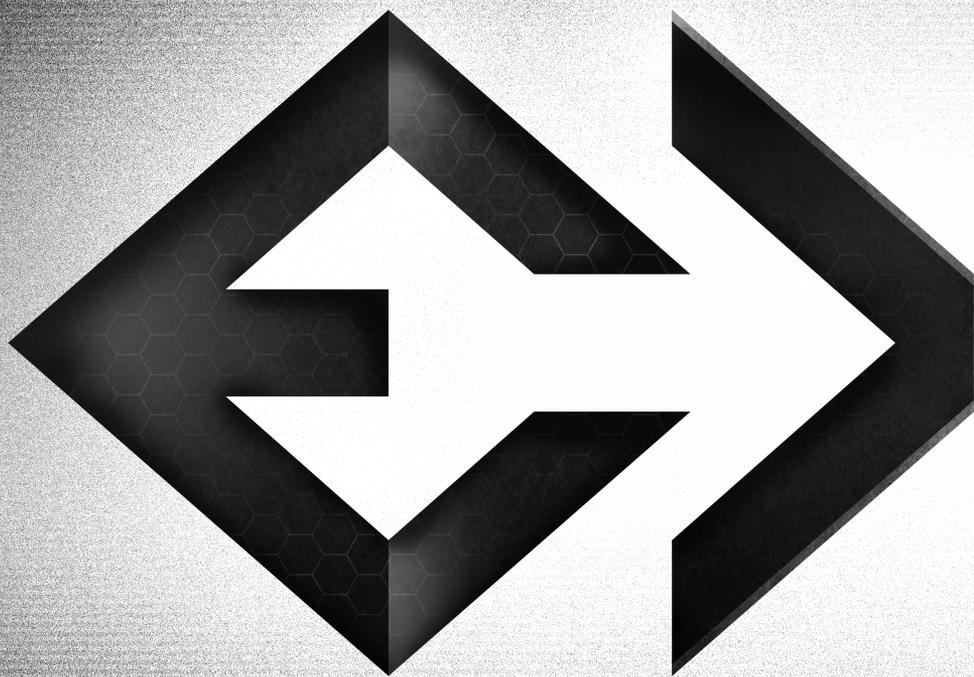
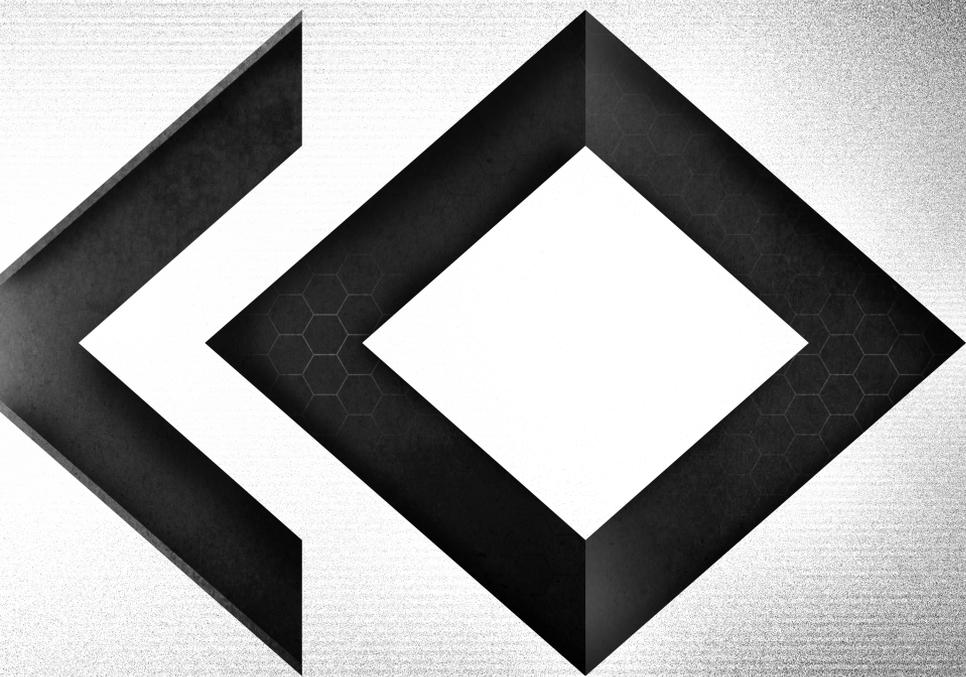


FONDA LEE





SCHOLASTIC PRESS ♦ NEW YORK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Lee, Fonda, author.

Title: *Exo* / Fonda Lee.

Description: First edition. | New York : Scholastic Press, 2017. | Summary:

For a century now, Earth has been a peaceful colony of an alien race, and Donovan Reyes is a loyal member of the security forces, while his father is the Prime Liaison—but when a routine search and seizure goes bad Donovan finds himself a captive of the human revolutionary group, Sapience, terrorists who seem to prefer war to alien rule, and killing Donovan just might be the incident they are looking for.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016031956 | ISBN 9780545933438

Subjects: LCSH: Terrorism—Juvenile fiction. | Extraterrestrial beings—Juvenile fiction. | Science fiction. | CYAC: Science fiction. | Terrorism—Fiction. | Extraterrestrial beings—Fiction. | LCGFT: Science fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.L395 Ex 2017 | DDC 813.6 [Fic]—dc23

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

17 18 19 20 21

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First edition, February 2017

Book design by Phil Falco & Mary Claire Cruz



The boy was watching them. Donovan had seen him before: number 53 by his jersey, ginger-haired, stocky. On Thursday afternoons, the boy ran drills up and down one end of the field in Scotts Bluff Center alongside his teammates in the youth football clinic. Afterward, he waited at the bus stop for his older sister to pick him up. He was waiting there now, wiping his brow with the sleeve of his shirt, and watching them. He was maybe ten years old, still too young to be marked. That made Donovan wary. Terrorists weren't above recruiting kids.

"Security log checks out. Infrared scan is clean, electronic scan is clean. Dull as toast out here. I'd say we're about done." Jet tapped the comm unit in his hand, marking off the last stop on their usual patrol route.

Donovan stifled a yawn as he let his gaze wander back up and down the street. Usually, Jet was the one who was wide awake in the mornings and fighting fatigue by the evening, right around when Donovan got his second wind, but after twelve hours on duty, at the end of their last patrol before a two-day break, they were both tired. Next week, they'd rotate onto night patrol.

As if reading his mind, Jet said, "Next week is going to suck."

"I'd take nights over waking up at oh six hundred any day."

Jet shrugged. "I can't sleep much past oh six hundred anyway."

"You're some sort of freak," Donovan told his partner, lifting a hand to shield his eyes against the evening sunlight as it sank to the horizon. It stabbed through the arched, soaring, woven metal struts of the stadium behind them. Named after the nearby steep hills that had been an ancient historical landmark, Scotts Bluff Center was the newest, grandest human-made structure in sight, a testament to the growth of the Ring Belt. One month from today, forty thousand people would descend to fill its stands for the centennial Peace Day celebration. Security would be a nightmare.

On Peace Day, the President of West America would stand up onstage to commemorate a century of peace and cooperation between humankind and the zhree. He would speak about the lessons learned from the War Era and the importance of continued human self-government. When the President sat down, Donovan's father would take the podium. Donovan pictured his father walking across the stage, in his stiff gait and dark suit. His father would tug on his lapels and clear his throat softly before speaking. Everyone watching—in the stadium, or at home—would shift forward and pay attention to what the Prime Liaison had to say, because even though the President was still nominally the head of state when it came to human affairs, was there anything of real importance that was purely a human affair anymore?

"Don't look now," Jet said, "but that kid is coming over here."

The boy was crossing the street, walking toward them with short, half-jogging strides. His shoulders were curled forward, and he glanced left and right nervously. Jet paced away, acting casual, scanning the street for any sign of danger. Donovan watched the

boy's approach. The kid slowed and stopped a few feet away, as if uncertain whether to come nearer.

Donovan took a step toward him. "Hi there," he said.

"Uh, hi," said the boy, eyes on the ground.

"What's your name?"

"Horatio."

Donovan pointed to the boy's football cleats. "You must be really good at football. You're here practicing a lot."

"I suppose." The boy relaxed a little. His shoulders came down and he looked up at Donovan's face. "Do you play?"

"Sure, a little. My buddy Jet over there is better than I am. We can't play when we're on duty, though."

Donovan tended to be the one to talk to the public when talking needed to be done. Jet didn't have the patience for it, and his good-natured but aggressive energy, like that of a caffeinated lion cub looking for stuff to wreck, could be a bit intimidating to civilians. Donovan knew that even with the uniform and markings, he didn't look much like a soldier in comparison, just an earnest, clean-cut teenager. True, he had his father's jawline and eyes, but his hair, despite being trimmed short, always insisted on being unruly, and the smattering of tiny freckles across the bridge of his nose, which he hated to no end, did at least help with the whole youthful and friendly look.

The exocel, however . . . there was no getting around it. Anyone with an exocel could expect to draw a few frightened or hostile glares out here in the Ring Belt. Armored soldiers-in-erze could expect worse.

Horatio didn't seem scared or hateful. He shuffled his feet. "Can I see your gun?"

"Sorry, buddy. I can't take it out for show."

The boy looked disappointed. He kicked the ground with his toe.

"I'll show you something else, though," Donovan said.

"Come here."

Horatio took a few steps closer. Donovan held up his hand, watching the child's reaction. The broken stripes across the backs of his hands mirrored the three body patterning of his master erze. Soldier's markings. They unnerved some people, which was often useful, but he didn't want to scare the kid. "You know how to play rock, paper, scissors?"

"Yeah." The boy held up his own hand, skeptical.

"Okay, ready? One, two . . . three!" Donovan stuck out his first two fingers and snapped them into sharp blades. "Scissors beats paper."

"No fair," said Horatio. "You saw what I was going to do." But his eyes were wide.

"Oh, all right." Donovan armored his fist, encasing it. "Paper beats rock. You win."

The boy grinned, impressed. Donovan quirked his lips up in a smile but glanced to either side quickly, glad he could count on his partner to be vigilant. You had to be careful with kids. You had to keep them at arm's length and not drop your guard, but at the same time, you had to be friendly and approachable. You wanted them to see past the biotechnology, to understand that you were one of the good guys—as human as them, and trustworthy.

Horatio's grin faded. He shifted his weight from foot to foot, then reached into his pocket and withdrew a folded, wrinkled pamphlet. "I . . . uh, I found this." He held on to it tight, frozen with indecision for a second. Then he handed it over quickly.

The paper was thin and gray, cheaply printed, and tri-folded. Donovan had seen something like it before and only needed to read the first few lines.

A CALL TO ARMS!

There can be no doubt we are in a struggle for the survival of our species. The Accord of Peace and Governance is a fiction, the greatest lie ever told to humanity. We are being lulled like sheep to a slow slaughter by our oppressors and only if you open your eyes will you see it all around you. Ask yourself now: Are you prepared to FIGHT, to KILL, and to DIE for what you believe in??!

Donovan refolded the paper. "Where did you find this?" He kept his voice curious, unconcerned.

The boy chewed the inside of his cheek. His eyes flicked to the bus stop, as if considering whether to run back to it.

Donovan slowed his words. "Horatio, you're doing the right thing."

"My uncle's place."

"Just the one copy?" This was important. Possession was a misdemeanor; distribution was a felony.

"No, a whole big stack of them. And . . . other stuff. Like equipment or something." In a rush, "I was just looking for a screwdriver, I didn't mean to go snooping around, honest."

"What's your uncle's name?"

"Sean. Sean Corrigan." The name spilled from the boy's lips like a large mouthful of water held too long. "My mom says it's

none of our business. We barely know him; he stays away from the rest of the family. I don't want him to get in trouble or anything . . . but I don't want him to hurt anyone, either."

"You think he might do that?"

"I . . . I don't know. Nothing bad will happen to him, will it?"

"Not if he hasn't done anything wrong yet."

Horatio nodded, a fearful look creeping into his eyes. "I don't want him to find out I told you."

"He won't," Donovan promised.

"I better go. I'm supposed to get picked up." The boy backed away, stuffing his hands into his pockets as he turned to dart back across the street.

"Horatio." Donovan caught the boy's backward glance. "Don't worry, okay? You did the right thing."

Donovan watched the boy hurry back to the bus stop. Then he returned to where Jet was waiting by the skimmercar. Jet turned over the pamphlet Donovan handed him. "More scribblings from our writer friend Max, huh?"

"Must be the latest issue. At least this one doesn't urge killing us 'soulless exo dogs.'"

"He probably got in trouble from his readers for insulting dogs." Jet opened the door to the skimmercar and punched open a line to Central Command. They were supposed to radio in any civilian tips they received while on patrol. A pamphlet handed to him by a kid wasn't urgent, not like a bomb threat or anything, but Donovan spoke into his transmitter.

"PT 202. We have an unsolicited civilian lead. Over."

The voice of Liz, one of the dispatchers, came back over the line. "Patrol Team 202, go ahead."

“What have you got on Sean Corrigan? A boy claiming to be his nephew says he found a stack of Sapience propaganda in the guy’s house. Some of the recent stuff from Max.” Donovan took the pamphlet back from Jet and rubbed the thin paper between his fingers. “Max” was the name printed on the bottom of all of these. A code name for the terrorists’ most prolific writer, or writers. Who knew if Max was one person or several.

Jet nodded across the street to where the boy’s sister had just pulled up in a blue sedan. “His sister’s marked.”

Donovan squinted, trying to catch a glimpse of the teenager’s hands on the steering wheel. “You’re sure?”

“Scientist erze. I saw it.”

A point in favor of the boy’s credibility, then, if the rest of his family was marked. Liz’s voice came back over the radio. “We have a red file on Sean Corrigan, going back five years. The civilian police put him away for ten months, for theft and arson, but didn’t find any direct links to Sapience at the time. Picked up again at a checkpoint three months ago on suspicion of weapons smuggling, later released. Unmarried, lives alone. One brother: Andrew Corrigan, a scientist-in-erze. A niece, Olivia, also Scientist erze marked, and a nephew, Horatio.”

So the boy’s story checked out. Donovan leaned back against the hull of the skimmercar, still warm from the afternoon sunshine, though the orange glow of the September evening would be gone in half an hour. They were near the end of their shift, and his father, whom he sometimes saw on the news more often than in real life, would be expecting him home tonight.

Jet crossed his arms. “This *is* the first interesting recon we’ve had all day,” he said slowly.

"I'm sure Cass and Leon would appreciate a fresh lead."

Jet shrugged, smiled. They'd known each other for too long to need to throw down a dare out loud.

Donovan sighed. "You have an address for Corrigan?" he asked Command.

"Sending it over."

Jet slapped Donovan on the shoulder and climbed into the skimmercar. He dropped into the driver's seat and programmed in the address. Donovan got back on the comm. "PT 202. We're following a civilian lead out of sector. Over."

Vic's voice piped up a second later. She and her partner, Thad, would be their nearest backup. "202, aren't you almost off shift? Don't you two have lives outside of work?"

"That depends," Jet replied, guiding the skimmercar into motion. He lowered his voice in an attempt to sound suave. "What are *you* up to this evening, Officer Kohl?"

A pause. "Oh, the usual. Putting *bad boys* in their place."

Jet whistled. "What's your location? A couple of bad boys here would really like to know."

Donovan shook his head in mock exasperation. "Ignore my partner, I'm not responsible for anything he says. Especially if it's being monitored." He leaned over to punch the line closed, then rested back in his own seat. He looked over at his friend. "Stop that. You look like a moron."

"Stop what?"

"Thinking about Vic with your mouth hanging open and drool running out."

"I can't help it, man. I'm in love with her. She's the hottest girl in the Round."

"Which is why you have to play it cool. Pique her interest. You're being too obvious."

"Girls dig obvious. Anyway, I don't *drool*. Much."

Buildings and trees blurred as the vehicle reached cruising speed. The body of the patrol skimmercar was a sleek zthree design, optimized for agile, multi-directional movement, but the inside, thankfully, had seats and controls proportioned for humans. Jet let the automatic navigation take over, then stretched his arms above his head and yawned. "I'm so glad we're off tomorrow. Commander Tate has been working everyone like mules all month. At first I thought it was a good thing to have graduated early, but whatever happened to downtime? Hey, why don't you get your old man to pull some strings and set us up with something easy for a while? Like guarding the shipyards or the algae farm."

Donovan snorted. "Come on, you know my dad." His father would never use his position to do anything that might smack of favoritism. He also did not approve of shirking hardship or duty. Besides, Donovan knew Jet wasn't serious about wanting a dull post. The guy might make a show of complaining, but when push came to shove, you would probably have to knock him unconscious to keep him away from his job. Like right now: chasing this end-of-shift lead when they could leave it to someone else. Despite his restless, devil-may-care attitude, Jet was as dependable a partner, and as competent a soldier-in-erze, as anyone could ask for.

The skimmercar banked slightly as the freeway curved. Donovan oriented himself automatically by looking for the Round. There it was, to his right: the circular city. From this distance, the only thing that stood out were the Towers, jutting up into the sky, metallic yet organic-looking, appearing like a cluster of

stalagmites, perhaps, or termite hills, but too symmetrical, too obviously the work of intelligent designers. The tips of the Towers glowed faintly pink as the last of the evening light slid into the skimmercars's windows and tinted the immense expanse of sky that stretched over the wide prairie landscape.

Donovan had seen an old photograph in a museum once that showed this area from a time before the War Era, before the Landing, even: just miles and miles of waving grass and grazing cattle with only the occasional small human town to break it up. It was hard to imagine such a time, when all around them sprawled evidence of activity and growth: construction equipment, busy roads running every which way, new neighborhoods filled with houses and shops and people hoping for erze status and work. The fluid curves of modern zhree-style architecture mingled with blocky, traditional human buildings. Skimmercars buzzed past ground cars, electricycles, and pedestrians. Donovan had seen another photograph in the same museum, of the Ring Belt some eighty years ago, in the early days of peace, when it had been part trading post and part refugee camp, burgeoning with displaced humans hoping for some livelihood or profit from working with the new governors. Now the urban sprawl encircled Round Three (for it was the third out of eighteen Rounds all over the world) in a messy, vibrant swath of humanity, like algae glommed around a pond rock.

The Ring Belt had its bad parts, though. The skimmercars slowed, began making tight turns to navigate the narrow streets of an old, crumbly neighborhood of small, square brick houses and weed-choked front lawns.

“This has got to be War Era housing,” Jet remarked. “Crazy that this stuff is still standing.”

Donovan checked the navigation screen and pointed down the row of near-identical dwellings. “Third one on the left,” he said. “Park over there, out of sight. I don’t think anyone out here in the place time forgot is going to be friendly to stripes.”

Jet took manual control of the skimmercar and guided it to a strip of gravel alley at the end of the block before lowering it to a stop. He checked his handgun, pocketed extra ammunition. “Let’s go hunt us down some sapes.”

Donovan drew his own sidearm—a standard 9mm electricpulse pistol, modeled after a classic human weapon but built with off-world metal composite and outfitted with three battery technology. He made sure the magazine was full, then holstered it and stepped out of the car after Jet.

They spaced apart defensively as they approached the house. Donovan watched for movement in the tiny windows of the neighboring homes. Evening had turned the world a shadowy blue, and the temperature was plummeting fast. The banter between them was gone, as was their earlier sense of fatigue; there was nothing like the possibility of danger to clear the mind. This place made them tense, focused. All the buildings on the street had flat, walled roofs and radiation-shielded basements. They had been built for a time of war, and the people who lived here—poor, unmarked Sapience sympathizers—probably felt like they were still in one. Donovan’s exocel crawled up, responding to cold, and nerves.

They circled Corrigan’s house. “Someone’s home,” Jet said through his transmitter, his voice low in Donovan’s earbud.

Donovan scanned the front door and the street. There was a car parked at the curb and a pickup truck in the side driveway. Sudden, silhouetted movement in the windows. Two, maybe three people. Donovan's pulse quickened. *Corrigan's supposed to live alone, isn't he?* The guy had a criminal history, stacks of seditious material, and visitors at night? Donovan toggled his transmitter. "PT 202 to Command, we have a suspected terrorist safe house here. Request permission to search."

Liz's voice came back a second later. "202, you are unsupported outside of your coverage sector. Flag it and come back in."

"Scorch that," Jet's voice interjected. "We chased a live lead and we're standing in front of the house now. If we don't engage, this guy is going to spook and the place will be empty when we come back."

Donovan ground his teeth. He thought of the boy, Horatio. If they didn't nab Corrigan, the man would be free to find out his nephew had turned him in. "Command, this is a reliable civilian lead on a prior record. We're going in."

"This is Command One." Commander Tate's voice broke through on the line. "202, we have teams tied up dealing with a bomb threat on the other side of the Belt. Your backup is fifteen minutes away. You are on your own right now."

"Understood."

"PSO," Tate snapped.

Probability of Successful Outcome. Donovan pictured the Commander's interrogative glare; no doubt she had pulled off her glasses and was leaning over Liz, rapidly tapping one arm of the thin wire frames on the dispatch monitor. She wanted his soldier-in-erze judgment: How reliable was the lead, how real and

urgent was the threat, how likely was it that they could apprehend the suspect without endangering innocent civilians or making the Global Security and Pacification Forces look trigger-happy or incompetent?

Soldiers-in-erze on patrol said that what PSO really stood for was Please Screw Off. As in, "Command, please screw off and let us do our jobs." Donovan looked at the house. One building, no more than a few people inside, empty street. "PSO is high."

"Keep your line open."

"Jet." Donovan jerked his head, and his partner advanced swiftly up the short walk to the front door. Donovan followed. He pressed his back against the brick wall beside the doorframe and drew his electripulse. He went to full armor, his exocel rippling from node to node, the living machine cells knitting their microscopic lattice structures across his skin.

Jet pounded on the door. "This is SecPac! Open up!"