

The Echo

By James Pearce

Year 3099:

Planet: Goshen

On a bustling spaceport dock, deep within the capital city of Goshen, the streets are lined with people from all walks of life. Sovereign police officers stroll through crowds of people waiting to find work or book passage on a ship with hopes of finding a home elsewhere. The Terran rebellion has caused hatred for the sovereign government here and tensions have never been higher. The walls of buildings along this area are lined with propaganda posters bearing the Sovereign Government's sigil with a large red "X" through it and upon the poster read the words "The people have no sovereignty under Sovereign rule!" And while the Sovereign police tear these posters down with vigor at every chance, two more always reappear in its place.

But on this street, amidst the chaos of a world under siege, a young man is making his way to the very last dock in the row, Dock 74, and he is looking for a very specific ship: The Echo. Renowned for its speed as well as the brash and unfiltered captain at her helm, the Echo is the go-to ship for anyone trying to leave Goshen unnoticed. When he arrives at the dock he is faced with the most beautiful ship he's ever seen, bright opalescent green hull with deep purple shielding around its wings, he is so taken aback by this sight that he doesn't hear the loud yelling of a woman behind him.

"Get out of the damn way!" the voice from behind him beckons aggressively.

"I'm so sorry," the man stutters and shifts to one side, allowing a tall, auburn haired woman in a dark green duster coat to move past.

She is wheeling pallets of unmarked cases into the ship's cargo hold when a group of Sovereign police officers abruptly call for her to stop from the dock entrance. The young man is frozen, hoping they won't notice him; he shrinks into himself and stays silent and motionless, as the woman exits the ship.

"The name is Rex," the woman exclaims proudly from the edge of the hold, "Captain Rex of the Echo."

"We don't care what your name is! We want to know what's in the cargo you're shipping!" The head soldier says loudly while slowly inching his hand toward his sidearm, "You know nothing leaves planetside without Sovereign consent."

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"Yeah, and we didn't see no Sovereign emblem on them cases. Seems like we might have some trouble on our hands here." a second soldier adds sarcastically,

Captain Rex steps out of the ship, counting on one hand with her fingers while staring at the guards.

"3" she says smiling, "seems unfair, don't ya think?"

"We don't have to play fair against you Terran dogs," the head officer replies, "take her in boys!"

With the agility of some unknown creature, Rex sprints toward the three men and leaps toward the head officer. Before the man can draw his pistol Rex delivers three rapid punches to his chest, throat, and face as the officer lets out a gasp of breath and hits the ground. Spinning toward the other two officers she pulls out a small, concealed, black knife from her shoe and smiles at the remaining men. While watching this unfold before his eyes the young man can see the people inside the Echo working on unloading cargo as if nothing bad is even happening, and before he knows it another officer is on the ground, this time with blood pooling around his abdomen. He can see that the final officer is approaching Rex slowly pulling a gun from his back waistband.

"He's got a gun!" the young man exclaims.

Both Rex and the officer turn to see the young man but the officer desperately pulls the gun faster to aim at Rex. The captain stops and begins to raise her hands.

"That's it! I have had enough here," the officer gasping for breath continues, "You are hereby under arrest..."

A single blaster sound echoes through the dock as Rex lowers her arms. The young man turns to see one of the Echo crew members standing in the hold with a pistol drawn but his attention is immediately drawn back by the loud thud of the officer hitting the ground.

"You!" Captain Rex exclaims while pointing at the young man, "What's your name?"

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“Uh...” in shock at all the sudden chaos the young man struggles to find the words to speak, “I...I’m Hector...”

“Great, Hector, pick these men up and bring them inside we have to leave.”

Gesturing to the three incapacitated men on the dock floor, Captain Rex jogs back into the hold of the Echo. Hector is startled but knows he needs this ride, so he proceeds to drag the officers across the dock floor and into the hold of the Echo. Once inside he finds himself overwhelmed by the experience. Lights as bright as the sun illuminate the hold and the adjacent hallways, while the sound of jumbled radio transmissions echo throughout the air, yet none of it seems to phase the crew in the slightest as they continue to work and strap down everything in preparation for takeoff. Hector, distracted by the sensation of this new environment, begins to explore the narrow hallways of the ship when he hears it. A faint whirring of machinery down the hallway grows louder as Hector approaches and he can see a bright blue light shining through a porthole in the door ahead. As he enters this room he finds himself in awe of the bright, rapidly rotating, sphere that is seemingly floating in the center of the room. The machine noise that was faintly coming from this room is immense and deafening while this close.

“Do you like it?” a muffled voice calls through the sonically fractured air. “She sure is a beauty.”

Hector turns to see Captain Rex standing beside him, proudly gazing up at the sphere. “Come on, follow me.” She says, gesturing towards another door.

The Captain leads Hector into the command deck, a smaller room lined with massive screens that are all illuminated with information and images of star-maps scrolling across them. Out of the front window he can see the sky above Goshen; once bright with sunlight and potential, now dim and scarred from years of war and rebellion.

“Where are you headed, and why did you choose my ship?”

Lost in the memories of his childhood on Goshen, Hector doesn’t answer. Instead he moves toward the front of the ship, staring at the silhouette of an enormous craft far above the planet surface.

“Dreadnaught.” the captain says as she walks up behind Hector, “blockade ship. Probably here to supply the sovereign troops, well, what’s left of them anyway.”

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The crew on the deck all seem to chuckle at this statement, dragging Hector back to reality.

"Now answer my question, boy."

"I'm sorry," Hector replies timidly, " I must have drifted off, what did you ask?"

Looking at Hector, now annoyed, the captain replies, "Where are you headed, and more importantly why did you choose the Echo?"

"Anywhere ma'am, anywhere but here."

"What're you runnin from?" the captain asked, looking at Hector almost skeptically.

"Nothin ma'am, I...I'm afraid." Fear now fills the eyes of Hector as he gazes back to the darkened skies above. "I can't explain why, but I need to leave Goshen..."

Rex looks Hector over as he stares out the window. She can tell that something is strange about Hector. He sounds afraid yet he stands still and calm before her.

"Why us? Why'd you choose the Echo?"

"I need to leave the system. And yours is the only ship docked that has a HIT on board. Without Helium Ionic Thrusters I don't stand a chance at getting far enough fast enough."

"Listen, Hector was it? I'll take you on as crew and you are free to tag along with us but you will work, do you understand?"

"I sure do, I'd be happy to help on board. What did you have in mind?"

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"Well, you seem to be familiar with our engine, you knew we had one on board and then I find you in the room starin' at the damn thing, are you any good with one?"

"In the academy I took a few engineering courses that taught me how to work with 'em. I've never seen one in person before today though."

"That doesn't matter, I'll have you help Kit in the engine room." Rex reaches to the computer in front of her and presses a large blue button, "Engineer Kit, you are needed on deck immediately, everyone else the Echo will be leaving port in 5 so tighten everything down and say a few prayers, we got a bumpy one ahead. Over."

A few moments pass as more crew members shuffle into the deck and begin sitting at stations and processing the take off procedures. The room fills with the clicking of keyboards and lights flash brightly across screens as the engine grows louder and louder. Suddenly the door to the deck opens and a loud brazen voice yells from the hallway,

"What could you possibly need Rex? You know we are trying to take off and I can't jus-"

The man stops talking as he enters and sees Hector, a stranger, on board with Rex glaring from behind.

"What could I possibly need?!" Furiously, Rex pushes Hector aside and approaches Kit.

Kit was an almost 7 foot tall behemoth of a man with a thick red beard and oil stained grey jumpsuit, begins backing slowly as Rex approaches confidently.

"My...my apologies Re...I mean Captain. I didn't mean no disrespect. I just know that our HIT ain't what it used to be and I can't..."

"Nevermind that Kit," Rex replied, calming down as she gestures toward the now visibly uncomfortable Hector. "I found you an assistant. This is Hector."

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"Assistant huh? I always wanted to boss someone around mercilessly like you do."

Kit laughs heartily at his own statement but stifles the laughter abruptly as Rex turns to glare up at him.

"F-follow me Hector, I'll show you the engine room."

"Oh I have already been but I can't wait!"

Hector and Kit leave the deck for the engine room as a crew member on the deck approaches Captain Rex.

"Captain, The Echo is all clear for launch, and all systems are ready and operational. On your command we can leave."

"Great! No delays then, we need to get this cargo off planet and out of the hands of those Constellation Corps thugs."

"Yes Captain, right away!" the navigation officer replied as she made her way back to her station.

"Attention Echo crew this navigation officer Karik on comms, we are now ready for take off."

Suddenly a loud metallic creak fills the air as the engines shift into flight mode and the ship lurches forward. Ahead in the distance a dozen black ships can be seen approaching through the capital city skyline.

"We've got company," exclaims Captain Rex, "Get us off planet now!"

The entire ship leaps from the ground as the thrusters activate and the Echo begins ascending rapidly through the atmosphere and away from the city below. The Sovereign ships are closing in behind as the Echo's comms channel begins lighting up with signals.

"Patch them through!" Says Captain Rex.

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Over the comms on deck a garbled, distorted voice can be heard-

“Attention, this is Constellation Corps Lieutenant Shan, on behalf of the Sovereign you are hereby required to cease further travel and submit for cargo inspection on suspicion of illegal smuggling and potential harboring of injured officers.”

Captain Rex takes a deep breath and lifts a comm device to her lips, “Don’t worry, there are no injured officers on board.”

Rex looks over to the navigation officer smiling, Karik is staring back at her worried. She knows that there are three dead Sovereign officers in cargo right at this very moment.

“What’s wrong Karik?”

“Captain you lied to those men, we will be in even more dirt now...”

“I never lied, there aren’t any injured men. Injured would imply that we took them alive.” Smiling at the surprised officer she says, “Now punch it!”

With a blast of energy the HIT kicks on and the Echo speeds farther into the atmosphere and farther away from the small scout ships that were following. From the engine room Hector hears Captain Rex over the intercom “Engineer Hector please report to the deck, I repeat, Hector get up here. Over.”

A few moments later Hector makes his way to the deck where he is greeted by a sight unlike any he has seen in his lifetime. Out the front window of the ship he sees stars, and for the first time in his life he has left home.

“Pretty ain’t it,” Captain Rex says as she approaches Hector.

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But Hector doesn't respond, instead he walks toward the window as his eyes widen and fear grips his throat. He can't speak, he can't reply, because within the field of stars he also sees the Sovereign armada hovering over the planet. Hundreds of ships are pouring in from deep space and assembling above Goshen. Hector stammers and stutters as he tries to form words but nothing escapes in this moment of pure dread and terror.

"Don't worry Hector, our ship is too small to be detected right now. As long as we keep our comm channels closed they have no idea we are here, that's how we leave."

"There are so many of them...how...how do we stand a chance..." Hector says, barely above a whisper.

Looking around the room Rex can see the fear in the eyes of her crew, "We don't. That's why we do what we do. We steal what we can to survive and move on. Goshen is tough, she'll fight back and the Terrans will be alright though."

Suddenly a loud tremor shakes the ship as a Sovereign Dreadnaught passes above the Echo. Everyone on board becomes silent, terrified to let a breath escape too quickly. Captain Rex backs away from the window staring at the bottom of the massive ship above almost as if she were analyzing it's every panel. Hector can see fear growing in her eyes but he can't figure out why...until... "Captain Rex...what are those? I've never read about weapons like that..."

"Scan that ship ensign, now!" Rex's voice cracks for a split second as she makes this request.

"Captain those...those are Tesla Cannons..."

"And the energy readings coming from them are off the charts!"

Terrified, Captain Rex commands that all crew strap themselves in and prepare to leave at maximum speed. But Hector is frozen in horror as he sees thousands of these massive ships unleash huge beams of blue energy toward the surface of Goshen. The atmosphere begins to glow bright red as the synchronized blast vaporizes the air around the planet. From every blast point on the surface the ground swells and begins cracking before the entire planet explodes before Hector's eyes. The entire crew lets out a scream in horror before a shockwave strikes the Echo.

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An unknown amount of time has passed when Hector and parts of the crew begin to regain consciousness aboard the Echo. It is dark now. Hector can see the stars shining from afar through the window in front of him. A dim red light flashes every few seconds, briefly illuminating the deck before going out again. He can see Captain Rex unconscious in her seat while some other crew members groan from the pain. They must have been thrown into the Exo by the blast, Hector thinks to himself, he can see an asteroid field around the ship, but no evidence of Sovereign ships anywhere. Hector climbs to his feet and stumbles toward the captain. Shaking her gently he calls her name and after a minute she begins to wake.

The engine can be heard suddenly, that all too familiar faint whirring of the HIT, and suddenly lights begin to flicker back on throughout the ship. The entrance to the deck opens as a slightly bloody Kit lumbers through and onto the deck.

"How is Rex?" Kit asks, gasping for breath between every word.

"I told you, it's captain in front of the new kid," Rex replies, struggling to pull herself to an upright position, "what the hell was that, and where are we?"

"Captain our systems must be damaged," Officer Karik says while staring intensely at the screen in front of her. "The readings aren't making sense."

"Karik, I have too big of a headache right now to have to ask everyone to explain themselves, so please, for the love of whatever god you pray to at night, just tell me what you mean."

"Apologies Captain, according to these readings and the map, we haven't moved...Goshen should be right in front of us."

Hector and the entire crew grow silent as horror fills the air, and they all gaze through the window at what Hector thought was an unknown asteroid field before. The crew is scrambling to figure out where they are in order to find Goshen. But tears fill Hector's eyes as he remembers the sky above him as a child. The warmth of the sun beaming down upon him playing with his friends, then growing up and going to school. A loud crash of an asteroid smacking the ship shakes Hector from this dream and back into this reality, the

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reality that Goshen is gone. Silence has overtaken the ship in this moment, breaths, if taken at all, are shallow and nothing but the faint whir of the engine can be heard as Hector turns to face the crew.

With tears streaming down his face, Hector can get two words out in response, "It is."