

THE FOOT RACE ON PHYTOLORE  
1920 Words

From her position in the middle of the line, Bianca Hernandez suppressed a shudder. It really wasn't cold under the contest site's dome. But the ten-foot piles of snow outside the barrier persuaded her mind that she should be wearing more clothing than shorts and a tee-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.

Why the technically advanced Cartologans used something as primitive as a foot race to determine the winner made no sense to Bianca. But she must snatch the treasure for Earth.

Sol's third planet made a lot of progress in the last century. Genetic manipulation ended the scourge of cancer and several endemic diseases. Using nanobots cleansed arteries of blockages, so heart attacks and strokes were a rarity. But even in the year 2207, there were problems that humankind could not solve.

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, and thankfully even her great, great, great *abuela* still enjoyed all her faculties, ran half marathons, and used her wicked sense of humor to entertain at family dinners.

While there were colonies on most of Sol's planets and large moons, none could support a significant population or were truly self-sustaining.

So, when the Cartologans visited the Earth and other civilizations who had the same level of technology and also suffered from world-wide problems, each species snapped up their offer with little internecine argument.

Of course, on Earth, there were hundreds of lawyerly types picking over each clause and every word of the contract. Thousands picketed outside government buildings, carrying signs in dozens of languages saying, "If it sounds too good to be true, it probably *is* too good to be true."

But in the end, all the nations of Earth signed the document. The promise of interstellar flight could save billions of lives.

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

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The string of runners shifted nervously as three Cartologan officials entered the high observation structure. Their home world hid somewhere in the dense center of the Galaxy. Cloaked in yards of red fabric, no hint of their body framework showed—no eye slits in the cloth, or definitive lumps and bumps. We only knew a few facts about them for sure. They were of uniform height, precisely six feet, three inches. Walking as if bi-pedal, with a slight side-to-side motion, they also seemed to breathe in Oxygen/Nitrogen atmospheres like Earth's, with no visible equipment. That was it—the sum of knowledge about their physiology.

All the creatures taking part in the race could survive in the PhytoLore air. In fact, each of the twelve species involved also 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 worrying thoughts. The purpose of the grid was not to keep out a dangerous atmosphere. Rather, it prevented entry of the curious wildlife that often sat passively outside of 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. However, the rules blocked her from going outside the grid to evaluate her theories in the few days she had been planetside.

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Bianca *did* spend time sizing up the contest participants. The nearest being, a unipod Alteran, reminded her of a giant single-footed rabbit. They were supposed to be far faster than any other creature.

She heard the representative of his species boast about his speed at last night's closing party. That individual sat 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 as he told a drinking buddy about the habit picked up on visits to Earth. She hoped the potent beverage would slow down the braggart a bit today.

The person to her right, a female Manicore, stood tall, with arms extended to her ankles. With mammalian charms obvious in a bikini-like top, her skin shined a lovely lilac. Both her fingers and toes displayed webbing. She obviously spent a lot of time in the water and would excel at any swimming event.

“Good luck,” Bianca said to her, trying for sincerity, but knowing a truer sentiment would have been, *I hope you come in second.*

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

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

Was that in the theatrical tradition, Bianca wondered, or had 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 Martell, a 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 was in the contest. 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 Martell exerted on Bianca any time he neared.

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

She looked down at her six-foot-long body. The skin revealed in the halter-top dress she wore was typical of 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, 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 that were not average by any means.

More humanoid than some of her college boyfriends, brown-skinned Martell stood seven feet tall with compelling color-change irises, and rust-red hair falling down 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 were larger than the others. What purpose they served, she could not find out in any of the literature she read.

Bianca kept having visions of his broad naked shoulders and all that hair coming down to envelop her narrow frame.

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

The course curved sharply left, so none of the participants could see the initial obstacle they would encounter.

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

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. It slowed down at each outcrop, having to pull away the sticky blue surface from the rocks.

Ascending to her right, the Therzion threw her a lustful glance, 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 that nestled into Bianca's brain, sending waves of peace that threatened her to stop and lay down on the soft carpet. All the other individuals in the race were swaying and tripping toward the turf.

To her horror, Marrtel 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 be in her mind for days, but it let her break out of powerful arms and run through three more obstacles with no other being near her. Then a vast pit of quicksand surrounded by high walls gave her pause for a second. But she could see the observation deck where the Carologans sat looking down at her. And at the far end of the pit, a large finish line sign and 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 base of the Cartologans for humankind.

She also gave in to Marrtel's Therzian allure and followed him to his home planet, Therza. She discovered the purpose of the bumps on his forehead, and they lived for five happy years together. Until a little understood clause in the Cartologan contract came due.

The paragraph, in effect, allowed the Cartologans the right to use virtual technology to harvest the brain power of humanity—forever.

Earth League's newly built hyper-space fleet conscripted Bianca and her unique talents to help in the battle against cybernetic slavery.