

The Exile II

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A small net, weighted at the ends by mollusk shells filled with packed mud, spread itself across the pinkish surface of the pond and sank down. Leaving nothing to disrupt the reflection of a large and lazy red sun caught within heavy white clouds but a small line drawing upwards. Several minutes later, a pair of calloused Human hands pulled the line up and the net with it. Tangled within were six or seven frog-skinned mud-flappers, struggling in vain against their imprisonment.

Calico Caldwell threw a trio of the creatures back into the water -- overharvesting his pond wouldn't do him any favors -- and carried the rest of the catch across a thin pier made of two long beams sparsely covered with thin foot-beams. When the explorer had first been marooned on the planet he named Nox, there was but a small patch of pebble-topped ground around a body of water otherwise crowded with black foliage and green or yellow flowers. He'd expanded that shore significantly over the years. Cutting back enough of the willow-like shag-trees and spikey hollygroves to build supplies and space for a growing home. A teepee of sorts, with wooden poles for a conic skeleton and gray-black fern-leaves for walls, stood just off to the pier's foot. The smoking box, which the flippers were destined for, stood to its left. Beyond that, the stand he used to scrape down animal hides -- when he could get them -- and the stump he used to cut lumber on. Far to the right, past much of the original shore, stood an archery target backed with a mat of the fibrous insulation produced by the willow-like shag-trees.

He tried not to think about the spot he'd picked out to build a permanent cabin on. The section of forest he'd decided to clear for the space and materials. How he was going to maintain this future home with bad knees and arthritic hands, should he live long enough to retire from the life of a hardworking castaway to that of a tired old hermit?

He tried not to think about how many more years it would take to stop missing civilization and the people that came with it. Or what losing that ache would turn him into.

The meat cleaning station was located right next to the pier, to make tossing back the scraps easier. Two stumps planted into the ground, with a slab of stone lashed over them. He slapped the catch down upon it, careful not to get any muck on his clothes. This day, clothes meant a vest and shorts of sturdy tanned hide. The loincloths that he'd first made from scraps of his old thermal suit had long since worn down to shreds, but he kept one memento of that outfit. The precious RangerCorps icon was burned into the vest, though it was largely hidden under a long beard curled by exposure.

From under the slab, he retrieved a roll-up kit of specialized stone knives. The clickers in the trees got started making noise the moment they saw the sharp flint-or-something-like-it blades shining in the sunlight. He set to work breaking the kills down. He returned everything that he wasn't going to eat to the water, and saw the pond boil over with hungry competitors. Not long after, he was seated by the smoker, keeping an ear to the fire within. A thin pink-purple cloud drifting out from the little chimney up top, while chewing on some mealy green tubers.

Calico sat as quietly as possible during this observation, hoping that his 'little friend' would make an appearance. The clickers had turned out to be less monkey-like than he'd expected. They were sort of like dog-faced lizards, semi-bipedal and short of tail. Not much larger than a housecat. He'd made a sort of unspoken agreement with them not long after being stranded on this world; he wouldn't eat any of them and they would keep him informed of the presence of any predators

other than himself. He'd caught glimpses of them here and there, in spite of the dull gray scales that barely set them apart from the dark foliage they dwelled within and jet-black eyes that returned no light by which to judge their thoughts towards him. Until the day, somewhere around his third anniversary, when he caught one snooping around his camp after a long swim. He'd recognized curiosity in the titled face that locked eyes with him for nearly a second. It ran off immediately after, clicking lousy away. Calico had been trying to coax it back for another visit ever since.

He chewed with exaggerated jaw motions. He worked the fire with one hand and kept his left -- the one holding the tubers -- low to the ground and facing the woods. Soon enough, he heard telltale scuttling coming over from the nearby underbrush. In his mind's eye, he could see the little fellow skittering closer on four limbs, judging its options, its pointed head twitching this way and that as it gauged every potential risk. It stopped at the edge of the blue-black ferns, becoming absolutely quiet. Then clicked softly to itself, a slower cadence than the usual alarm noise. As if to convince itself that what it was about to do, while dangerous, might be worth it for a free meal.

Calico's hand tensed in anticipation of the touch of scaly fingers. The creature stepped backward. He made himself relax. It clicked again and stepped forward into its sentry post. Then started, cautiously and fitfully, stepping out from under the last fern. Calico forced himself not to look at it. A gentle swish told him that the last leaf had been left behind. The clicker was out in the open! Oh, the possibility if these beings could be domesticated! Kept as pets and trained to aid him in his daily fight to survive, and let him help them in theirs!

"No! Don't think it!" No, he couldn't afford to let himself dream of that yet. The cost of failure, the onslaught of fresh loneliness, might finally break him.

Oblivious to the Human's private musings, the little clicker closed half the distance between tree-line and smoker. As close as it had ever come before! Calico wished himself not to tremble, and slowly lifted his hand up to his mouth to pop another tuber into his mouth. A promise of what awaited the clicker if it could overcome its fear. Its nose was snuffing furiously. It was interested, alright. It took another half-step closer. Then another.

Its fellows in the tree started up their warning clicks. The little scout turned tail and zipped into the unearthly dark woods, adding its voice to theirs.

Calico allowed himself to swear a few times before rising to see what had gotten their attention. He'd learned much about the clicker's signals over the years. From the way the clicks changed in positional focus and frequency, he could tell they were worried about something overhead. Something that did not move like a bird. Unless this planet produced things like hummingbirds the size of eagles, something capable of sipping back and forth and side to side on a relative dime.

Not circling like a bird-of-prey on the hunt would. More like tracing out a series of sequential squares.

"A search pattern! It's artificial! Holy fuck, it's artificial!" A whoop of laughter came from Calico that caused the clickers to silence. "Don't stop now, fellahs! Tell me where it is! Ha-ha!"

He'd planned for this, and the plan wasn't friendly. Into the teepee he ran. Out he came with a longbow and a quiver of arrows. As he ran into the woods, he passed up one of the many spears

he had planted all over his clearing for emergencies. The plan didn't involve getting so close to a machine. But he did work his way close enough to get a look at it from several meters below.

The bismuth-plated device was alien to his eyes, which dazzled at the sparking array of colors, some of which he hadn't seen in so very long. Its main body was comprised of half a sphere, with a diameter approaching half a meter, the rounded portion facing downward and covered in lenses and socket covers. It had a crown of three smaller spheres, the middle of which glowed faintly orange. Presumably, those were how it was resisting gravity.

Suddenly aware it was being observed, it stopped to look back at him.

Calico raised his weapon and took his first shot. The stone arrowhead breached a lens, resulting in a backwash of electrical arcs that burned a good chunk of the casing. It retreated, zipping higher up and further back without even turning around. Calico gave chase, moving left towards a spot where he knew he'd get another shot. The hollygrove branch he'd snapped a year back in search of berries had yet to fully grow back. As expected, the probe passed through the gap in the canopy, dark brown against the pink sky.

He let an arrow lose, and it shattered one of the spheres. It wobbled on, too slow and off-balance to keep from losing another. With a warbling wail of alarm, it started circling down to the ground. Long-earned knowledge of the trees granted him a path to the device, which hovered erratically not far from the root-infested ground. He tackled it. A few smacks with the pommel of his dagger killed the final sphere, grounding the beast.

"Sorry about this, little fiend, but I can't afford for your controller to mistake me as a native." Depending on who'd sent the probe, a planetary native was someone to be avoided at all costs for sake of preventing cultural contamination. A bit their tech in the hands of such a being was something that absolutely had to be retrieved, for the same reason. "Why waste time tracking your boss down when I can bring them to me! Now, all I have to do is work out if you have a self-destruct mechanism and neutralize it."

For this, he needed to retrieve tools from his home. "Home, but not for much longer!" he grinned, his joy somewhat dulled by the need to keep an ear out for a sudden explosion. None had occurred by the time he came back with a stone headed-hammer and matching chisel, along with a roll-up kit of other gear. But all of the remaining lights had gone out, and there was a slight stink of burned metal: the probe had reduced itself to a glorified paperweight. "Thanks for not killing me. You might have use to me yet, if I can slap your transmitter back together."

He started with the hole he'd made in the lens. Finding no weak spots, he focused on a boltless seam that circled the rim of the flat side. Slowly, he was able to open up room enough to leverage the chisel inside and leverage the thing open. It wrenched open with a teeth-vibrating shriek of metal that started the clicker up all over again and drove the nearby birds to flight.

Sitting with the metal corpse in his lap, Calico looked with ravenous eyes over the first real technology he'd seen in more days than he wanted to think about counting. Truly, the device's mechanics were laid out in a format that he'd never seen before, but the baseline mechanics were universal. "Looks like a two-part chemical was released that melted through all the computerized parts and heavy tech. Here's the containers for that. But this is a probe you sent out into the wild, and you needed to know it could transmit even if its higher functions were damaged in a storm or whatever. A bit more digging around with my tools and... Ha! I knew it!" Cradled deep inside the probe, shielded as within a black box, was a cluster of basic radio components. Only partly

destroyed by the chemical fire that had ruined everything else. "I'll have to dig out everything that's useful and scrounge up an energy source, but I can build my own transmitter out of this! Thank you, little buddy! I'm going home!" He shouted it again for all the creatures of Nox to hear:

"I'm going home!"

. . .

It had taken hours to get all of the probe's pieces to his clearing and harvest all the usable parts. Cleaning them up took more time, as did forming precision tools out of blackened metal. His fingers were cramped and sore by the time he started constructing his radio under the light of a fire and two glowing moons. Soldering his wire-joints with red-hot rock from his fire, burning his fingers through the leather-wrap over the handles in the process. Building a primitive potato battery out of the green gourds and leftover wiring was a breeze by comparison. Too bad for the little clicker who would go hungry.

Tired and blurry-eyed as he was by the end of a night's worth of construction, the pounding of adrenaline through his heart and the crushing weight of time slipping by wouldn't have let him sleep even if he'd wanted to. By the magenta light of early dawn, he switched on his device and tapped out a few meager lines in Intergalactic Pulse Code. *Tap tap, tap-a-tap! Tap tap, tap-a-tap! Tap tap, tap-a-tap!*

Within half an hour, he knew his call had been heard. Clickers from all sides of the pond announced the arrival of a half-dozen or more probes. Only this time, they were up high enough to be seen clearly over the trees. Almost too high to shoot at. When they had completed their mapping on the area, they withdrew to a safe distance and something much larger came whooshing across the water. A large circle coated in the same rainbow metal. The thrum of anti-gray engines sounded loud enough to be heard. As it came down, headed for a spot just beyond his pier, Calico rose up. As he walked the wooden planks, he saw the first hints of the beings who rode the sled: large feet with toes so long they were individually encased within black-brown boots. By the time he reached the pier's end, it was clear he was looking at two Reptiles of unknown origin.

They were female by proportion, though they lacked protruding breasts. Significantly taller than himself, but thinner even with their environment boots. Scales of gold, yellow, and orange were visible from bubble-helmets. Their eyes were covered by thin black visors. The symbol stamped to their chests was alien to him: a trio of nine-point stars radiating outward. Each had a snub-nosed pistol strapped to their right hip: the crackling light shows going off within spherical clips strongly implied energy weapons. Their gloved hands held on to control panels affixed to a thin hand-rail which encircled their transport sled. They and the rail both were shielded by a silvery hex-field projected by the sled's rim.

Shield or no, the vehicle settled into a position far enough ahead of the pier that the man couldn't have jumped onto the sled if he'd wanted to. And he very much wanted to. "Am I glad to see you!" He did not hear his words being repeated by a translator, which was either very bad or very good. "Thanks for answering my distress call!"

A modulated voice sounded from a speaker just below the helmet of the woman to the right. "You have misappropriated and defaced property of the mighty Scaidron Space Fleet. You will return it. Immediately."

“Sure, every piece,” he told them, still all smiles. “You can have it all! Hell, I’ll pay for a replacement! Three years of accrued bank interest has to be worth something! Just get me off this rock and we can--”

“And why would we do that?” asked the woman to the left. She was slightly wider in the hips and thighs than her companion, and very slightly shorter. Her simulated English used an identical voice. “You belong to this world, do you not? And this world to you?”

If Calico’s smile frosted away instantly. A familiar shiver ran up his spine. “No! No, I’m not! I am a Human! From Earth!” He did a quick calculation based on the night stars, and what he had surmised of them over the years based on distorted constellations. He pointed high to their left, forty degrees up from the horizon. “That way! I am a Human from Earth in need of rescue from this alien world to which I do not belong!”

“I find that story highly unlikely,” said Rightie. “Our survey found no evidence of interstellar vehicles in this region. Or wreckage of same.”

“That’s because I was *dropped* here! Literally dropped! Through a cargo hatch! And the last asshole who came by turned his tail and ran out on me three years ago! Taking his vessel with him! *My* vessel was stolen by the bastards that marooned me here!”

“Are you stating that our survey analysis is correct?” Rightie pressed. “That there is no advanced technology on or near this planet which might corroborate your tale?”

Calico’s mouth went dry. Not this. Not again! “To my knowledge, there’s no space-worthy tech here, no.”

Leftie moved her hand across her control pad. With her eyes unseen text upon it, no him, she asked, “Do you have a personal FTL transponder?”

“No, *obviously*. That’s why I needed to your--”

“Do you have any computational technology at all?”

“I’d make an abacus if I wasn’t so busy trying to not starve--”

“Have you any electronics of a non-computational manner?”

“That would require me to pull more batteries out of my ass, wouldn’t it?”

“Can you calculate the minimum distance one must travel from the local star before initiating an FTL jump, accounting for the mass of the local planets?” Leftie looked down on him with the arrogance of one who already knew the answer to the question they themselves had asked.

He looked back to her with all the anger of one dealing with a shameless hypocrite. “Who the hell can do that without a navigational computer? Or at least a half-decent stellar database and a calculator? Can *you*?”

“You do not even have a telescope from which to begin conducting a survey of the local system?” Rightie interrupted.

“Do you have any idea the kind of work that goes into making a telescope from scratch? Because I have put a *lot* of thought --”

Rightie tromped all over his answer. “The machinery from which to grind the glass to make the telescope? The specialized infrastructure to form the glass to be ground? Have you any industrial infrastructure whatsoever?”

Calico threw his hands out to his sides. “Look around you, dammit! I have nothing! Nothing! Have had all of three years to make all that shit, and I’m still hung up on not being eaten! I have exactly what you see here! It’s all I can do to keep myself alive! Let alone build a fucking kiln!”

Leftie had been studiously recording the responses to her partner’s questions. “All you do have, then, from which to present a premise of advanced civilization, is that which you have stolen from us.” She tapped a few commands into her control box. The probes in the air of homes in upon Calico’s teepee, where everything of theirs that he had collected or reverse-engineered lay. “We will reclaim that which is ours. Peacefully, or otherwise.”

“I am a Human from Earth *formally* asking you to aid a traveler in distress? If you want to sue me for breaking your toys, you’ll just have to escort me to a world with a judge on it.”

“We are empowered by our government to provide judgment here.” Leftie started swiping at something else on her control pad. “Your name?”

That was more like it! “Calico Caldwell! Lieutenant, RangerCorps, Covert Observation Unit! Serial code 56-7-889-Epsilon!” He added, reluctantly. “Probably stripped of rank in absentia for the gross incompetence that landed me here.”

“Do you have any evidence to support this claim?” asked.

He moved his beard aside to brandish the icon burned into his vest. “This. This is the symbol of the RangerCorps. Where I worked as a Star-Ranger.” He spoke very slowly to make sure the words sunk in.

“That symbol could have been found and copied,” Rightie countered. “You might have only seen the ‘Star-Ranger’ who wore it.” Her eyes narrowed. “Or killed them.”

“Did I steal their language, too? The one your suits are so helpfully translating?”

“It is possible,” answered Rightie. “The primate capacity for mimicry at all stages of evolution is well known to us. It is one of the defining features of the physiological line.”

“Oh, I’m not some dumb monkey, I assure you! Or backwoods native savage!” Calico ran into his shelter and returned with the radio. “Could some stone-age ape-man have turned your flying eyeball into this? Reached out to you through radio frequencies! Using intergalactic distress codes?”

“Those skills can also be surmised through exposure,” Leftie sniffed. “And if you are capable of reverse engineering our probe to suit your own ends, surely you can manufacture a fictional narrative out of scraps of knowledge of this so-called Earth and its supposed Rangers.”

Rightie nodded towards her companion. “Well stated. I quite concur.”

If Calico had stomped his foot into the pier any harder, it would have crashed right on through to the water. He swung an angry hand at all the probes that were encircling him. "Can't those things tell you that I'm *telling the truth*? Do the words 'vocal stress analysis' ring any bells? If not, what are they good for other than getting shot down by a..." He stopped himself from saying 'primitive.' "By a man who's very good at surviving where he doesn't belong."

"We lack the relevant data on your species." Or Leftie just wasn't bothering to look it up on her magic datapad! "In any event, the symbol you claim does not match any known alien iconography in our database."

"How the hell is that possible?" Calico demanded, slapping his chest hard enough to sting. "Even the Bull-guy who came here last knew what this symbol represents! You couldn't possibly have come this close to Nox--" He saw the eyes of both women narrow, and cursed himself for giving away the name he'd given the world. That much more reason to call himself part of this place. "You couldn't possibly have come anywhere near here without bumping into range of our beacons or the Kalistovs!!"

Unless...

"Unless the situation on Hgoflin V has deteriorated..." The Kalistov who'd come to investigate his involvement in the Gremneeki rebellion had stated that those Cats, well in the middle of crippling their former oppressors' infrastructure, had been gathering to discuss initiating an outright genocide. A slave rebellion on route to becoming something much nastier. Images flashed before the man's mind. Ones that he'd seen in his nightmares. Or imagined in his darkest waking moments, when he truly believed he'd never see another planet's horizon ever again. Ships of a design like that of his own lost *Whisperwind* raining plasma-hot death down on planetary populations, or forwards at anyone who might come to stop them. Growing in boldness and sadism with every successful campaign. Feeding ambition with each inch that they extended their reach by. Until, some horrible and preferably long-off day, when they came to Nox to plant a flag of conquest. With a set of slavers' shock-cuffs custom-made for him.

If such dark possibilities were coming to pass, options for RangerCorps were limited and awful.

The man slumped down into his ass. He spoke his woes to himself, rather than the pair. "RangerCorps must have pulled out of the region. But why? Did they make the same connections as the space-cop did, and backed away before any more fingers pointed their way? Did the Kalistovs demand withdrawal from the area, removing the temptation of interference, as a precursor to finalizing the alliance? Were they driven off by a Gremneeki fleet?"

The Lizards knew something. He could tell by the silent looks they passed to each other. Rightie taped something on her control pad. The probes fell back into the woods. "Your likeness and genetic profile have been added to the ecological data we are collecting about this world. The planet now officially designated Nox--"

"What do I have to do to prove to you that I don't belong here?" Calico slammed his fist into the wood and rose back up to his feet. "How about you take those damned robots and go looking for some bones, huh? Bones like mine? If I'm part of this place, *where did I come from*? Where are my parents buried? Where is my 'civilization'?"

The anti-grav sled began to rise. Leftie stated, in no uncertain terms, "That is beyond the scope of our investigation, primitive. The knowledge of sapient pre-FTL natives is sufficient to change our data collection prerogatives. We will now collect that which you have taken and contrived to put to uses in advance of your evident technological level." Rightie drew her sidearm.

"Oh, shit!" Calico dived for the water, hoping that Scaidron stun settings would be foiled by water, same as his own people's. Hoping like crazy that *she was using a stun setting at all.*

He didn't make it. A rainbow bolt of energy washed over him, sapping him of all strength. A tractor beam caught him just before he hit the water. The view of wish quickly blurred to darkness as unconsciousness took him.

. . .

Calico awoke on his back on the shore, called to wakefulness by the smell of burning meat. "The smoker!" He scrambled up and over to it, and threw open the top. A few hot moments later, he had rescued a few pounds of slightly-singed mud-flapper jerky. Only then did he realize that the sun was setting, and he was feeling unseasonably cool.

They had taken his vest. The one with the RangerCorps symbol on it.

They who, again?

"The Reptiles!" The memories rushed back into his mind, washing away the bitter battery taste of the stun bolt. "No! No! No! Not again! Please!" He rushed into his teepee. His home was perfectly untouched, save for the probe parts that had all gone missing, and the tools that he had fashioned to work them. The women hadn't even left footprints.

"It had to be a dream. Dammit! It had to have been a dream! Please let it be a dream..." But he knew it was real. He knew from the missing vest, the partially emptied quiver, and the lingering battery taste in his mouth from the stun beam. It was only then, as adrenaline boiled through his body -- anger, fear, regret at once more being denied his freedom from this awful life -- and the last numbing effects of the stunner had faded away, that he realized the Reptiles had, in fact, left something behind. He could feel it as a small metal triangle connected to a tiny lump inside his neck. That lump buried deep beneath newly-formed scar tissue, right next to his exterior jugular vein. Where removing it himself could be as good as committing suicide.

"A tracker-chip. They tagged me. Like an animal. Part of a wildlife reserve." Already knowing what he'd see, he staggered over to the pond. In the fading light his reflection showed the triangle to be made of some dark gray metal, too dense to cut or even chip away with the materials he had access to. A nine-point star embedded in the tag rested atop a series of symbols he could assume to be a numerical designation.

A whole new numbness swept over him. It lasted well into the night. Past a silent search for dinner and an equally soundless meal before a fire that he couldn't hear cracking away while he ate meat and berries and gourds that tasted of nothing. He lay own on a mat of leaves that felt like nothing and looked up to a static hut until his body finally faded into a dreamless sleep.

All morning long, Calico wept.