

Exodus Rising

Chapter 2: Weapons Of War

By Lauren Rivers

The hyena doctor looked through the glass in his office window at the new arrivals. Four of the pods had been opened and each of their occupants brought back to the *Winter's Fury*. They were milling about in the sickbay while two of the crewmen stood at the doorway blocking the exit. Quill stood in the office opposite the doctor with her legs crossed in the chair. He rubbed his muzzle with a paw and tapped the glass. "Now that is an unusual specimen." He indicated the blue haired triceratops as he watched him move around, and noticed they seemed to group around him. "He's their leader."

"How can you tell?" Quill asked.

"Besides the position of his pod on the other ship, just look at how they defer to him for answers. Anytime my nurse asks them a question, they always look to him. Almost like they're afraid to answer without their superior's permission." He held up a data display pad. "I've been looking over the material that you downloaded from the other ship's database. I hope you were wise enough to cover your tracks."

"Of course. Sparks purged any records of our access to the database and our presence on board the ship. While she was at it, she erased the records of our friends here so that our client won't know anything's missing," she said.

Doctor Payne gave a doubtful raise of one eyebrow. The desk behind him was littered with downloaded records from the *White Queen*. Most of them seemed to contain medical data that the doctor had dove into the moment he had access. The more he learned the more he seemed intrigued. "All the same, I'd recommend not allowing our clients access to our ship when they arrive if we can help it."

"There should be no need for them to board if they don't detect our entry. Now what did you find out about our guests?" It was Quill's turn to examine Loren through the glass. The triceratops cut an imposing figure. For a moment she was lost in his well-muscled form. The doctor cleared his throat, bringing her out of her reverie.

His hyena features signaled deep thought. "There's a lot to go over. They were trained to be soldiers. There's a little question as to their origin but the files indicate they're originally an isolated native population. Some time before the war they were conscripted into the military of one of the major world powers. Their physical abilities are significantly more powerful than most of us. They have much more muscle mass and on average are a foot taller than we are."

"That explains the unusual setup on that ship over there," Quill said. "They build them big and I don't just mean the pods."

"That's right. The pods are larger and draw more power to accommodate their size. That's also why the proportions on much of the equipment is designed for their operation, not ours." He paused for a moment. "One interesting thing to note, it appears that some of them possess some psi talent. It isn't present across the board, but as you know during the war a number of nations attempted to breed into us psi-combat skills. With us it never worked. Apparently with some of them it did."

The mention of the 'special talents' brought the glance of one of the female dinosaurs. Quill watched her for a moment to determine if it was a coincidence, but before she could tell their leader stepped in front of her view. "Psi talent, like what?"

"These files describe some mild empathic talent, some low level telekinesis. It's present in only a small fraction of the soldiers. The records indicate they were trying to

find out how to duplicate it but they could never identify the right genetic sequence.” Doctor Payne deactivated his screens and looked over at Quill. “Captain, I can’t begin to tell you what a Pandora’s box that is.”

“Are you sure they couldn’t have evolved these abilities naturally?”

“Absolutely not. Their brains are effectively the same model as ours. The only difference is theirs have a few alternatively wired connections. Whoever altered them during the last war was specifically trying to cause this. One other interesting fact, the dinosaurs of command rank have a slight genetic modification. You see the leader’s hair? It’s not present in most of the dinos, but it is in Loren and a handful of other files. Apparently it designates a squad leader. Of course, these files contradict what we know as the truth. While they never admitted to having the dinosaurs in the first place the rumors are that they were all euthanized.” The doctor’s statement reminded her that the first dinosaurs were solely weapons of war, a fact that seemed to disagree with the face she saw in the main Infirmary.

Quill touched the glass with her hand. “What if they were just hidden away from us? What if the Pan Oceanic Alliance was waiting for the day when they’d need them again?” The question hung in the air as Quill stepped out into the main area of the Infirmary and stepped up to Loren. The triceratops stood in front of the others with a cautious expression.

“My name is Captain Quill of the *Winter’s Fury*. You’re on board my ship as our guests for the moment. What happens from here depends on you.” Quill started to pace back and forth. “You see, I have a problem. The person who sent me to find your ship didn’t expect I’d go aboard or that I’d find several living breathing examples of illegal genetic engineering from the last war. For that matter, I’m still processing that fact myself.”

The leader tugged on the waistline of his black military issue t-shirt. “My name is Loren. This is Matthias, Tango, and Melantha.”

“Nice to meet you, I think.”

“What do you intend to do with us?” Loren asked.

Quill leaned back against one of the exam beds. The triceratops did all the talking while the other triceratops without the mammalian hair seemed to be caring for their other females, a parasaurolophus and a liopleurodon. She noted the hierarchy seemed to suggest the triceratops were of higher rank, though it could be a simple coincidence. “I don’t know yet. Strictly speaking you all aren’t supposed to exist. I’m just a simple cargo captain, I’m not part of any military outfit or anything like that. I suppose I should’ve just left you in those pods for Checkmate.”

“Why didn’t you?” Matthias asked.

“I honestly don’t know.”

“The reason is because we’re contrary to fact.” Tango’s eyes remained focused on the floor. Her fingers curled into near fists as she rocked back and forth. “Our existence contradicts everything you know so the dissonance must be solved. Captain Quill dislikes things that don’t fit the facts.” The parasaurolophus looked up at the quill.

Quill whirled to face her. “How the hell do you know that?”

“You spent five minutes talking to the doctor in his office. The only reason to do so given the lack of injuries among those present was to discuss us.” Tango’s fingers seemed to flex erratically as she turned away from the captain.

“You’re right, we were talking about you. What else do you know?” Quill approached within a few feet of Tango.

“Only what I know from logical deduction. There is a seventy percent probability that you will keep us secret aboard this ship since it is obvious you did not find us by accident. Most likely you were sent by someone that has access to Checkmate’s records.” Tango turned away and moved to the corner of the room.

Doctor Payne consulted his information on the dinosaurs. “From what their medical histories indicate, Tango has aspergers, and an eidetic memory. It explains her unique observations, her recall must be amazing.”

Loren nodded. “It was why Tango was their favorite for reconnaissance missions. She could recall things the rest of us couldn’t.” The blue haired triceratops stepped forward. “What are your orders, captain?”

“Orders?”

“We are obviously at your mercy at the moment. As the highest ranking soldier here, it seems that my companions and I have no choice but to follow your commands.” Loren’s posture was remarkably rigid as he offered a military salute to Captain Quill before standing at attention.

The gesture took her by some surprise. Quill felt a pang of pain deep in her chest, though her tightened fist was the only outward sign she gave. What she knew and what was in front of her didn’t seem to agree, and none of it made any sense. She turned away for a moment. “You’ll follow my orders?”

“I will, if it will protect my people.” Loren held his hands behind his back, his muzzle lowered to convey a soft form of strength.

Quill could not blame the blue haired triceratops for his motivations. It surprised her that dinosaurs could be so loyal to each other. The war had told stories of them being deadly, bloodthirsty monsters, but that had been the winning side’s version of history. She knew that it was seldom as clear-cut as it seemed. In war, one did what one had to do. Her own father had been a blockade runner, delivering supplies to beleaguered colonies and outposts that needed the daily essentials of life in a conflict that seemed to only care about how many bodies it stacked up. The war was a bloody conflict that had dragged on for years, all because the governments of Earth could not simply let its people go. He had run one hundred and forty seven missions before his death.

Her eyes met Loren’s, and after a flash of anger, she turned to look at their leader. “You do what I say, when I tell you to do it. Until I say otherwise, you will obey any orders given to you by a member of this crew. I guarantee you no harm will come to you. I want answers, and you may be the only ones that can give them to me. Until then, you are to answer any questions put to you. For now, if the doctor is finished checking you out, I’m ordering you moved to the third cargo bay until further notice. We’ll set up some blankets and other essentials until we can determine a more permanent solution.” Loren nodded to Quill. “Loren, Matthias, since you two seem to be in charge, Melantha and Tango are your responsibilities. One of you, take them to the cargo bay.” The two members of her crew that had guarded the doors turned around and led the parade of dinosaurs out of the infirmary.

Doctor Payne stepped up to her. “They don’t trust you.”

“I don’t trust them.” Quill looked at the doctor. “During the war, all of the blockade runners and soldiers had stories about these things, how ruthless and dangerous

they could be when they were backed up against a wall. I grew up hearing my dad's stories, but I never met one of these things face to face until today. Now I find out that there's a whole damn ship full of these things out there, and Brett Whitmore and whoever he's working for wants them. I want to know why, and I know damn well he won't tell me. Loren might, though."

"They won't have the answer to the question you want to ask." Doctor Payne scratched behind his antlers.

"I'm done talking on that subject, Allan. Someone wants them, and that's reason enough for me to keep them aboard until I know what the hell is going on." Quill started towards the door.

Allan gestured towards his office. "I've got a lot more records to sort through on our new guests. I'll report to you when I'm finished. It's funny."

"What is?"

"They don't seem that dangerous for weapons of war." Doctor Payne shrugged before he returned to his office.

Weapons of war. One typically did not think of a living being as a weapon of war, but the doctor was correct. The dinosaurs had been trained specifically to fight. The Pan Oceanic Alliance had the resources and lacked the personnel. Lack of experienced commanders had caused their fair share of losses and ultimately forced their unconditional surrender to the Eurasian Union, but everyone knew that they still held a grudge for losing. On the surface, the Pan Oceanic Alliance had destroyed all of their weapons, but now it appeared they had sent them into space to hide them from prying eyes.

Quill knew her father had fought one or two during the war as a side effect of his blockade running. He had never talked about it other than to say that he could not believe that the dinosaur races still existed, though not everyone believed the stories. She wanted to hate them, but Tango and Loren had surprised her.

She had been raised to believe every living creature had a soul. She supposed that included dinosaurs. She saw Tango cry, and Loren seemed to be hiding a fear he dared not express. Quill had bluffed enough card sharks across the poker table to know when one was hiding a weakness.

Her thoughts turned to Loren, their leader. She had looked into his eyes. As much as she wanted to believe they were the weapons of war she had heard so much about she could not simply regard them as the enemy. The war was long done, and they were just relics out of time. She stopped in the hall and thought about what Loren had said. He would follow her orders as long as she would promise the safety of his people. If dinosaurs were soulless weapons, why would Loren even care?

She shook herself out of her reverie. There was a ship to run.

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DECEMBER 15TH, 2045

TWO YEARS INTO THE WAR OF EXODUS

"Fall in!" A booming voice commanded. All of those present lined up in a perfect row, with Loren at the front of the line. A meerkat with short black hair dressed in a

colonel's uniform entered the barracks and kept his baton in his hand. Flanked by two raptors, he cut an impressive figure. The raptors had been the most unfailingly loyal, carrying a body count that dwarfed any of the other genetically engineered species. Compared to them, the other dinosaur races were a disappointment.

The first group had proven difficult to control. They were resistant to orders, far too quick to talk back, and they had several behavioral abnormalities. Some of their numbers had not proven useful at all to their masters and were boxed, as the higher ups liked to call it. Never once had any of them said killed, but everyone knew what had happened to those that displeased the command officers.

The second generation was not much better in their masters' eyes. They were more compliant, but they still seemed to possess the drive to seek their own path, and that was something they were intent to breed out of them. Unlike the first generation, some of them had been so unwilling to violence they were relegated to being the servants and administrators.

The third generation had never been allowed outside other than on a mission. They were exposed to nothing other than the compound and never interacted with anyone other than their own kind or the officers and personnel that ran this facility. Loren had never known the reasons for any of his orders, only that he was to follow them or he would be 'boxed' as well. It was thought that the third generation would not seek or desire freedom if they had never known any other life.

Colonel McKinnon inspected each dinosaur with a disapproving leer. He made no secret that he did not like them. They carried out their missions well, but he would brook no weakness among his soldiers. "Squad Leader Loren, report!"

"Sir! All units are operating at peak efficiency. We await your orders, sir!" Loren saluted with military precision.

"At ease. The rest of you are dismissed. Loren, walk with me." He gestured for him to follow. He took into step beside him but one step behind. Though it was never said, he was not to walk in front of an officer. His right forepaw ached from the time he had forgotten that. "How is our dear Melantha performing?"

Loren knew he was testing him. Melantha was one of the psychics. She could sense emotions, but not much else. It at times crippled her when there was strong emotion around her. "Her control over her emotions has significantly improved, sir." It was a lie, but if he told him the truth he knew he would never see the young female again.

"Are you certain? During the last mission she hesitated to report the civilians she discovered hiding in the cargo bay. It was necessary for me to order the second squad to terminate them. I can't have a soldier I can't rely upon." Colonel McKinnon stared at him expectantly.

"I am, sir. She will not make the same mistake again, I promise you." Controlling his breathing was hard, but not as hard as the urge to look over at Melantha, who had been the most reluctant to pull the trigger. Loren cursed the fact that he had needed to do it, but it was either their targets or his soldiers, and no one would protect them if he did not. Their lives were expendable in this war. A war he had no stake in and was given no choice whether to fight or not. The guilt formed a pit in his stomach that he had to swallow to keep from vomiting. "Melantha has demonstrated a marked improvement." Another lie.

Colonel McKinnon nodded, both his raptor bodyguards following him just far back enough so they were not intrusive, but Loren knew they could hear every word they said. “You understand why raiding those enemy ships was necessary?”

“It is not my place to understand, sir. Only to obey.” In truth he did, but he knew that to answer as an equal would earn him only a beating or an admonishment. The officers insisted all of their dinosaur servants behave in a subservient manner to them. Loren failed to see how they were any different than he, other than in their anatomy, but he had no way to control his own body, so how could he be their equal?

The reality was that the officers allowed no dinosaur to either disobey an order or to be seen on ground missions. Their mere existence was impossible according to every other nation on the planet. With no witnesses other than panicked soldiers, no one could accuse the Pan Oceanic Alliance of violating the treaties. With the war on, no one was all that focused on the Pacific Ocean anyway. Their eyes were all out there. Lunar colonies, the Martian terraforming project, and Jupiter Lunar Domes had drawn all attention to the rest of the solar system.

The dinosaurs were only allowed out on missions, and returned immediately after. Had it not been for mission briefs, Loren would not even know that much.

Colonel McKinnon seemed satisfied by his answer. “How is Tango progressing?”

“Well, sir.” Tango suffered from Asperger’s Syndrome as well as possessing an eidetic memory. That particular gift had granted her with an amazing recall for mission details. Her skills had made it easier for Loren to hide her reluctance in combat, even though all of them were forced to wear explosive collars and headset cameras on missions. “She’s our best tech.”

Colonel McKinnon nodded. “So I’ve noticed. She seems to have more promise at least. If the situation with Melantha does not reflect your assessment I may consider reassigning her to Solange’s squad, see how she does there. Failing that, or if the mission goes poorly enough, I may simply box her. Regardless, that’s a matter for another time. Atten-SHUN!” He awaited his salute before turning on his heel and leaving with his raptor guards. The door sealed and locked, and Loren lowered to the floor.

“Is everything all right, Loren? The Colonel seemed angry today.” Melantha reached out to hold him.

Loren pulled her close and brushed the top of her head with his hand. “Don’t worry about that, Melantha. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“Loren?” Matthias’s voice.

WINTER’S FURY – 50 YEARS LATER PRESENT DAY

“Loren!” Matthias shouted, louder this time.

“What?” Loren turned to him, returning his attention to the present. He looked around and realized he was being directed to step into the cargo bay. “Oh, I’m sorry. I was lost in thought.” He entered the room, which was smaller than the bay he had spent the first twenty years of his life in. It reminded him of his days in the compound, where from the moment he was old enough to hold a gun, he was sent on missions.

Matthias, Melantha, and Tango all gathered around him the moment the doors closed and they were left alone. Their faces all betrayed their desperate need for answers that he could not give them.

“Where are we?” Matthias asked. “What happened to the ship? The others? The last thing I remember is going into stasis...”

“I don’t know. I think it’s reasonable to say that we’re safe, at least for the moment. This certainly isn’t a Checkmate ship. No guards at the door, no cameras in here, and they aren’t interrogating us at the moment. Melantha, what do you sense?” Loren steeled his expression, though he shared their uncertainty.

Her eyes closed for a moment before Melantha answered. “I sense a lot of distrust of us, but no one intending specific harm. The captain has some unresolved issues with our kind, however.” The liopleurodon brushed a stray hair from her face. “I’m sorry. I can’t get any more right now.”

Loren held up a hand. “It’s not your fault, Melantha, you gave us more than we had a moment ago. Tango, do you think we’re in danger? What did you see on our way in?”

“I estimate a ninety percent probability the captain will not harm us unless we act aggressively first. Deliberate violence is not one of the captain’s more probable traits, however she is extremely protective of her surrogate family.” Tango sat on the deck. “I should also remark that the ship is not a military craft, nor does it have any larger association. I believe it is a freelance vessel.”

“Thank you, Tango, that’s extremely helpful.” Loren pulled Matthias aside in the far corner of the room. “Matthias, what do you think?”

“I don’t know. We haven’t been harmed, so I tend to agree with Melantha, we’re safe enough for the moment. I’m worried that they don’t seem to know where Solange, Hamilton, Topher, or Lexi are right now. It could be because they don’t know, or they could only fit so many of us on board the ship. As Tango said, this ship isn’t military and it isn’t large.” His second in command tugged on his shirt. He scanned the room with his eyes as they had been trained to do. He supposed they knew nothing else other than their training, but it was enough for now. Melantha and Tango clustered together towards the sheets that had been laid out as some sort of apparent bedding.

Loren opened his mouth to respond when the doors opened, and a young girl walked through. She was a brown haired rat and was dressed in work clothes stained in engine grease. The girl brought a tray of food and several containers of water in with her. A gentle smile on her face, she set the tray down on the nearby table. “What’s this?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. My name is Sparks, at least, that’s what everyone on the ship calls me. I have a habit of having issues with live current. I’ve been shocked more than a few times. Anyway, I brought you some food and water, I don’t know what you all like so it’s kind of plain, but it’ll do for now. I brought a data pad so you can write down what you’d like and I can see if we can provide it for you.” Sparks kept her eyes on the floor, her smile taking on a sheepish aspect.

The tray was full of a few bottles of water, some assorted fruits, and four prepackaged assorted meals. Loren picked up a bottle and handed one to Melantha and one to Tango. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I’m sorry that we don’t have a better setup for you down here but honestly we didn’t know you’d be coming, and the captain is a little busy right now.” Sparks hands slid into her pockets. The girl seemed friendly; it was the type of response Loren had rarely encountered in her lifetime. Loren stepped closer, waiting to see if the girl would step back, but to her surprise Sparks didn’t move. Instead, she reached out to touch her fingers.

Loren responded in kind, allowing his own fingers to intermingle with the young rat girl. The blue haired triceratops allowed a grin to take over his facial features.

He hoped that this meant that they were safe at last, and that the rest of her people in time could find that same safety. Thoughts of where the others were rushed through his mind as he recalled the last moment before he and the others had entered stasis. It had felt like he was never going to wake up again. He had taken one more look around and given a nod to Matthias, hoping that he would wake up with the others wherever he ended up.

Loren lowered her hand. “We are not your enemy. At least, I don’t think we are.”

Sparks smiled. “I don’t think you are either. It’ll just take some time. You’ve missed a lot in the past fifty years.”

A female voice Loren recognized as the captain’s came over the intercom. “Attention, all personnel to your positions. The Checkmate ship is on approach.” The message brought a change over Sparks, whose face drained of color as she whirled around to leave. She sprinted away from the dinosaurs, turning back just as she reached the doors.

“I’ve got to go, I’m sorry, I’ll come back later.” She hurried out and left the four dinosaurs alone.

Matthias leaned close to Loren’s ear. “Did she say fifty years?”

Loren gave a silent nod.

Melantha looked up towards the ceiling. Her eyes went wide with anxiety. “They’re here.”

Loren did not need to ask whom she referred to; there was only one reason for Melantha’s reaction. Their masters had returned to claim them. They had waited half a century to come for them and before they’d even known where they were, the people that had made them who they were had arrived. It was at that moment that Loren was certain he would never follow another order from them again.

Fifty years of sleep.

Matthias could count to fifty -- his tally in combat had long since exceeded such a paltry number -- but when it came to years the number seemed impossibly large and utterly insignificant. There could be fifty laps to run about the training compound, fifty targets to eliminate on a mission, fifty missions to win for the barkers, fifty different weapons to learn, fifty different ways to kill, and fifty different ways to die. But fifty years? What was a year but a measure suited to people who lived off the land and obeyed the law of seasons. He had been raised in the compound and its metal walls from his hatching, breathed recycled air where the only breeze was beneath a vent, and had never even glimpsed the sun or tilt of moon or turn of star in the night sky above that

compound. When they left on a mission they were stuffed in cargo carriers to keep them hidden.

To see the sky and to feel the earth beneath his heavy feet meant they were killing barker enemies.

From what Loren and the one-horned captain had discussed, and from what Melantha had sensed and Tango discerned, it was clear that the war they'd fought was over after those fifty years of sleep. But now Checkmate, they who Matthias had only ever known to bark orders of death -- death for others if they obeyed, death for themselves if they did not -- were coming back for them. He called them barkers because that was all they did. He had never said the word; it was only for his thoughts and helped him understand the world. There were barkers, the barker's enemies, and dinosaurs.

This Captain Quill and her crew seemed to belong to the second category. Could they be trusted? He hoped so, but they would know soon enough. Checkmate was coming.

Checkmate meant victory; it meant the game was over. Before he'd been assigned as Loren's second Matthias had actually learned to play the game of chess with his former squad leader. Telesto, a fellow Triceratops, had learned it while on reconnaissance -- the guards at the base they would storm a few days later had played it incessantly -- and taught it to his closest friend on the squad. Matthias had always enjoyed crafting little shapes from discarded scraps of paper, torn leather, or twisted scrap metal from wherever he could scrounge them; he usually made a show of tearing them to shreds or crushing them beneath his boots as viciously as he could to satisfy the barkers, but in the interval between missions he'd crafted a set that he and Telesto might use. Telesto had kept them hidden and in the dark hours when they were meant to sleep, they would by touch alone play a single game.

Until the barkers found them and Telesto refused to destroy them. Matthias had smashed them without hesitation. He was promoted and made Loren's second. Telesto was boxed.

Checkmate was coming. But whose victory would it mean?

Matthias stared hard at the bulkhead of the cargo bay in which he and his squad waited. He wished to find something he could work with his hands, but the bay was empty. He tugged on the black shirt covering his blotchy brown hide instead. Hot air gusted from his nostrils and he tilted back his head, turning his ear holes to listen to the grunt of the starship as its many parts moved and kept them alive against the ravages of space.

Checkmate was coming. The barkers would try to claim them. If Captain Quill was one of the barker's enemies, she would try to prevent it. One of the two, the barkers or the barker's enemies would have victory. But what of the dinosaurs?

Matthias ground his beak together as he mulled that question. With fifty years of sleep, could the answer he'd always known have actually changed? All he could do was trust Melantha's insights, Tango's conclusions, Loren's leadership, and that little spark he knew when turned inward and up beyond himself. They were dinosaurs; they would not always be pawns.

Let Checkmate come. Matthias's dark eyes narrowed; his horns tilted forward toward the bay doors. Let them come.