I rudely got interrupted mid clear coat. Some government lackey informed me that I was assigned to a top-secret, high profile government project.”

Clowy asked, “What project?”

Lexxi shrugged and responded, “I don’t know. My father said that I am supposed to accompany a pair of clueless Altians on some boring two-year deep space mission to investigate old cultures or something. I really didn’t pay much attention to him.”

The similarity of the missions bothered Lorano. He asked, “Exactly how recently were you assigned to this project?”

Lexxi checked her communication pad. She said, “Ten minutes ago.” She read her mission briefing a little further and sighed loudly. She continued, “Oh, apparently I have already located the two Altians.”

Clowy asked, “Which Altians?”

Lexxi had already put on her giant earphones, so Lorano responded. He started to say ‘The two inside the warehouse’ but stopped himself at the last minute. He really didn’t want Clowy to ask yet another question. Instead he responded, “Lexxi is accompanying us on our mission.”

Clowy smiled brightly. Lorano didn’t.

This mission had just gone from exciting to barely passable to something less than barely passable – possibly scarcely passable. Lorano’s plan for dealing with Clowy if she became too annoying was to trick her into getting into a cryostasis chamber. Now, that option was gone with Lexxi tagging along.

Lorano knew that he had to change the dynamic as quickly as possible. He grabbed his communication pad and said, “Computer, call Carank.”

Carank appeared on screen and Lorano greeted him as nicely as possible. He said, “Hello Carank, what useless project are you working on?”

Carank checked the time display and realized that it was a live call and that Lorano was on Advranki Prime. Carank refused to be baited and instead answered, “What brings you to Advranki Prime?”

Lorano briefly described the new mission and asked if Carank wanted to go. Carank responded that he was interested in going, but wanted to finish his current project. Carank asked, “Could you postpone it until next month?”

Lorano responded, “No. The Alliance Senate is really behind this project. They want the four of us to leave within the week.”

“Four?”

Lorano replied, “Yes. Both Clowy and Lexxi are coming on this mission.”

Carank replied, "I will be there this afternoon."

Carank immediately began packing his belongings. He noted that he was performing the task rather perfunctorily; primarily because his mind was focused on the upcoming trip. He was surprised how excited he was. Well, not the trip exactly.

He wasn't necessarily excited about spending the next two years with locked on a small ship with Lorano, and to a lesser extent Clowy. However, the concept of fully exploring their secret planet was intriguing and the possibility of discovering even more planets was exciting.

The primary reason for his excitement at the moment though was Lexxi. He was really looking forward to spending the next two years on a small ship all alone with her. Well, Clowy and Lorano were going too, but they were Altians. He would be the only male Advranki within hundreds of light years of her.

"I really like my chances," Carank summarized.

Carank refocused his efforts on his task at hand and quickly finished packing. He was just about to leave his apartment when he realized that he had forgotten the gag gift that he had purchased for Lexxi while they were on Solaria. He grabbed it and tossed into one of his bags.

He went to the intracontinental transport hub and booked passage on a shuttle. It was a regularly scheduled commercial transport that hopped between Askjunk, where he working, and Avunk, the capital city of Advranki Prime where Lorano and the others were located.

He was early. So early in fact that the transport wasn't boarding for another hour. Carank wandered around the spaceport for a few minutes. He had been in the spaceport many times before, but had never really bothered to see what stores were available in the waiting area.

He walked past a formal clothing store. He stopped and walked back and looked in the window. Carank dithered for a few moments and finally decided to enter. He selected one of the men's formal wedding outfits. He had the outfit vacuum sealed into a small tube for ease of carrying and storage.

He couldn't believe how similar it looked to the outfit in Fletcher Birdsong's painting. Fletcher Birdsong was a famous painter on Solaria and was also the father of one of his previous crewmates named Ella Birdsong. Ella had her father paint a mural in the Spaceport Hotel and Resort as payment for letting her stay there during the Solarian Celebration.

The painting, technically a fresco because the paint absorbed into the wall, depicted a double marriage. Clowy was dressed in a traditional Altian wedding gown. She was standing next to Lorano, who was dressed in a human inspired tuxedo. Lexxi was wearing a Solarian style wedding gown. Carank, dressed in a traditional Advranki groom's outfit, was standing beside her.

Admiral Solear was standing between the two couples and was performing the wedding ceremony. He was dressed in an Alliance Navy uniform and holding an Altian urn and an Advranki sea moss square. Both items were traditional wedding accompaniments. The painting, titled Double Wedding, was designed to honor the four vastly different cultures.

Carank boarded the shuttle. The transport lifted off and flew about halfway across the major continent. It landed about 90 minutes later at the Spaceport in Avunk. Carank disembarked and took the electro lift to the 50th floor.

Lorano's warehouse was about ¼ a kilometer from the spaceport. He decided to walk across the skywalk instead of taking the hovertram or a ground car because it was significantly faster than trying to arrange transportation. He reached the correct warehouse and took the electro lift to the ground floor. He was actually excited about the new project.

That evening, they gathered and decided upon their best course of action. Lorano and Carank made a list of everything that they would need to properly investigate ancient civilizations and uninhabited planets. The first item on the list was a Model 345.22.14 diagnostic computer. Lorano refused to leave the planet without one.

The list grew longer and longer – ground car, environmental suits, hoverbot, hovercarts, sea moss, seedlings to grow fresh sea moss, gravity missiles and gravity tracking equipment, and a vast array of other items. Of course, the last item on the list was a Model 542.26.19 label maker. Carank never left home without it.

Lorano summarized, “We will have to get a mini-freighter. The *Buzzkill* is too small.”

Lexxi sent the ship change request and the equipment request to the Alliance Senate. A few minutes later she received a response stating that a mini-freighter had been repurposed for their use and all of the equipment was on order. Everything was scheduled to be ready in 6 days.

They spent the intervening time researching old Advranki files about the first contact with Altians. Unfortunately, there was no information about the name change or any mention that Advranki found any inhabited, or even habitable, planets.

The only document they found with any relevance was a mention of an unofficial treaty governing space exploration. It basically laid out the galaxy as a two-dimensional map. The Advranki were responsible for exploring everything east and north of Conron. Everything south and west of Conron was the responsibility of the Altians.

Although they couldn't find anything of historical value in the ancient records, their research led them to Doctor Purami. She was one of the few Altians that accompanied the Advranki fleet on their ill-fated mission to the Spindle Station. She had recently performed an extensive physical on two human males and was in the process of writing a paper on human physiology.

Doctor Purami was stationed on the battleship *Guardian*. Fortunately, the *Guardian* was in orbit around Advranki Prime. As a result, they could speak to each in real time without any delay. Lorano contacted her and exchanged introductions. He informed her of their upcoming trip to search for a causal link between the Solarians and the Humans.

Lorano said, “Doctor Purami, I understand that you have performed in depth physicals on both races. What can you tell us about them?”

Purami responded, “Well, one race is blue. The other is not.”

Fair enough, Lorano thought. He believed that he already knew that particular fact, but it was certainly helpful to have a medical doctor confirm it. He continued, “Anything else?” He left the qualifier ‘of value’ off of the end of the sentence.

Purami: “The Humans are much taller and stronger than the Solarians. The reason is because their bones are slightly larger and their musculature is more developed. Also, some of Humans actually perform specific exercises to increase this size of their muscles.”

Wow, Lorano thought. So, the humans are taller, stronger, and a different color than the Solarians. He pretty much already knew that too. Lorano responded, “Thank you for that insightful list of differences doctor. How about similarities?”

Purami laughed and said, “You misunderstand me. Those are the only differences. They essentially share the same genome.”

“Genome?” Lorano repeated.

Purami: “The genome is the complete nucleic acid sequence of a species. Both Humans and Solarians share the same genome, or DNA, and the same 23 chromosomes. There are some minor deviations, but not outside the normal probability curve for recessive gene pairings.”

Lorano: “So they are the same race?”

Purami thought for a moment and said, “Yes and no. They certainly started from a similar ancestor in the not too distant past. And empirical evidence suggests that this particular race evolved on Earth.”

Lorano: “So, it is safe to assume that at least part of Solaria’s settlement is true. The statue at Settler’s Monument noted that there were 8,000 original settlers and that they landed about 4,000 years ago.

Purami, “Yes, that certainly makes sense. All Solarians living today are descendants of the original 8,000 settlers.”

Lorano said, “You also mentioned that there was a no.”

Purami said, “In Humans, the pigmentation, or the color of their skin, is the result of changes in melanin from UV light. The darker the skin, the better the protection from the UV rays.”

Lorano asked, “Then if darker skin is a desirable trait, shouldn’t all humans be black?”

Purami responded, “No, because the skin also absorbs vitamin D from the sunlight. The lighter the skin is, the better the absorption process. Humans in colder areas with less direct sunlight have less fear of skin cancer from harmful UV rays. Therefore, they can have lighter skin for increased vitamin D absorption.”

Lorano: “The point.” He mentally added ‘if any’.

Purami said, “The point is that skin color is a trade-off between diet and environmental factors. However, there is no natural pigment that would turn a Human’s skin blue. It is not a result of natural evolution.”

Lorano said, “I understand. Someone or something significantly altered their skin pigmentation. What about the height and weight differences?”

Purami said, “The average Solarian male is 13 cm (5”) shorter than the average Human male. The interesting thing about Solarians is that their average height hasn’t changed in the last 2,000 years. Further, there is very little deviation between the heights. One would expect to see a wider range between the tallest Solarian and the smallest.”

Lorano said, “So, Solarians are all roughly the same height and are all significantly shorter than humans. That is very interesting.” Lorano somehow managed to say that last statement with a straight face and even managed to make it seem sincere.

Purami said, “I have no recent trustworthy evidence, but the Humans that I interviewed stated the average height among males is 177 cm (5’ 10”), but can vary naturally anywhere from 156 cm (5’ 2”) to 224 cm (7’ 4”). Further, they added that there are instances of both taller and shorter males, but these are rare.”

Lorano noted that the tone of her voice was rather patronizing. She sounded as if she was speaking about things that he should already know. It seemed as if she was repeating a lecture that he had failed to attend the first time.

He sighed and said, “I still don’t understand the point that you are trying to make.”

She said, “Recall when you recently went to Earth to perform the semi-century review of Humans? The first mission report was written in the year 1600 and a new report has been filed every 50 or so years since. Nine total missions to Earth have been conducted thus far.”

Lorano had completely forgotten about those reports. He had meant to read them en route to Earth, but hadn’t. Then he meant to read them while on the planet, but didn’t. He should have read them during his investigation of Humans, but again, by that time he had completely forgotten about them.

She paused for a breath and continued, “In the years 1600 through 1750, the average height of a male Human was 165 cm (5’ 5”). There was little or no change. However, the average height increased by 3 cm (1.25”) every 50 years from 1750 through 1950.”

She purposefully paused for effect and concluded, “I was expecting the data from your visit to show that the average height was now 180 cm (5’ 11”). However, the data from your report showed that there was no change from 1954 to now.”

Lorano remembered that particular form. He had assigned it Crista. She asked if she really needed to travel to 6 different spots in the United States and measure and weigh 3,000 people. Lorano recalled that his answer was something along the lines of “Just get it done.”

No, he corrected himself. That wasn't exactly what he said. He told her to just go ask 50 random people in downtown Akron, Ohio how tall they were, how old they were, and how much they weighed.

Purami waited for a response and didn't immediately get one, so she said, "Oddly enough, all of your metrics, with the exception of weight, are exactly the same as those from the 1954 report."

Hmmm, now that he thought about it, they may have neglected to gather all of the necessary generational information. Further, he may have incidentally mentioned to Crista to just copy the census data from the last report if she had any blanks.

Lorano responded, "The height increases over the last two centuries was due to improved diet and food availability. Very little has changed in that regard over the last 60 years. As a result, the average height seems to have peaked."

He continued, "However, we may soon have to stop using average to describe to population and switch to median and mode. While the average height may not be changing, as you mentioned previously the tails of the distribution seem to be increasing."

He smiled as he appreciated his fast thinking. That excuse should convince her that they had done a thorough job during their assessment. Heck, who knows - it may even be true.

She responded, "So you believe that the tall people are getting taller and the short people are getting shorter?"

"Yes. That seems to be the case. Or perhaps the variance has always existed but was more pronounced this time because we sampled more data points than previous studies." He doubted that one was true, but hey, who knows.

She said, "Well, that certainly makes sense. There are three other rather minor differences that are very interesting. The first is that the Solarians are far smarter than Humans. However, their brains haven't been modified, they just have had centuries of better education."

"Second," Lorano prompted.

Purami answered, "Solarians appear to be far, far more docile than Humans. You would logically think that they would exhibit the same violent and anti-social tendencies as Humans, but they do not. My theory is the difference is due to centuries of conditioning combined with selective breeding and possibly some genome tweaking.

"Third," Lorano prompted.

Purami: "Solarians are somehow less imaginative than Humans. There is no biological or mental reason to explain it that I could find. That said though, the last two generations of Solarians have experienced an explosion in art and literature."

Lorano: "What would cause such a change?"

Purami: "I don't know. Perhaps they are now being exposed to some type of outside influence that is stimulating creativity."

Lorano: “The Solarians are now watching hours and hours of Human television programming.”

Purami: “Yes. That is probably it. Watching hours of Human television each day would certainly spur creativity.”

Lorano summarized, “So, our working theory is that some beings went to Earth 4,000 years ago, collected a bunch of short, dull Humans, altered their skin pigment blue, fiddled with their DNA ever so slightly to make them more docile and not grow taller over time. Then these mystery beings transported the altered Humans to a different planet and abandoned them.”

Purami nodded in approval and moved her finger to cut the connection. She stopped at the last moment and said, “A fair parallel may be the Neto.”

Intrigued, Lorano responded, “How so?”

Purami: “Recall that the Neto were in the news a few months ago. The Hirculans did many embarrassing things to the race to try to make them more intelligent. They euthanized the weak, the old, the lame, the mentally deficient, and the chronically ill. They cut off the Neto’s lower set of arms. Then they created a eugenics program...”

Purami saw that Lorano had a strange look on his face. He clearly wasn’t going to admit that he didn’t know what that word meant. She saved him the question and said, “The Hirculans implemented a planet-wide selective-breeding program where they forced genetically favorable couples to have children.”

Lorano pretended to nod in understanding.

Purami concluded, “If you came across a planet filled with 4-armed, disease ridden, lower intelligence Neto and compared it to today’s planet of 2-armed, smarter, cleaner Neto you would have a similar comparison between the Humans the Solarians.” This time she did break the connection.

‘Seems legit’, Lorano thought.

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The six day wait turned into a week. The week turned into, well, just a week. Exactly seven days later they were ready to leave. Every item on the list had been loaded into the mini-freighter, stacked in a spot based on either function or color, and appropriately labeled.

The main hold was filled with specialized equipment. There was a fully self-contained diagnostic laboratory for analyzing almost anything. One of the neater items was a micro drill. It was similar in function to the large orbital drills, but sized for small digging.

Although they hadn’t requested it, the Alliance Senate had donated two hyperspace communication devices for the trip. These were crammed into the very end of the primary hold. The hyperspace communicators were a welcome addition, for they could send and receive messages anywhere in the galaxy – provided they were on a straight line path from one location to the other.

The second hold contained a wide variety of spare parts, raw materials, and specialized equipment capable of manufacturing nearly anything. Oddly enough, they were exactly like the manufacturing machines that they had left on Earth at Victory Games.

The second hold also contained enough refined deuterium and polonium to fully recharge the plasma reactor should it become necessary. The mission brief stated they would be gone for two years, but they had enough supplies to last at least six. It also had two spare hyperdrive containment units, or hyper bubbles.

The mini-freighter was the same make and model number as Victor Bullpeep's ship the *Vista* that Lorano and Carank had ridden in the first time they visited Earth. The similarities between the two ships didn't end there though.

Instead of storing great quantities of food, they copied Victor's design and planted a space garden between the inner and outer hulls. They also cut an entryway to the garden in the same room as the *Vista*. However, they were scared of the effectiveness of their gardening skills, so they went ahead and packed great quantities of food anyway.

They also installed a backup power generator the same size and in the same location as the *Vista*. Since Lorano had installed the first one, it was much easier to simply duplicate the design than fashion something new.

There were originally 6 passenger cabins on the mini-freighter. They converted the cabin directly across the hallway from the control room into a gravity missile storage area. They also installed an automated lift assist and shuttle mechanism. Lorano certainly didn't want to roll missiles across the floor again.

Also just like the *Vista*, they chose another cabin and converted it into a combination entertainment, exercise, and communication area. This even included an electronics package to make the mini-freighter nearly invisible to most radar systems. It wouldn't hide them from advanced societies, but it should work for more primitive races like the Neto or the Humans. Lorano had no idea why the Alliance technicians had installed it.

Lorano walked up the gangway. His sense of déjà vu was so high that he half expected Crista to be waiting for him at the top of the stairs. Fortunately, she wasn't. He rubbed his chest anyway, remembering the time that she had punched him for calling her a human. He doubted that Crista would apologize once he proved that she actually was descended from humans.

Lorano entered the mini-freighter and stowed his belongings in the center cabin. It was the same cabin that he had used on the *Vista* during his trip to Earth and also on the *Jackal* during his trips back and forth to Altian with Jack Dogbarks. He decided that there was nothing wrong with an established routine. It was, in his humble opinion, still the best room.

Lorano moved to the control room and performed a full diagnostic check of the power generator, the backup power generator, the plasma reactor, and the hyperdrive unit. Carank entered the ship shortly after him and went directly to engineering. He performed a physical inspection of each unit.

Carank joined Lorano in the control room and said, “I didn’t realize until just now how much this ship looks like the *Vista*.”

Lorano responded, “Well, if the design works, we may as well duplicate it. I doubt Victor Bullpeep would mind.”

Carank laughed and said, “No, but Crista might.”

Clowy and Lexxi arrived pulling a huge object on a hover cart between them. They carefully guided it up the ramp and into the entertainment area. Intrigued, Lorano followed them. He watched them begin to unpack it and couldn’t resist. He asked, “What is that?”

Lexxi responded, “It is a type 8 makeup kit. It comes with a fully programmable spa chair that is perfect for any situation.”

Lorano considered several responses including, but not limited to, “That is the dumbest thing I have ever seen in my life,” and “It will still won’t help your looks.”

However, he chose, “I think the unit is awesome. Perhaps you two will find the time to teach me some of the finer points of cosmetology during our voyage.”

They were ready to leave, but Lorano decided to make one more tour of the holds. He checked the primary hold. Perfect. He inspected the secondary hold. Again, perfect. Although he had ordered that the tertiary hold be left empty, he went ahead and inspected it anyway.

Lorano couldn’t believe it. There were three pallets sitting on the floor still neatly packed and wrapped. He walked over and inspected them closely. He shrugged when he realized that they were the exact same three pallets that were left over from their trip to Earth.

He verified that the pallets still contained nothing of any particular value. He was tempted to open the hold door and chuck them out into the spaceport, but decided that it would be too much work. Besides, someone clearly wanted him to have this gear. Or perhaps no one really knew what to do with the stuff.

He walked back to the control room and said, “Okay crew, before we can leave, we need to name this ship. Are there any suggestions?”

Lexxi replied, “*Travesty*.”

There were no other suggestions, so Lorano entered the name into the ship’s transponder and requested clearance. He received it immediately. Traffic control had even given them a fantastic route to the Advranki Prime – Conron hyperspace lane.

Lorano engaged the autopilot and they left.