

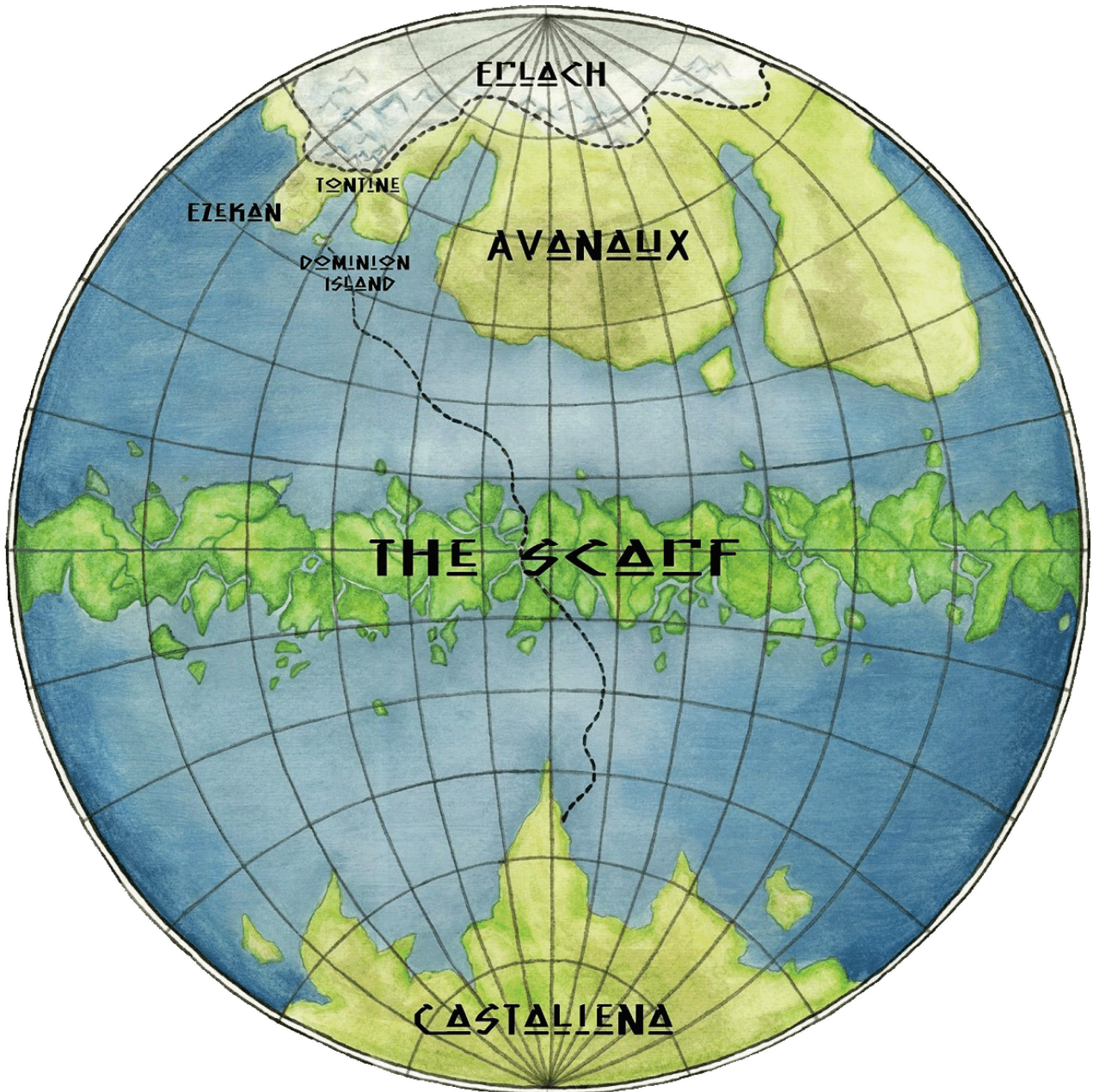
T H E P R O S P E R I N E T R I L O G Y

P A R T I

A V A N A U X

A HICKORY LACE SCIFI FANTASY ADVENTURE

PROSPERINE



Chapter One: The Alien Corps 2179AD

Hickory Lace gritted her teeth and willed her legs to spin faster. The ultralight racer surged forward and burned around the velodrome. Frosty air nipped at her face and whistled over her helmet as she flashed past the eighteen-kilometer mark. *Two more to go.* Only three riders were ahead of her: Gareth, Harry, and Jake.

Jake peeled off and swung up the stadium wall.

Hickory bridged the gap and sat in Harry's slipstream, conscious that Jake and Harry would try to work this between them. Sacrifice one for the team. Both men would be prepared to forfeit if it meant their partner took the points. From the corner of her eye, she saw Jake rocket towards her. With no time to plan, Hickory let her instinct take over.

A millisecond before he sent her flying, she lurched into him. Both machines recoiled and swayed before the riders regained control.

Jake veered away, then aimed for her again. At the last moment, he pulled in behind her back wheel and nudged her tire. Hickory's bike shuddered.

Bastard! She edged up the slope and let him pass.

Intent on catching up to his partner, Jake didn't notice Hickory until she was almost level.

She shifted her weight to the front of her bike, jumped out of the saddle, and powered past, clipping his handlebars as she rocked from side to side.

Jake's front wheel wobbled, and he panicked. He straightened his arms and pushed back on the pedals but applied too much pressure and catapulted over the handlebars, crashing onto the hard surface.

Hickory glanced behind and saw Jake being helped from the track. *What goes around, comes around, Jake.* She sucked in some deep breaths and set out to catch Harry, who was now fifty meters ahead. With less than half a lap to go, she accelerated past him into second place. *Here I come, Gareth!*

She couldn't stop grinning. Three months ago she would have been asleep in bed at this time of the morning. After she'd accepted the mission, Cortherien arranged for intensive one-on-one training to rapidly increase her strength and aerobic fitness. That proved tough enough, before taking on the plyometric exercises that boosted her flexibility and reaction times. But it was worth the pain to be able to channel her energy into the powerful and explosive athleticism she'd just unleashed.

Hickory hadn't felt this fit since winning her third Olympic silver medal in gymnastics at the age of thirteen. At that point, she was one of the best athletes in the world, with a long and exciting career in front of her. In the two years that followed, she sprouted twelve

inches and became uncompetitive at the elite level.

The Academy recruited her soon after, and when she graduated at age twenty, she'd signed up with the Corps for the first time. Now she was back. *Prefect Cortherien, you might be a sanctimonious prig, but thank you so much for pushing me to do this.*

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The alert came through on Hickory's personal hollo-channel just as she finished with her class for the day.

"Meet me in my office at seven. There's a matter of importance we need to discuss."

She arrived a few minutes early and sat in reception, alternately cracking her knuckles and glancing at the wall clock. At seven precisely, the security door buzzed, and she strode through.

Prefect Cortherien activated the privacy mode on his console and rose from his nineteenth-century walnut writing table. He reached for Hickory's hands and held her at arm's length. "My dear, how good to see you again. You're looking well. Teaching must agree with you."

"You would say that, Pierre. You're the one who recommended me for the job." She raised an eyebrow and smiled pleasantly at the prefect.

He frowned at her familiarity, then turned the scowl into a smile to match her own. "I terminated your employment with the Alien Corps for your own good—I was concerned for your welfare, child." He patted her hand.

Hickory's lips curled. She'd spent eight months in pursuit of a self-proclaimed messiah in the swamps and jungles of a remote planet in Andromeda, and when she returned to Earth, physically and emotionally exhausted, Cortherien had sacked her.

"My welfare? I needed your support, Pierre, not your concern."

His smile faded, and he let her hand drop. He crossed to his desk and shuffled some papers. "Your father called in the other day. He asked me to pass on his best wishes and says he hopes to be able to spend some time with you on his next visit."

Hickory swallowed. She opened the french doors leading to the balcony and stepped outside. Leaning over the parapet, she gazed at the vista of New Rome. After the war, the United World Government had rebuilt the city as a shining example of the new order, declaring it Earth's capital and the center for world government.

Spiraling towers and domes made from glass and plastiskin exemplified the state-of-the-art character of the city, changing color and shape depending on the weather and time of day. Few of the original buildings survived, but famous landmarks such as the Coliseum and the Pantheon had been restored to their original glory and now stood amidst extensive parkland. Private vehicles were banned from the city, but public transport capsules zoomed along multi-layered suspension roads that looped around the buildings and each other.

"That's nice," she said finally. "What did he come to see you about?"

Hickory kept her back to the prefect. After her mother had died giving birth to her younger brother, Michael, her father had offloaded both of them to his sister, Maddie. For ten years, the only communication she'd received from him was an occasional birthday card with his name printed on it. In the last five years, there'd been nothing. George Lace held the rank of flag officer in the Navy. He rarely made it back to Earth, and never so much as called her when he did.

Cortherien came to her side. “Your father does care for you, you know. As an admiral in the Intragalactic Agency, he carries enormous responsibility. Over forty known planets are at a comparable stage of development to Earth. I don’t want to preach at you, Hickory, but you know not all of these are friendly, and your father is the person responsible for neutralizing potential threats. He can’t just drop everything and come home, much as he might want to.” He patted her on the shoulder.

How much of his precious time would it take just to say hello? I bet he caught up with Michael. She turned away from the balustrade and sighed. “I’m amazed he knows I teach here.” She paused, struck by the truth of her own words. No way would her father have known. She met Cortherien’s gaze. The prefect was hiding something from her.

Hickory was a neoteric, one of a small percentage of the population born with nascent empathic ability deep in the receptors of their brains. The condition had gone undiagnosed until her sixth birthday when her aunt became worried about her odd behavior and took her to see a psychiatrist. He concluded her psychosis originated from the strong emotional bond she’d shared with her mother at the time of her death.

Later examinations by specialists dismissed the psychiatrist’s findings and classified her increasing sensitivity as a rare mutation that had emerged during the New Dark Age following World War III.

By the time Hickory turned fifteen, her spontaneous piggybacking onto other people’s thoughts and feelings reached the point where she had trouble distinguishing which were her own. Her doctor arranged for her to be hooked up to PORO, the Proto-sentient Objective Reasoning Organism, and surgeons from around the world probed her mind via the bio-computer. They applied patches and created new gateways in her brain that allowed her to better control the intensity of her empathic responses.

Following the operation, Hickory discovered she could sense whether someone was lying or avoiding the truth simply by reaching out to them with her mind.

“That’s probably enough about your family issues, Hickory. We have more to concern ourselves with than whether your father loves you or not.”

She knew the barb had been aimed to deflect her from the truth. Cortherien was well aware of her talents and adept at masking his thoughts.

“Admiral Lace brought me some interesting news from the far side of the Eridanus constellation. They’ve discovered a planet there—the fourth of six orbiting a main-sequence star about twenty light years from Earth. Prosperine has an oxygen-based atmosphere and a dominant life form similar in body plan to humans. They call themselves Avanauri, after their homeland in the northern continent. The anthropologists tell us the species has developed from an oviparous ancestry.” He walked to his desk and took a pack of cigarettes and an ashtray from the drawer. “Disgusting habit, I know,” he said, lighting up a Sobranie and inhaling deeply. “But it calms my nerves.”

Hickory’s nose wrinkled at the pungent aroma. “They’re descended from birds?”

Cortherien grimaced and exhaled a cloud of smoke before continuing. “To be more precise, they’re warm-blooded, egg-laying vertebrates with genetic traits similar to Earth’s extinct herbivores.”

Hickory tried to imagine a cross between a feathered dinosaur and a gorilla. The idea of intelligent birds made her feel queasy, then she realized she’d tapped into the prefect’s

nervousness.

Cortherien continued. “No wings, but they do have opposable thumbs. Their offspring begin life in *an egg*.” He shrugged. “My guess is that Prosperine—unlike our own planet sixty-six million years ago—didn’t have an extinction event. Instead, early dinosaur-like life forms evolved to become sapient. All part of God’s great plan, I suppose.” He tapped his cigarette ash into the tray.

“I assume the species is relatively advanced. Otherwise, the IA wouldn’t be interested.” Her father did nothing for altruistic reasons.

“Yes.” He hesitated. “I don’t have all the details, but it seems there are three stages to their development. The embryo grows inside a soft shell which is somehow conjoined to the mother. After seventy days, the egg is released, and a proto-baby hatches out. It starts off life with a prehensile appendage that looks like a tail, but is functionally similar to an umbilical cord. The tail latches onto its parent and allows the infant to extract nourishment. When the Avanauri child starts to eat solid foods, it separates and withers away.” He tutted. “Remarkable.”

Weird. The diversity of life in the universe seemed as infinite as the universe itself to Hickory. Even at this relatively young age of space exploration, the IA had come across many strange species, but none quite like this. She wondered why the prefect wanted her to know all this—she was no longer an active operative, and he wasn’t one for small talk.

Cortherien went on. “Somewhere along their evolutionary path, the Avanauri’s ancestors must have shed their more distinct avian or saurian characteristics, much in the same way as our human antecedents shed their tails and came down from the trees. You can see from this picture that the modern day Prosperine species is bipedal and looks remarkably humanoid.” He switched on a holographic image.

Hickory stared. The creature wore a garment like a monk’s cassock. It appeared tall and thin, with long legs and arms. Its skin was white with dark pigmentation around its neck and eyes. The oval-shaped head was devoid of hair except for a thin strip running along the top of the skull like a Mohawk. *Created in God’s image.* The irreverent thought flitted through her mind. “How intelligent are they?” she asked.

“Their race is older than ours, but their brain has developed more slowly. According to the admiral, they’re proficient in the physical sciences. He believes their intellectual and emotional development is approaching a critical point and will accelerate over the next century. The IA anticipates they will be on a par with humanity within a few hundred years.”

Hickory felt a flutter in her belly as she realized she would be reinstated to active duty. She said nothing, waiting.

The prefect cleared his throat. “How long is it since you’ve been on assignment, Hickory?”

She could have told him to the day, even the hour when she returned from her last mission. “Three years,” she said.

He smiled at her and nodded. “And no doubt you miss being in the field. The good news is the IA has specifically asked that you be released from your academic work to undertake an investigation in the Prosperine city of Ezekan.”

Hickory’s heartbeat raced, and she felt her cheeks glow. She averted her eyes so that

Cortherien wouldn't see the excitement shining through.

The prefect walked to the wall dispenser and said, "Coffee, black with two." He raised his eyebrows at Hickory, who shook her head. He took a sip from the steaming brew, then lit another cigarette.

"Reports have been coming in over the last few months that religious fanaticism is on the increase. There have been claims of magic performed by a mystic called Kar-sèr-Sephiryth. Loosely translated, that means 'Kar, beloved son.' His followers call him 'Teacher.'"

Hickory felt strangely light-headed. She forced herself to focus on the prefect's words. "You think this Teacher might be the one?"

Cortherien hesitated. "How long has the Corps been looking?" He walked over to the window and glanced down at the plaza below before continuing. "It's been well over sixty years since we discovered Philip's manuscript, and in that time fourteen potential messiahs have been investigated." He turned and blew a stream of smoke into the air. His eyes sparkled. "Hickory, do you believe in our mission?"

It was a fair question. One she'd struggled with. "I believe we can't stop searching," she said.

"I agree, although I would put it more positively. Someday, Hickory, on some remote, insignificant little planet, we will find the Christ or at least evidence He has been there. This 'beloved son' could be the one we have been searching for."

"I wish I had your faith, Pierre. But why would the IA concern themselves with a religious matter, and why me?"

His fingers flicked at the cigarette, dislodging ash onto the floor as he paced back and forth. "There's been an upsurge in violence and rumors of revolution in the capital. The civil government has asked the IA for their help in dealing with it."

Hickory shook her head and frowned. "The Agency don't get involved in internal politics."

"Which is why they've requested the Corps to investigate. We have a vital interest, and..."

Hickory waited.

"And," Cortherien began again, nodding, "the IA have been negotiating with them for the sale of crynidium—"

"Crynidium? They have crynidium?" Hickory's eyes widened. The liquid metal was essential for faster-than-light travel. Calling it rare didn't do it justice. So far, only three sources existed in the entire known universe. No wonder the IA were involved.

"Yes, and Admiral Lace was quite explicit. They've never dealt with a species so different. Given the sensitivity and importance of the relationship, he wants someone with Alien Corps experience on the team—he believes your rather unique talents could come in useful."

Hickory sensed the prefect's duplicity. The admiral might think her skills would come in handy, but Cortherien didn't share his view. She dropped her eyes. Though she desperately wanted to return to active duty, how could she? And why would Cortherien approve her transfer to the Agency for an operation like this, against his better judgment? Did he want her to fail?

“As I recall, you were the one who said I was no longer up to the rigors of the Corps,” she said.

A bead of sweat glistened on Cortherien’s forehead and trickled towards his eyebrow. “Your father insisted—and I agree with him—this mission needs an experienced head. He believes guile will be more useful than athleticism, and besides you have four months to get into shape—you’ll have access to the IA’s top training resources before you go.”

That still didn’t answer the question: why her? There were several other experienced operatives they could have pulled in for this job. Either Cortherien didn’t know, or he wasn’t prepared to say. She probed, but his barriers were up again.

Hickory negotiated terms. She would be reinstated to the rank of commander and could handpick her crew. She would be given full access to the equipment and training she needed, subject to an embargo on bringing modern weapons and technology to the planet. She would have sole discretion on how to proceed once she arrived, report directly to the admiral and keep Cortherien up to date on progress.

“You’ve been very generous, prefect. You’ve given me a lot to think about. It’s an exciting challenge, but I need a few days to think it through.”

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That evening she began working out at the university gym; stretching, boxing and cycling. Her first session lasted two hours, and she went home tired and aching. She stared at the unopened bottle of ten-year-old Barbaresco, then poured a glass of cold water and took it to bed with her. She rose early the next day and jogged round the lake in the gardens of Villa Borghese. It was a beautiful morning and her heart lifted as she ran. The autumn sunlight shimmered through the red, brown and golden leaves that lingered on the Chestnuts, casting a dappled light along her path.

After the first fifteen minutes, though, she was unable to appreciate the beauty of it and stopped to recover her breath and ease the stitch in her side.

Into the second week, she began to see improvement in her muscle tone and aerobic capacity and bought a road bike. At the end of that week, Hickory called her grandmother to say she was coming over for some pasta.

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Maria Lucerne looked up at her critically. “You are too thin, my little one. Come and play for me while I make something interesting.” Maria at five-foot-five was dwarfed by the much taller Hickory. Her olive complexion and dark hair provided a stark contrast to Hickory’s pale face and burnished red hair. But the two were great friends and had been a comfort to each other after the tragic death of Maria’s daughter, Hickory’s mother.

Hickory laughed as she made her way into the expansive lounge. “Don’t make too much for me. I’m in training.”

Maria popped her head around the door, her eyes wide. “You’re back in service?”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. Whether I should accept or not,” said Hickory.

“Play me ‘Claire de Lune’ while I fix some puntarelle and we can talk over lunch.”

Hickory had been taught classical piano from an early age. It was still a favorite way for her to relax. She settled onto the stool, centered herself, and let her fingers fall lightly to stroke the first notes of Debussy’s classic piece.

When lunch was ready, they took their plates and glasses onto the balcony and sat at the small table. Hickory glimpsed the spire of the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore peeking above the rooftops. It was hard to believe that the fifth-century church had survived the war.

“It’s quite beautiful here. You’re very lucky to have this place, Nonna, and your pasta smells delicious.” She smiled and forked some fettuccine into her mouth.

“It sounds like you’ve had some luck too. Don’t keep me in suspense, tell me all about it.”

Hickory outlined Cortherien’s proposal. “But I don’t know whether to accept. I’d have to work pretty closely with Dad.”

Maria looked at her over her sunglasses. “Surely that’s not a reason to reject this opportunity? You’re mature enough not to let a poor relationship stop you, and you never know, this might be a good chance for the two of you to—well, to get to know each other a little.”

“I’m sure he’s not interested in that, Nonna. You know what he’s like. But you’re probably right—I could work with him professionally. To be honest, it’s just an excuse. The truth is, I’m afraid I’m not up to fieldwork anymore. Cortherien was pretty adamant after my last operation that I didn’t have what it takes. He only agreed to this because the admiral insisted.” She put her fork down.

Maria tilted her head to one side and smiled affectionately at her granddaughter. “Gattina, you love the Corps. It’s what you were born to do.” She patted Hickory on the knee and rose. “Don’t let that old priest put you in a box. I’ll get us some coffee.”

Later that night Hickory called Cortherien to accept the assignment.

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Hickory glanced at the bio-computer on her wrist. Everything looked good: cadence, heart rate, energy reserves, elapsed time. Despite Jake’s tactics, she could still beat her personal best. She’d left Harry far behind, but Gareth still led out in front. She pushed back into the saddle and put her head down. *I’m not going to let that young monkey beat me.*

She could see he was tiring. He’d bet everything on starting out fast to establish a sizable lead, but the early effort had cost him. She crept up to Gareth’s back wheel and took advantage of his slipstream. He was off his seat, straining at the pedals, but his body had decided to give up, even if his mind hadn’t. His backside swung from side to side over the saddle. Hickory took a moment to admire it, then came out of his slipstream and accelerated to the finish line.

“Yee-haw!” She raised her arms in a victory salute as she headed towards the exit of the velodrome. “Once more and forever, the champion!”

Gareth Blanquette pulled alongside, grinning sheepishly at her. “I couldn’t very well beat my boss, now could I?”

“Ha! That’ll be the day, Junior. I think you owe me one large O.J.”

They dismounted and headed for the café. The cleats on their shoes clattered on the wooden floor as they made their way to an empty table and entered their order into the console.

Gareth looked around the crowded room. “It’s surprising how popular cycling is in this

age of PORO-enhanced fitness programs.”

“Still a nice way to tour around and appreciate what countryside we have left on this planet. And nothing beats it for building stamina and aerobic fitness, not to mention a competitive spirit.” She waved her orange juice in front of his face and arched an eyebrow.

He shook his head in mock disgust. “And I thought I was in pretty good shape. You’ve obviously been working out.”

“Yeah, a bit. I’m heading to the gym after I finish class today. Want to join me?” She grinned at him.

Gareth sipped at his drink. “Nah, wouldn’t want to show you up. Another time maybe. Anyway, I need to check out an old vid for Cortherien.”

“Something special?”

He nodded his head. “As a matter of fact—yes. Some pre-war footage about the discovery of Philip’s ‘bones box.’”

“Could be interesting. Where’d you find it?” Most of the ancient vids and docs, she knew, were destroyed during the sack of Rome.

“I’m helping a friend catalog the contents of a vault that’s been recently discovered under the ruins of Vatican City. There’s a heck of a lot of material in there. I found the vid amongst some other bits and pieces belonging to Innocent XIV. I mentioned it to the prefect and he arranged for copies to be made.”

“I wouldn’t mind having a look,” said Hickory.

“I’ll send you a copy. Or I could bring it over and we could watch it together with a bottle of wine or two?” He leered at her.

Hickory grinned. Gareth was her ex-student. A bright-eyed twenty-three-year-old adventurer, he’d graduated maxima cum laude two years ago but then unexpectedly resigned from the Alien Corps to continue his studies. He’d become a brilliant engineer, specializing in propulsion systems—including the latest Lightwave “surfing” technology. Despite many offers, he had no permanent job, preferring to work on an ad-hoc basis, picking and choosing the projects that most interested him. Though expert in many things scientific, Gareth was a rookie when it came to girls. He had a mild crush on Hickory, which she tolerated but didn’t encourage.

“Not a chance, Junior. Good try, though.”

He covered his face with his hands. “Oh no—rejected again.” He peeked at her from between his fingers. “You’ve broken my heart.”

She laughed. “Don’t be an idiot!”

He let his hands fall. “You could do worse, you know. When was the last time you had a date with a good-looking boy like me?”

“None of your business, Junior.” It’s been a while, she thought, but she didn’t want the emotional entanglement. Not now. She changed the subject. “Don’t forget the hollo-meeting with Jess tomorrow night. I’ve something important to discuss with both of you.”

“Okay. I get the message.” He sighed. “I need to get going, anyway. I have a morning shuttle to San Francisco to catch.” He rose and smiled. “See you tomorrow.”

“Thanks for the race, Gareth.”