

## THE FOOT RACE ON PHYTOLORE

4000 Words

From her position in the middle of the line, Bianca Hernandez suppressed a shudder. It wasn't cold under the contest site's dome. But the ten-foot piles of snow outside the barrier persuaded her mind she should wear more clothing than shorts and a T-shirt. Some of the other contestants didn't even wear that much, relying on their furry bodies for protection.

She was the only human competing among the entrants. Like Earth, the other civilizations in the contest came from the far edge of the Milky Way Galaxy. Each individual of a dozen species possessed the same desperation as she did to seize the prize offered by the Cartologans, although their reasons varied.

As Bianca waited for the starter signal, she thought back to the moment she first heard of the Cartologan's landing on Earth.

The invasion didn't begin with gynormous war ships gliding over our major cities. The Cartologans came in one sleek, needlepointed vessel. They politely asked permission to land near the New United World's building on what used to be the border between the United States and Mexico.

Bianca didn't hear about the event that would change the course of human history for at least two hours. Buried in a level 5 isolation lab, she was literally knee-deep in the dissection of a Hatter Worm from the depths of Europa's icy seas.

Water miners found the creature dead, with its head breaking through into the thin oxygen atmosphere of the moon. It was already deceased when they found it...so they said.

Bianca didn't like to think she was doing an autopsy rather than an examination of brain tissue to try to determine the intelligence level of the Hatter.

*We've not encountered any high-level intelligence in our solar system, she thought. Well, I know we should count our ape cousins and the cetaceans. But I'm talking about technology. Is there a race out there that has found a faster-than-light engine?*

Little did she realize that the object of Earth's quest for this knowledge just landed.

Her emergency communicator started buzzing

"Bianca, Bianca, drop your scalpel and get out here. You're not going to believe what's happened."

"What? What?" And of course the device faded out again, as it had been doing for a week now. Shortage of replacement parts. Really shortage of the hafnium needed to build the coated chips.

Martin waved his controller at her on the other side of the plexiglass window. He shook it hard and then showed with wild arm motions she should stop the dissection and start the exit protocol.

Looking down at the creature, Bianca shook her head at the mess it had become. Beautiful prismatic skin had lost its spiky color display and pulsed a dull gray. The top hat that earned the beings their name deflated in her dissection from a meter to a couple centimeters high.

Laying down her instruments of destruction, Bianca went over to the exit door and punched out to take her first shower. Stripping away the wet lab suit into the bio-hazard bin, she

washed her hair and body and then waited the required minutes being blow-dried and irradiated by ultraviolet light.

“You’ve got to see what just happened,” Martin shouted, waving his MFC, the sometime-working multi-functional contact pad.

She buttoned up the last closure on her everyday jumpsuit and got Martin to hold the device to her eye level. What looked like a space yacht, needle-pointed on each end, sat in the only open green space next to the New United World building. Huge, it was nothing Earth built in size and elegance. Three-word symbols were decaled on the ship area Bianca could see, in characters that had nothing to do with any language she had ever seen.

To Earth’s credit, none of the large group of people surrounding the ship carried a weapon. And when a portal opened, no one behaved aggressively when three tall, red-robed individuals calmly walked down the emerging ramp. The crimson material covered the trio completely, except for eye and mouth slits.

Bianca had an instantaneous jolt of memory. These aliens were right out of Arthur C. Clark’s *Childhood’s End*. Were their coverings hiding satanic features like in his novel?

The current leader of the NUW, New Zealand’s Paewai Parata greeted the visitors and accepted a scroll from them.

By the time Bianca traveled by vactrain the two-hundred clicks to her home, the message in the documents had circled the globe.

The Cartologans were on Earth to help.

Sol's third planet had made a lot of progress in the last century. Genetic manipulation ended the scourge of cancer and several endemic diseases. Nanobots cleansed arteries of blockages, making heart attacks and strokes a rarity. Nonetheless, even in the year 2207, humans had yet to solve every problem.

Earth scientists still could not come up with a faster-than-light drive to allow humankind to find new homes in the vast universe.

Extending life spans meant dangerous overcrowding. Bianca lived with four generations of her family in a four-stacked apartment in the Southwestern Arcology. She loved the Greats. Her great, great, great *abuela* still enjoyed all her faculties, ran half marathons, and always had a pointed comment about current events at family dinners.

“You know if this contract the Cartologan's offer sounds too good to be true; it might be too good to be true,” she offered when Bianca wanted to enter the trials. “Maybe you should reconsider, Bianca, *mi nieta*.”

Bianca weighed her *abuela*'s advice against Terra's urgent needs. While there were colonies on most of Sol's planets and larger moons, none supported a significant population or qualified as truly self-sustaining. Earth itself was bursting at the seams.

The possibility of interstellar flight could save billions of lives. Governments put the funding planned for generational ships on hold when the Cartologans dangled the carrot of virtual instantaneous travel to distant star systems as one of the potential rewards for the winner of the contest. Colonists could arrive at viable planets in their own lifetime, instead of generations later.

What the Cartologans would get from this deal, no one could figure out. More trade partners, or some altruistic reward with religious overtones? Nobody knew.

Why the technically advanced Cartologans used something as primitive as a foot race to determine the winner made no sense to Bianca. But the need for Earth to obtain the treasure compelled her to discount her *abuela*'s advice and to sign up for the trials designed to pick Terra's representative.

The testing began with examinations to find the individuals with the highest IQs and depth of general knowledge. Bianca rose to the top in this area. Since childhood, she read thousands of actual books in a variety of topics, played several sports, musical instruments, and spent untold hours in virtual reality with cyber games. These trained her to see solutions to unsolvable situations and to never give up until she found an answer.

"Kobayashi Maru" no-win scenarios didn't stymie her.

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Waiting for the race to begin, the string of runners shifted nervously as three Cartologan officials entered the elevated observation structure. Their home world hid somewhere in the dense center of the Galaxy. Cloaked in the now familiar red fabric, few hints of their body framework showed—there were two eye slits in the cloth, and a few lumps and bumps stretched the fabric. But we only knew a few facts about them for sure.

Of uniform height, they measured precisely six feet, three inches. They walked as if bipedal, with a slight side-to-side motion. As far as scientist could deduce, they breathed the Oxygen/Nitrogen atmospheres of planets like Earth, with no visible equipment. That was it—the sum of knowledge about their physiology.

All the creatures taking part in the race displayed mammalian characteristics. Did this hint at a clue to the Cartologan's purpose? Bianca, with a life science PhD in comparative anatomy, found her neck hairs rise when she thought about it. What did a certain body type and level of technology have to do with contestant selection?

A crackling of the energy net framework surrounding the contest site pulled Bianca's attention away from her disturbing thoughts. The purpose of the grid was not to keep out a dangerous atmosphere. Rather, it prevented entry of the curious wildlife, who often sat outside the structure. One of the cow-sized spiders must have brushed too near to the electrical netting.

The creatures moved on eight bent and bristling appendages. Bianca saw bits of fabric attached to the upper surfaces of those limbs, streaming in the wind.

Did this show an elevated level of intelligence, or were the colorful banners produced physiologically, perhaps designed by nature to attract mates? A puzzle. The Cartologan's list of rules blocked her from going outside the grid to evaluate her theories since she arrived.

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She *had* used her pre-race time to size up the contest participants. The nearest being in line next to her, a unipod Alteran, looked like a giant single-footed rabbit. Research she accessed reported they were far faster than any other creature.

At last night's closing party, this unipod sat with a companion at the bar near to Bianca, imbibing in copious amounts of spiked carrot juice. The universal translator provided by their hosts interpreted his burp-like sounds into English in Bianca's ear.

“Burp-BURP-buurpp...” (Love, LOVE this stuff. Found it on my visit to Earth. Gives me quite a buzzzz. Not that it’ll affect my speed tomorrow. Nothing can slow me down.)

His pal, a Lemarian whose green reptilian face contrasted with the ample golden fur covering his body, said through the translator, “@#! \*&\*^...” (You better watch how much you drink. Too much vitamin A from the carrots can be deadly to us mammals.)

Bianca didn’t wish the bunny any harm, but she hoped the potent beverage would slow down the braggart in today’s race.

The person to her right, a female Manicore, stood tall, with arms extending to her ankles. With mammalian charms obvious in a bikini-like top, her skin shined an iridescent lilac. Both her fingers and toes revealed webbing. Bianca thought she must spend a lot of time in the water and would excel at any swimming event.

“Good luck,” Bianca said to her, trying for sincerity. She knew her heart harbored a truer sentiment. *I hope you come in second.*

The Manicore looked Bianca up and down, smiling with impressive pointy teeth.

“Break a leg,” she countered through the translator.

Was her statement in the theatrical tradition, Bianca wondered? Or maybe the device interpreted her meaning exactly?

Repressing a shiver, Bianca looked to the left, past the Alderon bunny at her most feared opponent, warming up with jumping jacks. Last evening, she purposely tried to keep away from

Marr Tel, a gorgeous Therzion male, whose masculine aura threatened to lure her to his side and forget about her primary goal.

When she first saw him on indoctrination day, Bianca admitted she wanted to learn more about him. She read what she could find, discovering why his planet sent him. They needed advanced knowledge of genetic manipulation. Males on Therzion suffered with an exceptionally low fertility rate. An extra boost of pheromones increased their chances of attracting more females, with greater odds of impregnating them. Hence the allure Marr Tel exerted on Bianca any time he came close to her.

Impregnation by an alien figured way down on Bianca's bucket list.

Last night, he trapped her at the canape table, just as she popped a mushroom filled with—she was not sure what—into her mouth.

“Do all Earth women look as interesting as you?”

*Well, his line is a little less lame than most,* Bianca thought, chewing quickly and gulping down the *hors d'oeuvre*. It tasted, thank goodness, like chicken.

She looked down at her six-foot-long body. The skin revealed in the halter-top dress she wore typified most people in the 23<sup>rd</sup> century—tan with a hint of copper. Her aqua-blue eyes startled in contrast to her black hair. Rare, but she knew several people with that color combination.

“Oh, I'd say I'm just your average Terran woman,” she said, looking into eyes, not average by any means.



More humanoid than some of her college boyfriends, brown-skinned Marr Tel stood seven feet tall with compelling color-changing irises, and rust-red hair falling to his slim waist. The only feature hinting to a different genetic history were three rows of flat knobs on his forehead. The middle-row bumps stood out, larger than the others. What purpose they served, she could not find out in any of the literature she read.

“What’s your strategy for tomorrow’s race?” Marr Tel asked.

“Now, why would I reveal my plans to you?”

“Perhaps we could meld our strengths and produce something beautiful we could share.”

Bianca felt a wave of longing at his words, swaying toward him. She experienced a vision of his broad naked shoulders and all that hair enveloping her narrow frame. With her hand held high to ward off his spell, she escaped Marr Tel before fantasy became reality.

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Pulling her attention back to the starting line, she avoided Marr Tel’s gaze as he crouched in runner form, waiting for the starting signal.

Too bad Cartologan rules didn’t allow friends and family at the site. Bianca could use a bit of cheering at the moment.

As the huge timer displayed over the Cartologans neared zero, she mentally powered up her enhanced metabolism to get out in front of the herd.

The course curved sharply left. Cinder-like black material provided surface friction. The high stand accommodating the Cartologans blocked the arched path, so none of the participants viewed the initial obstacle they would encounter.

The blare of a shrill horn launched the contestants. Bianca purposely aimed for the center of the pack. Rounding the first curve, she skidded to the edge of a pond filled with various shaped steppingstones. She quickly plotted a path, not the shortest, but with the flattest rocks, and skipped over them, grinning as she heard the kerplops of a half-dozen rivals.

A climbing wall ahead proved easy to scale. From her peripheral vision, Bianca saw the rabbit-like Alteran grabbing each projection with its long, prehensile tongue. The blue, sticky saliva coating his tongue slowed the bunny down at each outcrop as he struggled to pull it away from the rock surface.

*So much for his super speed,* Bianca thought.

Ascending to her right, Marr Tel threw her a cheerful grin, the power of which she deflected by gritting her teeth and leaping over the wall into a deep pond.

Wishing for the webbed fingers of the Manicore who powered across the water with windmill-like strokes of her long arms, Bianca dug in and used her best Australian crawl to cross the distance.

Dripping and out of breath, she staggered into a flower-covered meadow. Dozens of small, wide-winged creatures flew over the bright purple flowers, humming a melody nestling into Bianca's brain. Waves of peace threatened her to stop and lie down on the soft carpet. Her competitors swayed and swooned toward the verdant green turf.

To her horror, Marr Tel stumbled next to her, grabbing her shoulders for stability.

She would not give in to her desire to fold her arms around his trim waist and nestle her head on his chest.

Fighting the pull of his masculinity, blocking out the warbling of the bird-like creatures, Bianca proved why Earth selected her for this race. She dug into her memory to resurrect the most annoying jingle she could find.

At first, she just hummed the tune. Then the words came more easily, and she bellowed the earworm from over two centuries ago — *Don't Stop Believing* by Journey.

The song and its insistent rhythms would linger in her mind for days. Filling her head with the tune let her break out of powerful arms and run through three more obstacles with no other being near her.

Then a wide trench, with a sign label “Quicksand” in several languages, gave her pause. At the far end of the pit, the three Cartologans sat looking down at her from their observation structure. Below them, flat steppingstones with a finish-line tape awaited.

Spurred on by the sight of victory, and before she sank beyond her ankles, Bianca again dredged the database of her mind and grinned. She flattened her long body on the surface and slowly dog-paddled across to triumph.

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Bianca won the knowledge of the Cartologans for humankind.

She wanted to go back to Earth and find out just what treasures awaited Terra. But an overwhelming desire for Marr Tel overcame her, and she followed him to his home planet instead. She hadn't realized Therzion was a desert world. A Cartologan ship deposited them at a tiny spaceport near the planet's North pole. The city featured several oases surrounded by buildings embedded low in the sand.

It was dark when Marr Tel led her inside the hermetically sealed door of one structure, and after opening a second portal, entered a branching tunnel.

“What time is it?” Bianca asked, suppressing a yawn.

Looking at the device on his arm, Marr Tel said, “Third Division, just before sunrise. This shift will end in a few units.”

The information meant next to nothing to Bianca, and she felt too tired to ask for more data.

They passed rooms with large portal-type windows. Bianca looked inside as Marr Tel pulled her along. One held tables and food serving stations occupied by a few tall members of his race. Another immense space featured floor-to-ceiling shelves of labeled cannisters. Maybe this was a library?

Then they passed a brightly decorated room, too large for the few small children sitting inside. Seeing them brought home to Bianca the sad reality of Therzion’s dwindling population. The shifts Marr Tel mentioned must go around the clock if children were studying at this time, Bianca thought.

When they reached Marr Tel’s apartment, he led her into a room divided by finely loomed silk-like material, crisscrossing the small space to form complex pockets, somehow increasing the area’s square footage by degrees of magnitude.

“This is so beautiful,” Bianca said, and then caught her breath at the sight of Marr Tel’s blazing eyes.

A few seconds later, a parallel trail of clothing led from the main room to his bed. Bianca came out of the haze of passion Marr Tel's kisses induced when he lifted his mouth from her lips and focused his ever-changing eyes on hers.

"Before I enter you, I must ask if you want me to use the *sptlnz*? He pointed to the central bumps on his forehead.

"Whaah, what do you mean?" Bianca's wide eyes centered where he pointed.

"I'm going to share a secret with you, not known by many outside our planet. I can use a telekinetic power directed by these to harness the flow of my sperm toward the egg you just released. We might be blessed by creating a child, if that is what you want. Or I can deflect the stream and we will just have the joy of being together."

Thinking of revising her bucket list, Bianca said, touching the bumps on his forehead, "Oh, Marr Tel, how did you know I released an egg yesterday? I always feel the mittelschmerz pain."

"I just know these things."

"Is there documentation of conception between our people? Do you have any children already?" The words popped out before she could censor them.

The pain she saw in Marr Tel's eyes answered her second question before he said, "No, I have not been successful in that way. And I haven't heard of a Human-Therzonian offspring. But why don't we give it a try?"

His eyes glowed, a golden flame within a black circle. Bianca responded yes by throwing her arms around his wide shoulders and accepting his embrace while his long hair enveloped her.

After recovering from the passion they shared, Marr Tel answered more of Bianca's questions about his splnz powers.

“Hunters used it in the old days to direct arrows and throwing weapons at prey. Now it's refined to use as I just did. Our population is dwindling, there are fewer babies each year. We hoped I would win information from the Cartologan database to solve our most profound problem.”

Bianca and Marr Tel didn't conceive during the night, or in the five years they lived happily together. Marr Tel worked as a thermal engineer, building conduits to the planet's molten core. This heat ran pollution-free engines, and produced a quantity of water, making life possible on Therzion.

Learning of Bianca's qualifications, the scientific community offered her a position in their genetic research program. After checking the composition of Therzonian blood and the native minerals on their planet, she suggested that Therzion was not their world of origin, and they needed to uptake other minerals, some of them from Earth.

An up-tick in live births in the next few years indicated this might be a solution to their reproductive problems. The two peoples grew more closely related than they had ever thought possible. Bianca's contributions cemented a unity between the two planets.

Surprisingly, when Earth's nations mined the Cartologan database and began construction of faster-than-light ships, the extra-luminal engines running these craft needed connections to a human pilot's brain and neural net. Individuals with this talent proudly joined a world-wide corps, the SpaceNet Marines.

After Earth's manufacturers constructed the ships, and trained SpaceNet Marines staffed them, the Cartologans called for a meeting with Earth's leaders. One member of a red-robed trio stepped forward and read the last page of their original contract.

“After building seven squads of ThroughLight ships, this planet's inhabitants will have gained eternal benefits from our technology; their functional mental contribution will thereafter become a part of us for that length of time. To make sure of your compliance, we will demonstrate what will happen to the surface of this planet if you try to abrogate the clause.”

A few seconds after this announcement, a small meteor came burning through the atmosphere and impacted on a relatively empty area of the South Pacific Ocean. Tsunamis did minor damage to Asian coastlines, but the threat was clear and instantly understood.

Cartologan owned the Earth.

How could all the legal minds of Earth not have seen the meaning of this mandate? The paragraph, in effect, allowed the Cartologans the right to use the brain power of humanity for their benefit—forever.

This is what they got out of the contract. This was their over reaching plan.

They would find a lesser mammalian civilization with some vital need. They didn't care which of the twelve contestants won. The important thing was their mammalian brain. The winner, the target population, would use their own resources to build a fleet of starships. Trained pilot's brains would connect to the neural network that ran the engines. Eventually, the target planet, Earth, would populate and develop new worlds with colonists.

The Cartologans could then transport their own extra populations to the new worlds, where they would have an enslaved workforce tending them at minimum expense. Trade between these new worlds would power the ever-expanding Cartologan empire.

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By year five, a clandestine Earth group conscripted Bianca, with her unique talents, to help in the battle against cybernetic slavery.

The first thing she did was to convince Marr Tel's people to join with Earth in the struggle. Their telekinetic ability made it possible to change the neural programming of pilots and neutralize Cartologan commands. Also, buried in the network of data activating their propulsion drive, human scientists and mathematicians discovered clues to the location of the Cartologan's home system.

Bianca and Marr Tel joined the crew of the *Revenge*, which would infiltrate the Cartologans home system. Once there, they hoped to discover a fatal flaw forcing the Cartologans to break the contract.

But that is another story.