

EXAVIOR

John Sachu

Art by Kevin Duncan

Joseph walked with the salesman to his new ship. It was used, but new to him. It had been rebuilt after crashing into EPSO 8, out on the perimeter of this solar system. Everyone aboard died, including the copilot bolted and sealed in her stasis room. The crash had flickered off the inertia canceller permanently and everyone on board was lost in a rather tragic and messy accident.

According to the record's sphere, an object or meteor of just enough volume had slammed into the vessel cutting off most systems just as it was landing on that distant atmosphere-free moon, and that was that.

"There you are Mister Wately. She's all yours," smiled the pretty saleslady "Have a good lift."

"Thank you Marian for all your help. So long."

"Take care."

Josef followed the cargo ramp up its rather steep artificial hill and entered the medium sized, one-man cargo ship. He tapped the door closed to the strong temperate wind blowing off the north end of the field and was glad to be onboard and alone for once. It was a locally run government facility, on this planet, that controlled all spaceports and he wanted out of there. He never liked these anal kind of worlds where the locals controlled so much, especially free trade.

He dropped his one personal flight bag on the deck plates and rushed forward. He was anxious to get airborne and report to yard sixteen for his cargo he'd set up before the sale had been completed. Joseph wanted a good used ship and this one being a rebuild and re-supplied, especially with that somewhat new but questionable copilot, was all bought at a bargain-based price. It fit the bill perfectly.

"Can you start the warmers, Angela? I want to get out of here as soon as we're cleared."

"Certainly, Captain. So. You bought us, huh?"

"Yes. Quite the deal, too."

"I suppose I had something to do with it, didn't I?"

"Yes. They did mention it but without specifics and I didn't ask what they were. All they said was you were a bit quirky."

She didn't seem to be offended. "Warmer on line. Grav field ready when you are. Why didn't you ask about me?"

"Okay. We've got clearance," he said without answering her question. "Let's take her up," he announced without strapping into the pilots chair, pulling back on the control stick and guiding the craft in a low altitude adjustment to the ground. Those six meso's to the cargo yard would only take a minute or two.

“Would you like me to strap you in, sir?” she asked, seeing he wasn’t.

“No thank you. I’m too nervous to be confined right now. I just want to get our cargo and get the rocket off this planet.”

“I see.”

“I know you’re looking out for me. Thank you, but we’re okay.”

“I am, but we’re traveling at a hundred and twenty meso’s a minute. If something else hits us, you’re going to bounce around a bit.”

“Isn’t the inertia canceller on?”

“That only works after a six minute warm. We’re just barely into hover stage. I really wish you’d strap in. We’ve still got more than half a minute till touch down.”

“Any traffic around us?”

“Quite a bit, yes.”

Joseph sat back in the chair and said, “Okay, go ahead.” She could strap him in faster than he could do it himself. The crisscrossed webbing fluttered into place and Joseph moved the chair closer to the dark bordered flight consol to guide the ship in the last few seconds of flight.

When they touched down Angela announced, “Yard sixteen, bay seven,” while he stabbed at the strap release button beneath the cockpit chair’s arm, then jumped to his feet.

“Keep the warmers going,” he told her. “We won’t be here long.”

He almost jogged to the ramp opening, and quickly lowered it. The loading crew and small, compact cargo were already on the perimeter, waiting. He walked briskly their way and took care of the formalities, noticing a first time fee on the electro sheet for cargo severance. They didn’t know him and so couldn’t trust him, completely, this first time. He hated that fee, even when he worked for Epsilon Industries, his former employer. It could sometimes mean as much as three percent of your profit margin and that was almost stealing, in his opinion, which didn’t matter to cargo transfer companies a whole heck of a lot, did it? He’d just have to live with it.

It took roughly ten whole minutes to load and secure the draft pallets and Joseph actually jogged back to the pilot’s consol this time. He had asked Angela to get lift clearance as he came back.

“Don’t you want to check the securing mechanicals before lifting, sir?”

“Thanks for reminding me, but no. Not this second. I noticed a bunch of aggravated people on the other side of the office, trying to get through. I think they were coming for me.”

“I see,” the voice said, and then, “You’re clear to lift on vector three, seven . . .”

“I see it, thanks.”

Just as the ships landing struts retracted and a microsecond before the grav drive threw up its protective atmosphere shields, they both heard a pinging noise, and then several more, and then it was silent except for the ship’s engines and machinery getting up to speed.

“Looks like they got through and took a couple of shots our way. Any damage?” he asked.

“No sir. It was small arms fire. Who were they?”

“Some people that didn’t like it that I won a lot of money from them. That’s how I paid for this ship.”

“Did you cheat them?”

“No. I won it fair and square in a card game. They’re gangsters, though, and in their world no one wins but them. They’ll cool down in a couple of years but it’ll be a lot longer than that before I return to this place. They’ll learn to accept the fact that they lost this one, eventually.”

“I see, sir.”

"I hope you don't, completely. Gambling for me is a bad habit. I've sworn it off a number of times but it's always a weakness in me that takes me back to those smoky rooms."

"So this wasn't a casino?"

"Oh, heaven's no."

"Why go to gangsters to gamble, then?"

"They give better odds but usually no one collects even if they do win. They just wake up in an alley somewhere with a big head ache and some broken bones, if they're lucky. The casino's have a nicer tactic. They merely ask you to leave and you can't make money if you're winning all the time. They don't like it either, but their refusals of letting you be there are just about the same results, in the long run. They black list you from playing, too, from world to world. It's all crooked."

"So what 'is' the appeal?"

"I don't know. I don't need to gamble. I've got plenty of money. I suppose it has a lot to do with the excitement and surprise of the winning. In my case, though, how many times I can win hands in a row."

"You're that good?"

"Well, yes. I have some hidden abilities most people wouldn't appreciate my having, if they knew."

"I don't suppose you'd like to share them with your co-pilot, would you?"

"The less you know, the better off you'll be. And no. I'd don't want to share them. No offense."

"None taken. In a galaxy of wonders, I have no doubt you have hidden abilities. There are a number of races that are banned from gambling. Apparently you're from one of them, though I can't distinguish which one. You certainly seem completely human."

"I'm not exactly from one of those races, but that's a good guess. I came about it by accident, actually, my, shall we say, gifts."

"Plural, huh? You have more than one, apparently."

"Clear for flash drive. Grav fully on line," she supplemented.

"Coordinates set?" he said.

"Lane clear and field open."

"Initiate."

The ship's readouts jumped to impossible abbreviation of alphanumeric numbers, though inside the craft, no feeling of accelerated motion was present with the inertia canceller active.

"ETA is fourteen hours, 'S', (standard time), twenty-nine minutes to Queka Industries, Eppie one, zero, five.

The two continued their conversation as if nothing had interrupted it.

"Yes. I have some, uh . . . , well, several things I can do to help me win, but I'm not infallible. I have my limits and silly human weaknesses."

"Can I get your card info? I'd like to know who I'm working for."

"Um . . . in a little while, yes. I've got some things to take care of on the pin-beam. I want to know what happened in that bay after we left."

"If you mean the gangster's coercing information about your heading from the ground crew, it probably hasn't happened, yet, don't you think?"

"Maybe you're right."

"So -- the card?"

"Something first. I want to be addressed as simply Joseph, Okay."

"Yes sir. That will be easy enough to adapt to."

"And please, no sirs. Just Joseph."

"Alright, Just Joseph."

"No! Simply, Joseph."

"I was joking, Joseph. I am alive, you know, and with a sense of humor."

"And kind of a smart aleck, too, I take it?"

"Yes. Are you sure you don't want to know why you got a ship's symbiotic so cheap?"

He thought about it for several moments.

"Well, don't over think it, will you?" she said.

"I'm sorry. I don't like getting close to people. I don't need to know."

"Oh?"

He didn't answer.

"Joseph?"

"People get hurt and die, it's been my experience in the past. I've been close to people before. I haven't been able to cope well with their passing as well as some people, maybe. Forgive me if I'm a little cold or distant. I don't purposely mean to hurt your feelings. I'm just trying to relieve my own pain for the future."

"But doing that, you will only be more lonely than necessary, and in pain, all the more, whether you loose someone close to you or not. It's a flawed philosophy to live by."

"Maybe it is." Joseph paused and then reached into the inside breast pocket of his leather flight jacket. He rifled through his several cards and found his I.D., which contained his qualifications, histories, and education, and a myriad of other bits and pieces of information. He put it in the reader slot for her.

"Don't make a big deal out of this, Angela, like most people do," he said, and tapped the 'READ' bar on the consol.

The electronic feeds to her mind filled up almost instantly with his life and nearly every detail of it. It took less than three seconds and was usually kind of a rush for a symbiotic copilot.

Joseph heard a gasp over the speakers that gave very life like sounds of the sealed off copilot in her chamber. Everything had hit as if at once, he knew. They, the copilots, were so acute to that reading that most listeners felt the voice was being spoken right beside their heads and it often caused the passengers, or in this case, a single man flyer such as his, to let themselves sympathize and endear themselves very intimately to the poor souls that ran and looked after most of the ship, most of the time, encased and helpless inside their protective chamber. He wasn't immune to it, he knew, but tried very hard to be, though that simple gasp had gotten to him. He hope she was all right.

Joseph waited, and pulled the card from the slot, knowing the download was completed.

"You poor thing."

"Don't, please."

"Do you ever talk about it?"

"No. Never."

"Going through that much surgery and rehabilitation, don't you think you should?"

"That's what they tried to tell me at the institute. I declined."

"Seventy percent, though?"

"Yes. I'm almost an android, it seems."

"So -- that's your secret to winning. You can see through things, calculate and predict outcomes, almost everything a gambler or an explorer, or even a spy, would need and envy. You're almost a computing robotic. You'll probably never age or die, either, will you."

"So it would seem -- I'm told."

"And you are of royal lineage. Why are you running around the galaxy risking your life when you don't have to?"

“You’re making a big deal about it.”

“No I’m not. I’m your co-pilot. I can’t be forced to release any of these intimate details and you know it. Get over it and talk to me. I’m your symbiotic slave, your friend. No one’s ever going to know what we say here. Talk to me.”

Joseph stood up and walked around the smallish cockpit compartment, and then left.

Angela let him go without comment. With the thousands of micro sensors and hi resolution micro camera’s on board, both inside and out, she knew where he was, exactly, and could continue to edge him on, if she wanted to, but she could easily sense his difficulty at discussing his past. Something they hadn’t touched on was the loss of his young wife, barely two months married. She wouldn’t bring it up, either. It was way too painful for him, she knew from the medical reports. She couldn’t, wouldn’t do it.

She sensed something unrelated to their discussion and with her full capacity of mind at her instantaneous disposal, she needed to inform him immediately and activate their counter measures. She did and the small, almost feeble, defensive arms they had at their disposal, were quickly put into play.

“Unknown object approaching aft. Intersect in eighty-three seconds.”

Joseph dashed back to the flight controls and checked the readouts.

“A Transition Missile?” he said, unbelieving. “That’s gotta cost more than what I won from those clowns.”

“Intersect in sixty-three seconds.”

“Fire everything we got for a three second burst, then release a counter drone with ship’s holo.”

The multi-barreled gun shot aft immediately and the vibration was felt, though very slightly, and then the screen showed a quickly disappearing drum-like image drifting rearward which soon took on their craft’s shape.

“Increase speed to twelve parsins.” They were only traveling at eight. They would need that distance to stay clear of the debris, if the drone decoy worked.

It did.

There was a huge flash aft and even before it had subsided, Angela gave the outcome.

“Object destroyed.”

“Whew! That was close,” he said. “I can’t believe they would send something like that after me. They must have a permanent station somewhere near the spaceport. Crimony! Talk about sore losers.”

“Defenses stored. You do lead a colorful life, don’t you?”

“You have no idea.”

“Oh yes I do.”

“Yeah. I guess you do.”

There was that screaming silence that everyone hears from time to time in their lives, now, between them, then Joseph spoke up, after several minutes, again.

“It was very hard, at first, but having gone through all that reconstruction and therapy, something in me changed. I couldn’t take all the royal ceremony my family was expected to perform and even though I was not required to participate, any more, I just had to leave. I keep in contact, to some degree, but I’m happier now than I was at home.”

“I understand, Joseph, and I’m sorry about everything that happened. I do understand. I really do. Something of a similar disaster happened to me. I was only sixteen when my functions stopped working, after the collision. We hit a roving asteroid way out in a dead zone. We were trying to get someplace fast. The asteroid was too big for our push mechanism to move it out of our way and our ship hit it with a glancing blow, thank goodness. The ship we were on wasn’t as quick to respond as

it could have been, with its older components. I've been this way ever since. The impact was just enough to break through the field and damage the ship, and me. Most everyone else was killed but one of the surviving crew, a robot. He was able to get us to a near port and that saved my life. That's my story, if you were wondering at all. Plus, my attitude is not what most ship's symbiots are screened for, but my dad had some pull. I'm supposed to be too head- strong and independent of thought. In other words, a rich brat. I hope, though, we can get along. I'm so grateful for this chance to work and feel alive again, with all these sensors. It's like having multiple bodies. I can't imagine living my life out in a stasis chamber at home. Those people don't usually last too long. Their minds go a lot of times before their bodies do."

"So I guess we're two damaged souls, then?"

"Yes. I suppose we are."

"Thank you for sharing. I don't know if that was hard for you, but I feel a little better now, knowing you a little more, and what brought you to be aboard. Thanks."

"Sure thing," she said. "I feel better, too."

"Can you bring up the pin-bean and range it for Solcintra? I want to bounce a communiqué off of several planets and see what the port is thinking so the gangsters don't get suspicious that we're still alive. If that drone means anything, they think we're destroyed, hopefully. That'll lessen our worries in the near future. Oh. I forgot to ask. Our image was active on that drone, wasn't it?"

"Yes, the missile was sending back false holographic images of the ship, all the way till impact. Anyone watching those transmissions would think it killed us, I'm certain."

"Okay. Good."

Joseph did a thorough search of the port news back on their last port of call. As far as anyone was concerned, they were long destroyed and dead.

"I'm going to have to get new cards," he said. "These old ones are no good to me anymore."

"Is that hard to do?"

"No. Just expensive."

"You better change the electronic signatures to the various readouts of the ship, Angela. And the name."

"It's done."

"Already?"

"Yes."

"Boy you guys are quick."

"Is that a compliment, 'You guys?'"

"It's supposed to be."

"You silver tongued devil, you."

"I do have a facility with language, don't I?"

"Yeah, about as graceful and smooth as a eighteen kilo-quar-ton log falling on a house."

"I can see why you needed your father to get you into the service."

"Na, na, na -- na."

Joseph laughed and he heard her laughing, too. It felt good to be friends.

"Got any ideas for a new ship's name?" he asked Angela.

"I've always been partial to the name, Exavior," and she spelled it out.

"What's it mean and where's it from."

"It's a Laiden name. From what I remember, it mean's, Truth."

"It sounds like a battle cruiser's name."

"Still, there's a dignity, to it. I'll bet we'd be the only ones in the galaxy to use it."

"Okay. Exavior it is. It does sound dignified. Thanks."

Their cargo was delivered on time to Queka Industries, on Eppie one, zero, five, and claimed they had been commissioned by another craft to deliver the cargo. It was a believable lie as that sort of shuffling of deliveries happens all the time. Plus; they got the early delivery bonus, to boot, coming in at twelve parsins instead of the fuel saving eight.

Within seven hours they had another cargo and it was further in, to one of the frontier planets. It was a long way but they were both glad to get off world. They wanted to put distance between their gangster buddies and the ship, just in case they were more clever than they had guessed them to be. It could happen.

Three days out, Joseph and Angela having spoken more about their past and opening up about their feelings on various subjects, he felt himself drawn quite closely to his copilot. It wasn't unusual for a pilot to get so close to his ship's symbiot, but it was for him.

He tried punching the code into the view screens that would show Angela. It was only used for emergencies, normally, if something was needed as in acute difficulties in the health of the copilot, but Joseph was merely curious about what she looked like.

"What are you trying to do?" she asked.

"Um . . ."

"I've got them locked out. You know you can't access my inner cameras without my permission."

"Unless you didn't have them locked."

"Why do you want to see me?"

"I'm just curious."

"Why."

"I shouldn't say."

"Why? Are you afraid I'll spank your hand?"

"I heard on Eppie, talking to another captain, that there's a system further in where he claims his ship's symbiot was cured. There is supposedly a race in there that can heal almost any damage. I was thinking of myself, at the time, but since then, I've been thinking of both of us."

"That's not possible."

"I met her, his symbiot, Angela. She was as mobile and perfect as anyone. He seemed very sincere and they both were very sober about the discussion. I have the coordinates."

"I can't entertain such hope. It sounds too fantastic and it's cruel of you to share this with me."

"It's only cruel if it isn't true. I sincerely believe them, Angela. I don't know if I can be helped in any way, but you seem to be a prime candidate."

"And why the curiosity about my appearance?"

"I wanted to see how much damage had been done. I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking."

"I'm fully featured. I didn't lose any limbs. The damage was done to the spinal tissues, most of them, but I look like a girl, still. The electronics keep everything toned and looking as if I'm taking a nap. My body hasn't aged, either. It's one of the nice side effects of being a symbiot. You stay pretty."

Joseph didn't know what to say. He cancelled the code and tried to look busy though not before saying he was sorry, again.

"It's alright. I understand, now. You can look at me if you want to."

"I don't want to impose."

"You aren't. I'm naked, though. You think you can deal with that and not make any cracks about my appearance?"

"I won't."

"Okay. I'll open things up. You don't have to punch in the code. I'll do it."

“Okay,” he said, his voice barely heard.

The woman on screen was beautiful beyond his imagining. She was a white haired blond with very fair creamy skin. Her body did look like it was merely sleeping and it had the body tone of an athlete. The things they could do these days. Her breasts, even lying down, were proud and extended, her tummy was flat upon delicately molded hips and the line of hair from her genitals looked like a fine line of artistic strokes from an artist’s brush. She was beyond beautiful and he told her so.

She blushed and then cut the view short. “You embarrassed me.”

“I know. I’m sorry, but you really are such an enchanted creature, Angela. We’re going to that planet and if they can do anything for either of us, if this isn’t a ruse, or a very cruel, cruel joke by bored pilots, then I think we will have a wonderful relationship. We have a good ship and the universe is ours for the taking.”

He heard several snuffles and heard her breathing. It was not an unpleasant sound, and he sympathized with her emotions.

“I think I’d like that,” she said, sniffing, again. “Whichever way it turns out.”



