

RISE OF THE ERLACHI

THE ADVENTURES OF THE SPACE HEROINE HICKORY LACE
(Book 2 of Prosperine)

PJ McDermott

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“The Son is co-existent with the Father, which means Jesus was not merely a man. He took the form of a man to fulfill God’s purposes. It is reasonable to assume He took other forms in far-off worlds as well.”

**Pope Innocent XIV on the opening of
The Saint Philip Research Academy, 2099**

Prologue

The wails of the dying joined with the triumphant shouts of the city's defenders and the Whump! Whump! of war catapults in a chorus of horror and madness.

A piercing screech penetrated the secret room. Thurle crouched and covered his ears. He had seen firsthand the savagery of the Charakai attack; had endured the terrified screams of the Bikashi soldiers as the bird-reptiles feasted on their still living flesh. When his master had signaled the retreat, he had been almost giddy with relief.

"This battle is lost," Sequana had acknowledged as his lieutenants urged their steeds to haste, "but the war will go on."

The leader of the Pharlaxian rebels, intent on returning the country to its fundamentalist past, had charged Thurle with bringing him the Sword. Thurle considered the honor well deserved. After all, he had revealed the plans for the city defenses that had almost led to their victory—would have led to victory if it hadn't been for the Earthling female. The one named Hickory Lace, who had used her dark magic to call the Charakai down upon them. Balor curse her name. The memory of the trust his leader had placed in him fortified Thurle and he

thrust his fears aside.

A few days before defecting to the rebels, Thurle had scouted the maze of tunnels leading under the mountain into the Temple of Balor and he was confident he had taken the right turns. He examined the rock wall blocking his path. Four small depressions scarred the otherwise smooth surface. He placed his fingers in the cavities, and pushed. The rock face swung gently away from him, and a shaft of light greeted him from the other side. Thurle peered through the crack. Seeing no one, he slipped inside.

He had come to the temple many times, and normally there were supplicants and priests aplenty, but not today. The priests were on the city ramparts, encouraging the city militia to greater efforts, distributing amulets and giving blessings and absolution to the troops.

The perpetual flame on the altar flickered red, sending dancing shadows across the four faces of Balor that had been sculpted from the mountainside. They formed one of the temple's walls. Thurle's heartbeat slowed at the sight of his God. He was, after all, about Balor's business.

Quickly, the revolutionary padded over to the grotto where the legendary heroine Connat-sèra-Haagar was immortalized in stone. The statue held aloft a double-edged sword. At her feet, lay the enemy dead along with the dying in various postures of terror.

The weapon glittered metallically in the light from the fire. Thurle took a dagger from his belt and

tried to prise the Sword from the statue's hand, to no avail. Drawing his longsword, he slashed at the statue's fingers. His blade clanged and ricocheted, sending spasms of pain along his arm. Thurle was horrified. Sequana had assured him that stealing the Sword was a command from Balor, but this felt like a desecration. He mumbled a prayer, *forgive me Balor*, and brought his weapon down with all his might.

The statue's arm shattered and the heroine's sword clattered to the floor of the temple amidst a cloud of dust. He wrapped the relic tightly in his cloak, making certain not to touch the blade. Lifting it reverently, he bowed to the mutilated image, then hurriedly retraced his steps and left the temple.

Chapter 1: Touchdown

“**W**hat the hell are you doing?” Jess Parker gripped the top of the pilot’s seat and shouted into Saurab’s ear. ‘I thought you knew how to fly this antique piece of scrap iron.’

The spaceship bucked and swooped in the grip of the magnetic storm that raged in the ionosphere. The blinding red and green flashes of the flickering Aurora struck the hull and surrounded the jet with the eerie luminescence of St. Elmo’s fire.

“Jess, for God’s sake strap yourself in before you get hurt.” Hickory Lace fought to stay in her seat and clipped on her cross belts. “I don’t want to lose you before we even get started.” The howling screech of the storm battering the hull almost drowned out her voice.

“I know, Hick, but these two cowboys will kill us if they keep going like this.” Her head jerked forward as the ship hit a pocket of air and almost stalled. She glared at the pilot.

The third passenger caught her shoulder and forced her back into her seat. “You heard the commander, Mother. You don’t want to disappoint your new hubby by going home early, eh? Mack told me he was looking forward to some bonding time alone with the kids. And you know Saurab. If you

annoy him, he's just as likely to belly-flop this crate to spite you."

Jess pushed back into her seat, buckled her belt and groaned theatrically. She raised her eyes to the heavens. "Hick, why did we have to bring Gareth along? He's such a boy."

The jet shuddered violently and Gareth's teeth rattled. "More to the point, Mother, why did you have to persuade the Admiral to sign up two Dark Sun smugglers for this mission? If we get out of this alive, Mack is sure going to hear about it."

Hickory shook her head disbelievingly. What was it between Jess and Gareth that they took every opportunity to have a go at each other? The weird thing was that in an emergency, they would give their lives for each other. Jess was thirty years older than the boy and she treated him like a wayward son at times, much to Gareth's chagrin.

The pilot turned his head and grinned. "Save the grievances for someone who cares, Earthlings. The Shahrazad has survived worse than this before now. Why not sit back and enjoy the ride—let the professionals worry about flying? After all, that's what we're being paid for, right?" He laughed and turned back.

The jet hit an air pocket and lost height rapidly and then an updraft hoisted it skyward again. Hickory felt her gorge rise.

"Hold tight," said Jakah from the co-pilot's seat. "Saurab flies the Shahrazad like he fights. He'll get us down safely."

A memory of the diminutive Dark Sun single-

handedly taking on three opponents flashed into Hickory's mind. Saurab had skipped and rolled, avoiding his opponents' swords and disarming them in the process. He had sent them running with a prick at their buttocks and a wild laugh. *I'm not so sure being a member of a gang of space smugglers is the best qualification for a mission like this one.*

The ship pitched violently one last time. Saurab brought it under control and swept through a break in the clouds into the lower atmosphere. Instantly, the ship righted itself and the howling ceased. The Shahrazad glided smoothly to the surface. Saurab engaged landing thrusters and the ship settled on the ground with a gentle, almost silent, hiss.

Hickory let out a long breath and checked her team. All five had been through the Maquillage program before setting out on the mission. As a result, their metabolism and respiratory systems were now in harmony with the Prosperine environment. Their skin had also been impregnated with a screening agent, without which the radiation from Prosperine's sun would kill them within a few days.

Their physical appearance had been transformed to match Prosperine's main indigenous species. Although humanoid in appearance, the Avanauri had evolved from both mammals and herbivorous dinosaurs. Modern day males and females, the naurs and nauris, were hairless except for their eyebrows and a strip running across their skull from forehead to halfway down their spine.

... to be continued.