

BOOK ONE IN THE *PROSPERINE* SERIES

THE
ALIEN
CORPS

P J M C D E R M O T T

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Extract from a manuscript discovered in 2095 AD

“At the end of days, the Lord of Light will be seen on many different worlds. He will lead believers to the planet called Earth and they will be united with their brothers, the dead and the living, and live with the Sons of the Father for eternity.”

Aquarius IV 2176 AD

Lightning snaked from the leaden sky and struck the tree a mere hundred yards from where the girl now stood. The trunk exploded in a ball of fire and she ducked. *Silly cow*. She redoubled her efforts and sprinted for the tepee tree as the thunder crashed about her head and hail pummeled the ground.

Breathing hard, she parted the branches anchoring the weeping plant in the marshy soil then activated a glow-globe to check for any hostile tenants. The tree was a favorite refuge for wildlife, offering warmth and shelter from the harsh climate of Aquarius IV. She sniffed. The tent-like interior had a musty smell, but at least it felt dry.

The girl squeezed inside and sat on the carpet of dry leaves, resting her back against the tree trunk. She listened to the storm for a few seconds, gathering her breath, then wiped the rain from her face and removed the envelope from her pocket.

She turned it back and forth in her hands. It was a curious object. No one used paper these days. If they needed to write, t-mail was the medium of choice, but most people didn't even bother with that, preferring the more intimate contact of their SIM. The implant hooked into the visual and auditory cortices of the brain, providing almost instantaneous communication. A letter, though, did offer anonymity, should the writer so desire.

That was the first clue to the sender.

Hickory brought the envelope close and inhaled. An old-fashioned smell of peach and musk, vaguely familiar, tickled her nose. An image of mousy brown hair and dark-rimmed eyes rose before her. *Julia?* The assistant medical officer was a strange one. She was always moping around the flight deck or sitting by herself in a far corner of the lounge. She'd given Hickory one or two dark glances over recent days, and when Hickory tried to engage the girl in conversation, Julia had looked her up and down in a way that made her blood run cold.

She slipped one finger under the flap and carefully eased open the envelope. Inside was a single sheet of paper. The words were handwritten in a genteel blue script, belying their poisonous message. “Lieutenant Lace, as a fellow officer, I feel it’s my duty to let you know your affair with Engineer Switzer has become common knowledge aboard the Dreadnought. You may not have known, but Jacob is married. He’s also father to three gorgeous children. I assume you aren’t aware of these facts, otherwise you wouldn’t be doing what you’re doing. For the sake of the family, I hope you’ll reconsider.” It was signed, “A well-wisher.”

Her head swam from the shock. *Julia, of course. Some well-wisher—more like a bitter, spiteful, old maid.* Married? He couldn’t be, wouldn’t have led her on the way he had, seducing her with his boyish good looks and shy smiles; his kindnesses, like bringing her coffee and making her laugh at silly things. Then, the hesitant, almost accidental brush of fingers, sweet words whispered while they sat alone in the ship’s observation deck gazing at the myriad of stars. And afterward, the nights of discovery and unbridled passion in this very place, driven by, or so she’d thought, their mutual need for friendship, for affection, for the love that had escaped them both. *Married? No, it’s a mistake. It must be a mistake. The stupid woman is obviously madly jealous.*

But somehow Julia knew or had guessed she and Jacob were an item, and Hickory’s position on the team was now compromised as a result.

She heard footsteps sloshing through rain, then the rustle of leaves as branches were drawn apart. She stood as Jacob entered.

“Hickory, I...” A sheet of notepaper, identical to the one she’d just read, trembled loosely in his hand. “Hickory, I’m so sorry.” He shook his head, his eyes glistening, and his brows wrinkled in pleading.

Hickory’s eyes widened, and she felt her throat tighten painfully. “It’s true then, you’re married with a family?” He said nothing, and she pressed her lips tightly together. She couldn’t stop the bitterness pouring from her. “What was I? Your little bit on the side - something to while away the tedious hours of space travel?”

“No, Hickory, it wasn’t like that.” He bit his lip, then continued. “Okay, I’m married, and I do care for Maeve. She’s a decent person and an amazing mother to the kids. But I don’t love her. I...I love you.”

She scrutinized his face, then reached out with her empathic sense. Hickory had sworn to herself never to use it on friends because it felt like an intrusion on their privacy, but she needed to know the truth. She

searched for the man who loved her but found only a caricature. Sadness took hold of her, cold and hollow. “Why didn’t you tell me? You led me on, made me believe we had a future together. Oh, God - I suppose everyone on the ship knows.” She took a step back, grasping her arms.

He made to reach out to her, but she slapped his hand aside. “No! You’re a liar. You made a fool out of me, but it stops here.”

Jacob’s eyes hardened. He straightened to his full height, crumpled the letter into a ball, and tossed it at her feet. “Don’t kid yourself, Honey. You were just as keen as I was to grab the chance for a roll in the hay. There’s not exactly a lot of choice around here.”

It was as though she’d been doused with ice water. Anger flooded her mind and she struck him.

Jacob reeled back, clutching his bleeding nose.

Hickory pushed past and ran outside. Bile filled her mouth. She couldn’t stand to be in the small space with him.

Mud squelched beneath her feet as she picked her way across the flea-infested swamp. Perspiration covered her face soaking her collar, and tiny flies swarmed in front of her eyes every time she paused to take a breath. She batted them away frantically, but they persisted and nipped at her exposed skin. Their needle-sharp teeth carried a multitude of exotic diseases endemic to Aquarius IV, and she’d been inoculated before arrival, but that didn’t prevent the insects leaving a small itchy swelling with each bite. This only made her mood, already dark, even blacker.

Her quarry held a three-hour lead. She could sense his presence, albeit faintly. She felt thankful for sensing anything at all. Without her empathic skills, she could never hope to find him.

The Corps Commander had tried to alert her to the kidnap attempt earlier. But she’d switched off her SIM during the argument with Jacob to prevent accidentally airing their affair in public. When she reconnected afterward, the religious fanatics had already made their move. Her heart beat faster at the thought of failure. She and Jacob were finished, but their brief liaison might yet result in a permanent scar. Hickory glanced at her ex-lover running parallel to her, about twenty meters distant, and gritted her teeth.

Her best friend, the space pilot Jess Parker, loped alongside her. “Any sign of them, yet?” she asked, her eyes flicking across the terrain ahead.

“Faint images. I think they’ve stopped for a rest, thankfully. About ten miles north of here.” Hickory panted as she spoke. *Too much Lambrusco*. It had been a wild month of carousing in the bars and taverns of Aquarius IV. Besotted though she was, she didn’t entirely abandon her responsibilities in the investigation of the alien, Crxtor Aliaq. She’d deduced at their first meeting he wasn’t who they were looking for. He was a miracle worker alright, but of the sorcerer kind—party tricks and stage magic—no spiritual side to him, just fakery. Another failure for the Alien Corps to add to their growing list. *Is there any point to all this anyway?* She shook her head, but the facts couldn’t be denied.

The new Gospel was discovered nearly a hundred years before. Written by an eyewitness to the teachings of Christ, it was certified as genuine by the Prognostic Cybernetic Network -PROCYN - the latest breakthrough in man/computer intelligence systems. The secret revealed in that document shook the world to its foundations and was the catalyst for a nuclear war lasting over ten years*. The prophecy stated the Messiah would rise on different worlds throughout the universe. The Vatican established the Alien Corps to search for signs of His presence amongst inhabited planets, but their mission had been interrupted by the war and its aftermath.

When humanity emerged from the darkness, the Corps was re-activated, and many potential messiahs had since been discovered, but all were proven false. Crxtor Aliaq of Aquarius IV was the latest.

“I hope they stay there for a while, then. If we don’t catch up to them in the next half hour, my legs are going to fall off. I don’t suppose it’ll matter because there won’t be much left of me when these flies get done.” Jess complained, but Hickory could sense no lessening of effort from her, and she wasn’t surprised. She’d known Jess since they’d studied together at Rome University, and they’d been firm friends ever since then.

Hickory managed a grin at her friend despite her mood, then forced her legs to move faster.

Two hours later, their mission ended abruptly. They found Crxtor Aliaq stripped naked, his arms and legs staked out on the ground, his eyes milky-white in death.

Jacob examined the body and raised his eyebrows at Hickory. “How do we explain this? I think we’re looking at the end of our careers right here.”

**As told in Born of Fire, Prequel to the Prosperine Series*

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 so, 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 emitted a quick snort of disgust. After she'd found the lifeless body of Crxtor Aliaq, she'd spent weeks in self-recrimination, trudging through the swamps and jungles of Aquarius IV fruitlessly chasing up clues to his assassination. When she returned to Earth, physically and emotionally exhausted, Cortherien had sacked her.

She shook her head. "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 rebuilt the city as a shining example of the new order, declaring it Earth's capital and the center for world government.

Few of the original buildings survived, but famous landmarks such as the Coliseum and the Pantheon had been restored to their original glory

and were now surrounded by extensive parkland. Spiraling towers and domes, made from glass and plastiskin, changed color and shape depending on the weather and time of day. Private vehicles were banned from the city, but public transport capsules and electric taxi cabs zoomed along multi-layered suspension roads that looped around buildings and each other like spaghetti.

“That’s nice,” she said finally. “What did he come to see you about?”

Hickory kept her back to the prefect. When her mother died giving birth to her younger brother, Michael, her father had offloaded both to his sister, Maddie. For fifteen years, the only communication she’d received 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. Something else must be going on. 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 went 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 had originated from the strong emotional bond she shared with her mother at the time of her death.

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

By the time Hickory turned fifteen, her spontaneous piggybacking onto other people’s feelings had reached the point where she had trouble

distinguishing which thoughts were her own. Her doctor arranged for her to be hooked up to PORO, the Proto-sentient Objective Reasoning Organism, which allowed eminent surgeons located in New York, London, Moscow and Tel-Aviv to work on her mind. In cooperation with the bio-computer, they applied patches and created new gateways in her brain to reduce the intensity of her empathic responses.

After the operation, Hickory found with her power subdued, she could now sense whether someone was lying or avoiding the truth 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 was aimed to deflect her from the truth. Cortherien was 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. There’s a planet—the fourth of six orbiting a main-sequence star about twenty light years from Earth. Prosperine, as it’s called, 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 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 akin to Earth’s extinct herbivorous dinosaurs.”

Hickory tried to imagine a cross between a feathered dinosaur and a super-brainy gorilla but failed. The idea of intelligent birds was making her feel queasy. Then she realized she’d latched onto the prefect’s emotion.

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

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

Cortherien went on. "Somewhere along their evolutionary path, their 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 the modern day Prosperine species is bipedal and looks remarkably humanoid." He switched on a holographic image.

Hickory started. The creature wore a garment like a monk's cassock. It appeared tall and thin, with long skinny legs and arms. Its skin was mainly white with dark pigmentation on its neck and around the 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 humankind, 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 is likely to undergo rapid acceleration 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, two months and ten days.* "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 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 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 year 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. Loosely translated, it means ‘Kar, beloved son.’ His followers call him ‘Teacher.’”

Hickory felt strangely lightheaded. She forced herself to focus on the prefect’s words. “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 eighty years since the discovery of Philip’s manuscript, and in that time, we’ve investigated fourteen potential messiahs.” He turned and blew a stream of smoke into the air. “Including the one unfortunately killed during your last mission. This ‘beloved son’ could be the one we’ve been searching for, but there’s a problem. Our intelligence tells us he’s a thorn in the side of the government and a target of vitriol from a disgruntled cleric called Sequana whose mission seems to be to return the planet to the dark ages.”

....to be continued.