

“Exodus Rising”
By
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Chapter 1: The Job

“You know, you’d think with the war having been over for a year now the Lunar Confederation would’ve put some more money into their space stations.” A gruff wolf gestured around the room. “This place is a shithole.” His ebony black fur reflected the light from above the table indicating he was doing relatively well for himself to afford such fur care products.

“Lunar space stations were shitholes before the war happened,” a qilin pointed out. She studied her cards with interest. Her single unusual horn identified her race as the deer like unicorn species originating from the Asian continent on Earth. She brushed her medium green hair away from her face as she selected her next card to play.

The wolf spat on the floor. “Yeah, well, if this wasn’t the only place to refuel on the Aurora Run I doubt they’d see half the business they do.”

The qilin laughed. “Even in space it’s true, location, location, location.” Her eyes focused on the wolf as she asked for two cards. “So what do they have you transporting this time?”

“I don’t discuss my cargo with other captains, Quill.” The wolf gave her the cards and the other players did the same, evaluating their hands as they went.

Captain Alena ‘Quill’ Maichiru stuck out her tongue at the wolf before she placed her opening bet. “I’m not here to steal your jobs, asshole.”

“All the same, you’ll forgive me if I don’t trust venison like yourself.” His use of the pejorative term for a deer made her scowl. She wasn’t a cervine, but her resemblance to that species had often made her the target of some rather impolite statements. He smiled as he realized it had gotten to her ever so slightly. “You going to play or what?”

Quill examined her cards in detail for a long moment. She held them close to her face as she evaluated each of her opponents. The wolf had a cocky expression, but he was good at lying. She suspected he had no cards of real value and was betting on the others thinking he did. The coyote to his right seemed uninterested in the game. He kept yawning and looking at the clock, but Quill was uncertain whether that was legitimate disinterest or if he too was trying to play the others. The third player was a fox with dark glasses; she hadn’t figured him out at all yet. The fourth was a female skunk with a mild smile.

“I’ll raise you twenty.” The skunk said.

“I’ll see your twenty, and raise you another ten.” Quill made sure to keep her face expressionless, something she had not managed to do well so far.

The round of betting continued, with the wolf raising another ten. A smug face kept smiling back at the other players. The fox with the dark glasses folded and walked away from the table. The coyote kept up with the betting, but he seemed to hang on to his chips for a prolonged moment before he dropped them into the pot.

“I’ll call,” the wolf said.

“I’ve only got two pair.” The coyote cursed as he placed his cards face up on the table.

The skunk tossed her cards onto the table. “I’ve got nothing.”

“It’s just you and me, venison.” The wolf held his cards in front of his muzzle and winked at her.

“Well, then you’ll forgive me, but I’ve got to take my winnings and go. Royal flush.” She laid the cards out on the table next to each other while the wolf dropped his cards in disbelief. From the cards that fell face up she reasoned he had a full house, but it wasn’t enough. She reached out and pulled the chips towards her. “Thank you for your generous contributions, but I’ve got to get back to my ship.” She dumped the chips into a bag she had brought and blew the wolf a kiss before turning to leave.

No sooner had she stepped outside than she spotted a well-dressed penguin in a suit with his arms behind his back. The bird watched her for a long moment from his vantage point on the crossover bridge above her. Once she had passed underneath it she heard his footfalls as he climbed down the steps to match pace with her. “Captain Quill, I presume?”

“Is there a reason you’re following me?” Quill regarded him with a cautious glance.

“I’m here to offer you a job. I need a ship and yours is the fastest one available. The matter is somewhat time sensitive, so we’re willing to pay commensurate with the extra effort the job would require on your part.” The bird did not skip a breath as he continued. “I am aware of the specifications on your ship, the *Winter’s Fury*, and it will just barely be adequate for the minimum needs of this task. Your ship has adequate cargo capacity, is exceptionally maneuverable for a ship of its size, and I happen to know you’ve no other jobs at the moment.”

Business had been somewhat dry in the inner solar system, especially around Earth and Luna. They had obtained a good job on Earth, but once the work dried up they were as they say without a master at the moment. Quill had a friend that suggested she get her ass to Mars. Evidently there was a lot of work for a cargo ship there while they tried to terraform the planet.

Terraforming. It was the new booming business, and a way for the survivors of the Terran War to expand and rebuild. Even fifty years later there was a great need for just about everything. Earth’s population had ballooned to twenty billion before the war began, and the Lunar Confederation and the Martian League had been active long enough to form cities on the moon and domes on Mars as well as numerous large underground habitats. When the war began, each major power tried to annihilate the others. The war only ended when most of the world leaders that had begun the war over global dominance had been killed. Three billion people dead and several major cities destroyed, the infrastructure of the entire planet was decimated.

Quill’s father had been a fighter pilot for the Eurasian Union. He’d told her a lot of war stories, and one lesson she’d learned from him is be careful of men in glasses that offered you a job.

“Who the hell are you?” The qilin turned on him, offended that he pointed out her current lack of clients.

“My name is Brett Whitmore. I’m an agent for Checkmate. Would you like to hear about the job, captain?”

“I’m all ears.” Quill said as they headed towards the docking bays.

“During the war, the people I work for were aware of several assets of theirs that were sent off planet to keep safe when it appeared the war was turning against them. These assets were stored in the asteroid belt where they were unlikely to attract attention. One of the ships containing a large amount of pre war tech has drifted out of the asteroid

belt. We need to claim salvage rights on it before anyone else does. In less than two days the ship will drift out far enough to be noticed by conventional detection systems. It's our intention to claim it before that occurs."

Quill bit her lip. "A salvage job, that's it?"

"That's all we require of you. Once we've established our claim, we'll need you to maintain your position to validate it until one of our own ships can arrive and take the load off your hands." Brett followed her around the corner while she considered his offer.

"How much is this job worth?" she asked.

"Sixty thousand credits."

Quill had to keep her jaw from dropping, brushing a green hair out of her face. "For a job this time sensitive and as important as you claim?" She stopped just at the entrance to the docking bay where her ship rested. "One hundred thousand, no less." She held her hand out to his chest to keep him from proceeding further.

Brett paused for a long moment. "Fine. Consider it done. The money will be transferred to your accounts immediately. Half now, half upon completion. One more thing, captain. Do not under any circumstances board the ship. My company does not wish to be responsible for any possible hazards on board the vessel, and you would be well advised to listen to me on this point. We don't know of the condition of any of the ship's on board systems. My team is trained for what's on board that ship and for the purposes of the job it is only necessary that you mark our place, nothing more."

"Should I be concerned for my crew's safety?" She kept her hand on his chest.

He removed it with a gentle motion of his own. "Not at all. My company simply wishes to conduct this operation with minimal risk. We're thinking about you and your crew, Captain Maichiru. Nothing else."

"I see." Quill nodded. "We'll do your job. Tell your men we'll be waiting for them at the rendezvous point."

"Good hunting, captain." He handed her a data chip. The penguin remained at the entrance while she walked towards her ship. After she approached the ramp, he turned and disappeared.

"Everything okay, cap?" A young teenage rat bounced up with a tool in her right hand.

"Yeah, Sparks. Everything's fine. Get the engines warmed up, we're going to be giving them a workout." She saluted back to the young girl, an affectation her young rodent engineer had picked up from her military father while she continued through the passenger entrance up to the lift that would take her up towards the bridge.

The *Winter's Fury* was a long vessel with two thick wings on either side at the rear third of the hull's length. Integrated into each wing were the fastest sub light engines that money could buy, at least in their price range. Military grade would obviously put them to shame, but that was beside the point. She was a sleek ship, with a larger than standard bridge for its size, and that was one of the things she liked. The ship boasted three full size cargo bays, ten passenger cabins, fifty crew cabins as well as a captain's cabin right off the bridge hallway, and full medical and culinary facilities along with a few perks like a music room and a library, the latter being Quill's personal affectation. She'd insisted that the ship be as much of a home as it could be, as well as being a workhorse. She'd pulled them through a lot, and there were few ships that could haul ass and dive between tight spaces like this ship. The *Winter's Fury* even carried some

armament. It had two high capacity guns on front loaded with bullets that could tear through almost any hull. When asked about their purpose she insisted it was to shoot asteroids. Most authorities looked the other way. The ship also boasted two wing cannons with rotating turrets that could do the same, but gunnery officers in each wing controlled both of them.

The crew was her family, and all fifty of them had been with her for a long time. Sparks was the youngest. She was an engineer picked up on one of Jupiter's moons for having a talent for fixing things without the traditional ways of knowing what was wrong. Sparks always saluted her when she came on board, a consequence of growing up with military parents.

Quill and her crew were freelance, meaning they didn't belong to any particular planet or government. At times it was a hindrance, but she preferred it considering how the different powers had treated each other since before the war. Out in space, she was master and commander, and this was how she wanted it. No one would take the ship from her as long as she was alive.

She stepped onto the bridge, which had a number of standing consoles around a holographic map of the Terran solar system. She walked past them and headed up to the command center, which had two consoles on each side and a large station up front for the pilot. "Simon, report?"

"She's ready to go, captain, though for what, I don't know." Simon's antlers stuck out from his chair as he turned around to face her. "Are you going to tell me what's going on?"

"I don't rightly know myself, Simon." She handed him the chip. "The coordinates are on there. Get us to them as fast as the ship can carry us. One hundred thousand credits depends on it."

"Are you serious?" Simon asked, incredulous.

"Yeah, it's enough to keep the ship afloat for a while longer. Now get us up into space, if you please." Quill stood next to the side of the pilot's console while Simon revved up the engines and requested permission to depart. The approval from flight control came back, and the ship lurched as it moved forward out of the docking bay and into the low gravity of the lunar surface. The ship broke out of its hold in seconds and hurried away from the moon. She smirked at her affectation of calling it 'the moon' like it was the only one. The qilin remembered that was how Earthers used to think. She was born in between the stars when the war had just started; her father had been serving on a ship at the time.

"We're on our way. ETA, two hours." He turned back to face her. "I'll call you when we're close."

Quill looked out the front windows for a few moments longer before she turned away to walk back towards her quarters. The crew watched her as she walked by, most of them busy with whatever they had been doing when she had come back aboard. She entered her quarters and set down her winnings from the game that she had forgotten she was even carrying. She sent a message to the station so that they would know to deposit her winnings into her account and arranged for the chips to be returned to the station on the next courier shipment. Under normal circumstances she would've simply turned them in, but time was of the essence, or so the mysterious Mister Whitmore seemed to think.

She leaned back in her bed and stared up at the metal ceiling of her ship, wondering what could be so important aboard an old Earth war vessel. She knew that they had lost several fairly advanced technologies in the conflict, but what could be so important that they would spend a hundred thousand credits just to keep it under their control?

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“Captain to the bridge, captain to the bridge.” The voice was Simon’s. She opened her eyes and sat up, realizing she had fallen asleep. She hurried out of her quarters trying to straighten her wrinkled clothes and jogged up to the bridge. She entered to find Simon slowing the ship’s speed as they approached. “Captain, we’ve got her in visual range. She’s a big one.”

“Analysis.”

“She’s a Destroyer Class, but it’s not a conventional design.” Simon brought up a schematic on one of the screens. “Take a look.”

Quill looked at the sensor analysis and raised an eyebrow. “What the hell? This thing has only a third of the weapons capacity it should have. Its power readings are weird as shit, and I’m not detecting any signs of a hangar bay. Aren’t these things supposed to have a huge wing of fighters?”

“They are, but this one doesn’t. My analysis of the hull indicates that other than a few micrometeorite strikes the hull is intact.” Simon shrugged.

Quill looked at the large ship, it’s silver gray hull indicating its status as an Earth vessel, pre war. The ship was long and looked deadly, even with one third of the weapons it should be carrying. The ship bore none of the usual identifying markers, other than a corporate symbol on the hull and the characters ‘*WHITE QUEEN*’. “What the hell do you suppose that means?”

“I don’t know. It’s definitely a military style ship, but captain I don’t think this ship was ever part of any military. She’s got no battle wounds.” Simon tapped a hoof on the floor and shook his head. “What sort of destroyer goes through a war with no hull damage at all?”

“I recall hearing that during the latter days of the war, some of the military space frames were sold off to private corporations to help fund the war effort. I suppose someone could’ve bought one and retrofitted it.” The idea was uncommon, but a pre-built space frame reduced the construction cost of a starship almost by half. If the military had done half of the work for you, why wouldn’t a company take advantage of that? “Conduct a full survey of the hull, and then I want you to bring her in on the far side to dock.”

“Didn’t the instructions on the chip say NOT to board the ship?” Simon asked.

Quill leaned against the side of his console. “Hey, this might be my only chance to get a look at one of these pre war ships intact, and I’m not missing out on that for anything. You can stay behind if you want, but I’m going aboard. We’ve got two days before the client catches up with us, more than enough time for a quick look around, don’t you think?”

Simon nodded in agreement as he brought the ship all the way around and then approached the nearest airlock that was compatible with their ship. The *Winter’s Fury*

docked with an audible clang, and as soon as the airlock started to pressurize, Quill spun around to the intercom. "This is Captain Maichiru. Sparks, time to take a field trip. Meet me on board the other ship."

Quill turned away and walked down the hall into the airlock towards the bridge, and looked at the panel. Simon joined her while the backup pilot took over monitoring the station. "Atmosphere reads a little stale, but breathable. At the moment they're set to minimum levels. No space suits needed." The moment the airlock had finished cycling, she walked through to the other door and opened it into the other ship. A gust of wind blew her hair back for a moment. "Shit. The computer and my opinion of breathable air are definitely not the same. We'll have to see if we can't get life support back to full capacity.

She stepped into the Earth ship and looked around. Other than her hoofbeats there were no sounds. "The bridge should be this way."

Sparks appeared in the airlock entryway. Her red hair stood out amongst her dark brown fur. "Whoa. Look at this stuff!" Sparks youth made her more excitable than the rest of the crew. The young rat girl entered the ship and spun around once, her arms extended. "I haven't seen stuff like this in forever. Usually not in such good condition."

"Do you know how to work Earth tech?" Quill looked towards her engineer.

"Hm? Oh yeah. Earth tech is the same as Lunar tech or Mars tech or Jupiter tech. It's all just languages. What do you want me to do?"

Quill looked around at the directory display on the wall and powered it up. "We need to get life support up to more than the minimal levels. I also want to know if they didn't use all the internal space for weapons, what did they use it for? Not to mention why the power signature for this ship is so uncharacteristic for a ship this size."

"Best place to do all that is probably Engineering," Sparks said.

Quill consulted the interior ship map and turned back to the others. "That'd be this way, and down two levels." They walked to a lift and rode it down to the engineering section. "Anyone notice how the lifts and corridors on board all seem to be reinforced?"

"Maybe they were all overweight." Simon offered, not being serious.

Quill stepped into Engineering first, with the larger chairs being the first thing she noticed. "I guess they don't believe in small seats on *White Queen*." She walked up to the main systems display. "Sparks, work your magic."

Sparks stood in front of the main console like a conductor preparing to direct an orchestra. The large seating made her appear tinier than usual. Her hairless hands tapped the controls, her digits dancing over the surface like it was second nature. The controls on this ship were touch screens, as opposed to the levers, buttons, and switches of the *Winter's Fury*. The screen displayed a cross section of the entire ship in three views, from the top, the side, and the internal systems. As Sparks entered commands, different parts of the ship would highlight on the display.

Quill noticed right away when the air started pumping at full capacity. "Nice job, Sparks, you got the air on."

"Yeah, but this is only seventy percent of the life support system's capability. If I turned it up at full there'd be too much oxygen in the air for us." She returned her attention to the console, while Quill looked at Simon.

"Why the hell would the life support system be set at anything other than Terran normal for their standard? We all breath the same air." Quill looked at the stag and the

young rat, not really expecting an answer. She thought on the matter for a moment and wondered what would require an increased life support requirement. For sure, it was a little ridiculous to expect alien life, since the various races had never successfully breached the borders of their solar system, an act unlikely without the perfection of FTL. Other than the loss of the experimental ship *Flashpoint*, also before the war, there were no other attempts.

After a long moment Sparks stopped her motions above the console and whirled around. "That's weird."

"What?" Both asked at once.

She turned back around. "Most of the ship's power is being directed towards several large cargo bays. I can't tell what for, but the ship's four fusion generators are all slaved into them. The backup generator is running the rest of the systems and that's what's failing. It looks like it had a few more weeks at most from what I'm seeing here." Sparks entered a few more commands into the system. "This ship didn't drift out of the asteroid field. It maneuvered out when it detected the eventual fault in the power systems."

"What?" Quill asked.

"I'm saying this ship isn't here by accident. It was supposed to remove itself from the asteroid field when the systems became unstable." The display shifted to one of the three cargo bays. Sparks looked over her shoulder at the captain. "I'm detecting life forms."

"I can see why someone wanted us to stay off the ship." Simon rubbed his chin as he examined one of the other consoles.

Quill put her hand on Sparks's shoulder. "Can you get us access to one of those cargo bays? I want to see what's down there."

"I can." Sparks stood up and gestured for the others to follow her. She hurried down the hall with Simon's and Quill's hoofbeats echoing through the halls. The three came up against a large door marked with the same symbol that was on the outside of the hull. She approached the door controls and entered a few commands. A loud hiss of air and the doors slowly rolled back driven by large gears visible on either side of the door.

The trio entered the large bay as the lights inside came on in sequence from one end of the bay to the other. Quill stepped forward into the center of the entryway and looked down at the master command console. There were indicators for each and every single pod in the cargo bay, with a few of them flashing red, but most of them were still a bright green. "What the hell is this?" she asked to no one in particular. She stepped up to the consoles and looked down at the identifiers. They were mostly consisting of single names. She stepped down the stairs on the left side of the console down to the bay where all of the pods rested. She walked up to the first pod and leaned over it.

The glass from the pod was frosted over. She took a hand and wiped away the obstruction, being greeted by a race she had only heard of in legend and myth. During the war there were stories of dangerous lizards that were fearsome and possessed dangerous claws, sharp horns, and brute strength among other things. None of the reptiles known to exist matched these species in size or in appearance. As far as anyone knew, they didn't exist anymore.

The being that greeted her was male triceratops with green scales. His eyes were closed as if he were simply sleeping. His most striking feature was the blue hair that

framed his face on either side, contrasting the ebony that composed the rest of his hair. He was lying in a pod that seemed extraordinarily large, his arms at his sides. On the side of the pod it bore the identifier 'Loren'. She activated the controls to open the pod. A loud hiss sounded as a white smoke covered the ground for a moment before it dissipated, and the pod opened.

Simon and Sparks joined her on either side, saying nothing as they looked down at the dinosaur inside of the pod.

“Huh.”