

Chapter One: The Alien Corps 2179AD

Hickory Lace gritted her teeth and forced her legs to spin faster. The ultralight racer surged forward and burned around the velodrome. Frosty air nipped at Hickory's face and whistled over her helmet as she flashed past the eighteen-mile mark. *Two more to go.* Only three racers were ahead; Gareth, Harry and Jake. Jake peeled away from her front wheel and swung high on the stadium wall.

Hickory bridged the gap that had opened up and sat in Harry's slipstream. He and Jake would try to work this between them. Sacrifice one for the team. It was against the rules to take out a rider, but that wouldn't worry either one. They'd both be prepared to forfeit if it meant their buddy took the points. From the corner of her eye, she saw Jake swoop, heading straight for her. There was no time to plan. Hickory let instinct take over.

A millisecond before he sent her flying, she lurched into him. Both machines recoiled and wobbled before being brought under control. Jake veered off to the high side and aimed at her again. At the last moment, he pulled back and dropped behind. She felt the nudge as he bumped her back wheel. *Bastard!* She edged away, turned onto the flat, and feathered her brakes. He was too slow to follow suit. She let him pass and then accelerated to a position above him. Jake lost his composure and struggled to keep close to his partner's wheel, but he had spent too much energy trying to cause the spill. He didn't see her swoop down on him until it was too late. Hickory hit him shoulder on shoulder and he careened off the track. His front wheel turned too far and he applied the brakes trying to right himself but catapulted off his bike and landed head first in the center of the velodrome.

Stupid, thought Hickory. She sucked in some deep breaths, then set out to catch up with Harry, who was now fifty yards ahead. With less than half a lap to go, she powered into second place. *Here I come, Gareth!*

She couldn't stop grinning. She felt vindicated for all her hard work. Three months ago she would have been asleep in bed at this time in the morning. After she accepted the mission, Cortherien had arranged for intensive one-on-one training to rapidly increase her strength and aerobic fitness. That was tough enough, before then taking on the plyometric exercises that boosted her flexibility and reaction times. Now she was capable of channeling her energy into the powerful and explosive athleticism she'd just demonstrated.

Hickory hadn't felt this strong or healthy since she'd won her three Olympic silver medals in gymnastics at the age of seventeen. It was soon after this that she'd been recruited to the Academy. *Prefect Cortherien, you might be a sanctimonious prick, but thank you so much for pushing me to do this.* She thought back to when she'd received the summons.

She'd been lecturing on the principles of leadership and had just dismissed the class when the alert came through on her personal hollo-channel.

"See me in my office tonight at seven. There is a matter of importance we need to discuss."

As she entered his quarters, Prefect Cortherien was hanging up his red skullcap and stole in a wardrobe. He activated the privacy mode on his console, then 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 smiled pleasantly at the Prefect.

He frowned at the familiarity, then turned it into a smile to match hers.

"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 lip curled. She'd spent eight months in a fruitless chase after a self-proclaimed messiah in the swamps and jungles of a remote planet in Andromeda. When she'd 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 moved behind 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 and walked slowly to the window behind the Prefect. She gazed at the vista of New Rome. The United World Government had gone all out to re-create the city as a shining example of the new order and had declared it Earth's capital and the center for world government. Few buildings had survived the war, but famous landmarks such as the Coliseum and the Pantheon had been restored to their original glory and were surrounded by parklands. Spiraling towers and domes, made from glass and plastiskin, breathed and changed color and shape depending on the weather and time of day. 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, stony faced. "What did he come to see you about?"

She kept her back to the Prefect to hide her disappointment. She'd scarcely seen her father in the last twenty years. When her mother died giving birth to her younger brother, Michael, her father had offloaded both his children to his sister Maddie. George Lace was a flag officer in the Navy, and rarely made it back to Earth. However, the fact he had been in the neighborhood and hadn't bothered to call served to twist the knife that he had lodged in her heart when she was six years old.

Cortherien came to her side and raised his eyebrows. "Your father does care for you, you know. As an admiral in the Intragalactic Agency, he carries an 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 that precious time would it have taken just to say hello? I bet he caught up with Michael. "I'm amazed he would remember I was teaching here." She paused, struck by the truth of her own words. There was no way her father would have remembered. Something else was going on here. She met Cortherien's gaze. The Prefect was concealing 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 her brain. The rare mutation had evolved out of the New Dark Age following the war. In Hickory, it had gone unnoticed until she was six years old when she was hospitalized suffering from acute anxiety and shock. The examining physicians concluded her trauma was in some way linked to her mother's painful death while giving birth to her second child.

By the time she was thirteen, her spontaneous piggybacking onto other people's emotions had reached the point where she had trouble distinguishing which feelings were hers. Medical scientists hooked her up to PORO, the Proto-sentient Objective Reasoning Organism, and connected surgeons from around the world to 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. A legacy of this was that she could usually sense whether someone was lying or being truthful 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 was adept at masking his thoughts and true feelings.

"Admiral Lace brought me interesting news from the far side of the Eridanus constellation. There's a planet there named Prosperine—the fourth of six orbiting a main-sequence star about 20 light years from Earth. Prosperine has an oxygen-based atmosphere and a dominant humanoid life form. The anthropologists tell us the species has developed from an oviparous ancestry." He walked to his desk and took a packet of cigarettes and an ashtray from his drawer. "Disgusting habit, I know," he said, inhaling deeply. "But it calms my nerves."

Hickory's eyebrows rose. "They're descended from birds?"

Cortherien grimaced and exhaled a cloud of smoke before continuing. "Loosely speaking. To be more precise, they're warm-blooded, egg-laying vertebrates who share a common ancestry with herbivorous dinosaurs and anthropoid mammals."

Hickory knew the Prefect was an authority on paleontology and ornithology. She tried to imagine a cross between a toothless pterodactyl and a gorilla. "What do they look like? I mean, do they have wings, feathers?" The thought of intelligent birds made her feel uneasy. Then she realized she was tuning in to the Prefect's sentiments. The mask concealing his thoughts was slipping.

"No wings, but they do have opposable thumbs, and four toes on each foot with one pointing backward. Their offspring begins life in *an egg*." He shrugged helplessly. "All part of God's great plan, I suppose." He tapped his cigarette ash into the ashtray.

Hickory's interest was aroused. "I assume they're intelligent. Otherwise, the IA wouldn't be interested."

"Yes." He hesitated. "I don't have all the details yet, but it seems there are three stages in their development. The embryo grows in the mother's womb for around seventy days before it's expelled from the body. Then, it takes a further ten days until the egg hatches. What emerges is a proto-baby with a parasitic appendage where a tail would be. The tail latches onto its parent, extracting nourishment until, at three hundred days when the baby can be fed orally, the appendage separates and withers away. Remarkable."

Weird. The IA had come across some strange species in its travels but none with such unusual origins. She considered why the Prefect would be telling her 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 adults must have had more distinct avian or saurian characteristics, just as human beings had tails and swung from trees. You can see from this picture, though, that the modern day Perine is bipedal and looks remarkably human." He switched on a holographic photo. "No wings," he mused. "I guess the mammalian genes must be dominant."

Hickory stared at the picture. The creature, wearing a garment like a monk's cassock, looked tall and skinny, with long legs and arms. Its skin was mainly 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. "How advanced are they?" she said.

"Their race is older than man, but their brains have developed more slowly. According to the admiral, they're adept in the physical sciences. He believes their intellectual and emotional processes are reaching a critical point and are likely to undergo rapid acceleration over the next decade or two. 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 was going to be reinstated to active duty. She said nothing, waiting.

The Prefect cleared his throat. "How long since you've been on assignment, Hickory?"

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

"The IA specifically asked that you be released from your academic work to undertake an investigation in the Prosperine city of Ezekan." 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 who goes by the name of Kar-sèr-Sephiryth, which loosely translated means 'Kar, beloved son.' His followers call him 'Teacher.'"

"You think this Teacher might be the one?"

The Prefect 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 Philip's manuscript was discovered, and in that time we've found and investigated fourteen potential messiahs." He turned and blew a stream of smoke into the air. His eyes sparkled. "Hickory, do you believe in our mission?"

It was a good 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."

"Even so, why would the IA concern themselves with a religious matter, Pierre, and why me?"

His fingers flicked at the cigarette, dislodging some ash onto the floor. "There is another problem which may or may not be related. There's been an upsurge in crowd violence and rumors of revolution. The civil government has asked the IA for help in dealing with it."

"The Agency doesn't involve themselves in internal politics," said Hickory, frowning.

"Which is why they have 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 potential sale of crynidium—"

"Crynidium? They have crynidium?" Hickory's eyes widened. The liquid metal was an essential constituent of the fuel that enabled faster-than-light travel. Calling it rare did not do it

justice. So far, only three sources existed in the entire known universe. No wonder the IA was involved.

“Yes, and Admiral Lace was quite explicit. They’ve never dealt with a species so different, and 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 thought Prefect Cortherien sounded less than convinced on this point. She felt both excited and frightened by the prospect of a return to active duty. She desperately wanted to, but she was out of condition, rusty. How could they expect her to drop everything and leap into an operation like this? Unprepared, she was certain to fail. Her last live op had taught her that.

“As I recall, you were the one who said I was no longer up to the rigors of the Corps. What’s changed your mind?” she said.

A bead of sweat gathered on Cortherien’s forehead and trickled towards his eyebrow. “Your father insisted—and I agree with him—that this mission needs an experienced head. We believe guile will be more effective 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 and she couldn’t tell which it was.

Hickory negotiated terms. She was to be reinstated to the rank of Commander; she could handpick her crew and have full access to the funding and training she needed; she would have sole discretion on how to proceed once she arrived on the planet, subject to an embargo on the import of modern weapons and technology; she would report progress regularly to the admiral and Cortherien.

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

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 Barbarosco, then poured a glass of cold water and took it to bed with her. She rose early the next morning and jogged through the park, along the riverside. The water was sparkling, and the sun shimmered through the branches, casting dappled light along her path. After the first ten minutes, she was unable to appreciate the beauty and had to stop several times 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 puntarella.

Maria Lucerne looked up at her critically. “You are too thin, my little one. Come and play for me while I make something more interesting than salad.” 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 gnocchi 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 and struck the first notes.

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

“It’s quite beautiful here. You’re very lucky to have this place, Nonna, and this pasta smells delicious.” She smiled and forked some gnocchi 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’m not sure I should 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, Hickory? You’re mature enough not to let a poor relationship stop you, and you never know, this might be a good opportunity 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 don’t have it in me 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 lovingly 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 man put you in a box. I’ll get us some coffee.”

Later that night she called Prefect Cortherien to accept the assignment.

Hickory glanced at the bio-computer on her wrist. Everything looked good: cadence, heart rate, energy reserves, elapsed time. Despite Jake’s attack, she was on track to top her personal best. She had left Harry far behind, but Gareth was still 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 sizeable lead, but the early effort had cost him and now his body was hemorrhaging energy. With nothing left to replenish it, his legs would be filling with lactic acid.

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 it was time to give up, even if his mind hadn’t. He had lost that relaxed motion and his backside was now swinging from side to side over the saddle. Hickory took a moment to admire it, then came out of his slipstream and accelerated past him to the finish line.

“Yee-haw!” she shouted, raising her arms in a victory salute and coasting towards the exit to 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 went into 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. There were plenty of cycling enthusiasts eating breakfast.

Gareth looked around. “It’s surprising how popular cycling is in this day and 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 work 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 I’ve had converted.”

“Something special?”

He nodded his head rapidly. “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?” She knew most of the ancient vids and docs had been destroyed in the fighting.

“I was helping a friend catalogue the contents of a vault just discovered beneath the ruins of Vatican City. There was a heck of a lot of materials in there. I found the vid amongst some other things belonging to Innocent XIV. I told the Prefect about it and he arranged for copies to be made.”

“I wouldn’t mind having a look at it,” 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 had graduated maxima cum laude two years ago but had unexpectedly resigned from the Alien Corps to continue his studies. He was a brilliant engineer, specializing in propulsion systems—including the latest Lightwave “surfing” technology. Despite many offers, he didn’t have a permanent job, preferring to work on an ad-hoc basis, picking and choosing the projects that most interested him. Though an expert in all things scientific, Gareth was a rookie when it came to girls. He had a mild crush on Hickory, which Hickory 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 and smiled at her. “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 had been a while, she thought, but she couldn’t afford 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 off, anyway. I’ve a morning shuttle to San Francisco to catch.” He rose and smiled. “See you tomorrow.”

“Thanks for the race, Gareth. See you tomorrow.”