

EXILE

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The Dome of Eyes made it almost impossible for Terrans to reach the world of Tepokt. For those who did land there, there was no returning—only the bitterness of respect—and justice!

The Tepoktan student, whose blue robe in George Kinton's opinion clashed with the dull purple of his scales, twiddled a three-clawed hand for attention. Kinton nodded to him from his place on the dais before the group.

"Then you can give us no precise count of the stars in the galaxy, George?"

Kinton smiled wryly, and ran a wrinkled hand through his graying hair. In the clicking Tepoktan speech, his name came out more like "Chortch."

Questions like this had been put to him often during the ten years since his rocket had hurtled through the meteorite belt and down to the surface of Tepokt, leaving him the only survivor. Barred off as they were from venturing into space, the highly civilized Tepoktans constantly displayed the curiosity of dreamers in matters related to the universe. Because of the veil of meteorites and satellite fragments whirling about their planet, their astronomers had acquired torturous skills but only scraps of real knowledge.

"As I believe I mentioned in some of my recorded lectures," Kinton answered in their language, "the number is actually as vast as it seems to those of you peering through the Dome of Eyes. The scientists of my race have not yet encountered any beings capable of estimating the total."

He leaned back and scanned the faces of his interviewers, faces that would have been oddly humanoid were it not for the elongated snouts and pointed, sharp-toothed jaws. The average Tepoktan was slightly under Kinton's height of five-feet-ten, with a long, supple trunk. Under the robes their scholars affected, the shortness of their two bowed legs was not obvious; but the sight of the short, thick arms carried high before their chests still left Kinton with a feeling of misproportion.

He should be used to it after ten years, he thought, but even the reds or purples of the scales or the big teeth seemed more natural.

"I sympathize with your curiosity," he added. "It is a marvel that your scientists have managed to measure the distances of so many stars."

He could tell that they were pleased by his admiration, and wondered yet again why any little show of approval by him was so eagerly received. Even though he was the first stellar visitor in their recorded history, Kinton remained conscious of the fact that in many fields he was unable to offer the Tepoktans any new ideas. In one or two ways, he believed, no Terran could teach their experts anything.

"Then will you tell us, George, more about the problems of your first space explorers?" came another question.

Before Kinton had formed his answer, the golden curtains at the rear of the austere chamber parted. Klaft, the Tepoktan serving the current year as Kinton's chief aide, hurried toward the dais. The twenty-odd members of the

group fell silent on their polished stone benches, turning their pointed visages to follow Klaft's progress.

The aide reached Kinton and bent to hiss and cluck into the latter's ear in what he presumably considered an undertone. The Terran laboriously spelled out the message inscribed on the limp, satiny paper held before his eyes. Then he rose and took one step toward the waiting group.

"I regret I shall have to conclude this discussion," he announced. "I am informed that another ship from space has reached the surface of Tepokt. My presence is requested in case the crew are of my own planet."

Klaft excitedly skipped down to lead the way up the aisle, but Kinton hesitated. Those in the audience were scholars or officials to whom attendance at one of Kinton's limited number of personal lectures was awarded as an honor.

They would hardly learn anything from him directly that was not available in recordings made over the course of years. The Tepoktan scientists, historians, and philosophers had respectfully but eagerly gathered every crumb of information Kinton knowingly had to offer—and some he thought he had forgotten. Still ... he sensed the disappointment at his announcement.

"I shall arrange for you to await my return here in town," Kinton said, and there were murmurs of pleasure.

Later, aboard the jet helicopter that was basically like those Kinton remembered using on Terra twenty light years away, he shook his head at Klaft's respectful protest.

"But George! It was enough that they were present when you received the news. They can talk about that the rest of their lives! You must not waste your strength on these people who come out of curiosity."

Kinton smiled at his aide's earnest concern. Then he turned to look out the window as he recalled the shadow that underlay such remonstrances. He estimated that he was about forty-eight now, as nearly as he could tell from the somewhat longer revolutions of Tepokt. The time would come when he would age and die. Whose wishes would then prevail?

Maybe he was wrong, he thought. Maybe he shouldn't stand in the way of their biologists and surgeons. But he'd rather be buried, even if that left them with only what he could tell them about the human body.

To help himself forget the rather preoccupied manner in which some of the Tepoktan scientists occasionally eyed him, he peered down at the big dam of the hydro-electric project being completed to Kinton's design. Power from this would soon light the town built to house the staff of scientists, students, and workers assigned to the institute organized about the person of Kinton.

Now, there was an example of their willingness to repay him for whatever help he had been, he reflected. They hadn't needed that for themselves.

In some ways, compared to those of Terra, the industries of Tepokt were underdeveloped. In the first place, the population was smaller and had different standards of luxury. In the second, a certain lack of drive resulted from the inability to break out into interplanetary space. Kinton had been inexplicably lucky to have reached the surface even in a battered hulk. The shell of meteorites was at least a hundred miles thick and constantly shifting.

"We do not know if they have always been meteorites," the Tepoktans had told Kinton, "or whether part of them come from a destroyed satellite; but our observers have proved mathematically that no direct path through them may be predicted more than a very short while in advance."

Kinton turned away from the window as he caught the glint of Tepokt's sun upon the hull of the spaceship they had also built for him. Perhaps ... would it be fair to encourage the newcomer to attempt the barrier?

For ten years, Kinton had failed to work up any strong desire to try it. The Tepoktans called the ever-shifting lights the Dome of Eyes, after a myth in which each tiny satellite bright enough to be visible was supposed to watch over a single individual on the surface. Like their brothers on Terra, the native astronomers could trace their science back to a form of astrology; and Kinton often told them jokingly that he felt no urge to risk a physical encounter with his own personal Eye.

The helicopter started to descend, and Kinton remembered that the city named in his message was only about twenty miles from his home. The brief twilight of Tepokt was passing by the time he set foot on the landing field, and he paused to look up.

The brighter stars visible from this part of the planet twinkled back at him, and he knew that each was being scrutinized by some amateur or professional astronomer. Before an hour had elapsed, most of them would be obscured by the tiny moonlets, some of which could already be seen. These could easily be mistaken for stars or the other five planets of the system, but in a short while the tinier ones in groups would cause a celestial haze resembling a miniature Milky Way.

Klaft, who had descended first, leaving the pilot to bring up the rear, noticed Kinton's pause.

"Glory glitters till it is known for a curse," he remarked, quoting a Tepoktan proverb often applied by the disgruntled scientists to the Dome of Eyes.

Kinton observed, however, that his aide also stared upward for a long moment. The Tepoktans loved speculating about the unsolvable. They had even founded clubs to argue whether two satellites had been destroyed or only one.

Half a dozen officials hastened up to escort the party to the vehicle awaiting Kinton. Klaft succeeded in quieting the lesser members of the delegation so that Kinton was able to learn a few facts about the new arrival. The crash had been several hundred miles away, but someone had thought of the hospital in this city which was known to have a doctor rating as an expert in human physiology. The survivor—only one occupant of the wreck, alive or dead, had been discovered—had accordingly been flown here.

With a clanging of bells, the little convoy of ground cars drew up in front of the hospital. A way was made through the chattering crowd around the entrance. Within a few minutes, Kinton found himself looking down at a pallet upon which lay another Terran.

A man! he thought, then curled a lip wryly at the sudden, unexpected pang of disappointment. Well, he hadn't realized until then what he was really hoping for!

The spaceman had been cleaned up and bandaged by the native medicos. Kinton saw that his left thigh was probably broken. Other dressings suggested cracked

ribs and lacerations on the head and shoulders. The man was dark-haired but pale of skin, with a jutting chin and a nose that had been flattened in some earlier mishap. The flaring set of his ears somehow emphasized an overall leanness. Even in sleep, his mouth was thin and hard.

"Thrown across the controls after his belt broke loose?" Kinton guessed.

"I bow to your wisdom, George," said the plump Tepoktan doctor who appeared to be in charge.

Kinton could not remember him, but everyone on the planet addressed the Terran by the sound they fondly thought to be his first name.

"This is Doctor Chuxolkhee," murmured Klaft.

Kinton made the accepted gesture of greeting with one hand and said, "You seem to have treated him very expertly."

Chuxolkhee ruffled the scales around his neck with pleasure.

"I have studied Terran physiology," he admitted complacently. "From your records and drawings, of course, George, for I have not yet had the good fortune to visit you."

"We must arrange a visit soon," said Kinton. "Klaft will—"

He broke off at the sound from the patient.

"A Terran!" mumbled the injured man.

He shook his head dazedly, tried to sit up, and subsided with a groan.

Why, he looked scared when he saw me, thought Kinton.

"You're all right now," he said soothingly. "It's all over and you're in good hands. I gather there were no other survivors of the crash?"

The man stared curiously. Kinton realized that his own language sputtered clumsily from his lips after ten years. He tried again.

"My name is George Kinton. I don't blame you if I'm hard to understand. You see, I've been here ten years without ever having another Terran to speak to."

The spaceman considered that for a few breaths, then seemed to relax.

"Al Birken," he introduced himself laconically. "Ten years?"

"A little over," confirmed Kinton. "It's extremely unusual that anything gets through to the surface, let alone a spaceship. What happened to you?"

Birken's stare was suspicious.

"Then you ain't heard about the new colonies? Naw—you musta come here when all the planets were open."

"We had a small settlement on the second planet," Kinton told him. "You mean there are new Terran colonies?"

"Yeah. Jet-hoppers spreadin' all over the other five. None of the land-hungry poops figured a way to set down here, though, or they'd be creepin' around

this planet too."

"How did you happen to do it? Run out of fuel?"

The other eyed him for a few seconds before dropping his gaze. Kinton was struck with sudden doubt. The outposts of civilization were followed by less desirable developments as a general rule—prisons, for instance. He resolved to be wary of the visitor.

"Ya might say I was explorin'," Birken replied at last. "That's why I come alone. Didn't want nobody else hurt if I didn't make it. Say, how bad am I banged up?"

Kinton realized guiltily that the man should be resting. He had lost track of the moments he had wasted in talk while the others with him stood attentively about.

He questioned the doctor briefly and relayed the information that Birken's leg was broken but that the other injuries were not serious.

"They'll fix you up," he assured the spaceman. "They're quite good at it, even if the sight of one does make you think a little of an iguana. Rest up, now; and I'll come back again when you're feeling better."

For the next three weeks, Kinton flew back and forth from his own town nearly every day. He felt that he should not neglect the few meetings which were the only way he could repay the Tepoktans for all they did for him. On the other hand, the chance to see and talk with one of his own kind drew him like a magnet to the hospital.

The doctors operated upon Birken's leg, inserting a metal rod inside the bone by a method they had known before Kinton described it. The new arrival expected to be able to walk, with care, almost any day; although the pin would have to be removed after the bone had healed. Meanwhile, Birken seemed eager to learn all Kinton could tell him about the planet, Tepokt.

About himself, he was remarkably reticent. Kinton worried about this.

"I think we should not expect too much of this Terran," he warned Kluft uneasily. "You, too, have citizens who do not always obey, your laws, who sometimes ... that is—"

"Who are born to die under the axe, as we say," interrupted Kluft, as if to ease the concern plain on Kinton's face. "In other words, criminals. You suspect this Albirken is such a one, George?"

"It is not impossible," admitted Kinton unhappily. "He will tell me little about himself. It may be that he was caught in Tepokt's gravity while fleeing from justice."

To himself, he wished he had not told Birken about the spaceship. He didn't think the man exactly believed his explanation of why there was no use taking off in it.

Yet he continued to spend as much time as he could visiting the other man. Then, as his helicopter landed at the city airport one gray dawn, the news reached him.

"The other Terran has gone," Kluft reported, turning from the breathless messenger as Kinton followed him from the machine.

"Gone? Where did they take him?"

Klaft looked uneasy, embarrassed. Kinton repeated his question, wondering about the group of armed police on hand.

"In the night," Klaft hissed and clucked, "when none would think to watch him, they tell me ... and quite rightly, I think—"

"Get on with it, Klaft! Please!"

"In the night, then, Albirken left the chamber in which he lay. He can walk some now, you know, because of Dr. Chuxolkhee's metal pin. He—he stole a ground car and is gone."

"He did?" Kinton had an empty feeling in the pit of his stomach. "Is it known where he went? I mean ... he has been curious to see some of Tepokt. Perhaps—"

He stopped, his own words braying in his ears. Klaft was clicking two claws together, a sign of emphatic disagreement.

"Albirken," he said, "was soon followed by three police constables in another vehicle. They found him heading in the direction of our town."

"Why did he say he was traveling that way?" asked Kinton, thinking to himself of the spaceship! Was the man crazy?

"He did not say," answered Klaft expressionlessly. "Taking them by surprise, he killed two of the constables and injured the third before fleeing with one of their spears."

"What?"

Kinton felt his eyes bulging with dismay.

"Yes, for they carried only the short spears of their authority, not expecting to need fire weapons."

Kinton looked from him to the messenger, noticing for the first time that the latter was an under-officer of police. He shook his head distractedly. It appeared that his suspicions concerning Birken had been only too accurate.

Why was it one like him who got through? he asked himself in silent anguish. After ten years. The Tepoktans had been thinking well of Terrans, but now—

He did not worry about his own position. That was well enough established, whether or not he could again hold up his head before the purple-scaled people who had been so generous to him.

Even if they had been aroused to a rage by the killing, Kinton told himself, he would not have been concerned about himself. He had reached a fairly ripe age for a spaceman. In fact, he had already enjoyed a decade of borrowed time.

But they were more civilized than that wanton murderer, he realized.

He straightened up, forcing back his early-morning weariness.

"We must get into the air immediately," he told Klaft. "Perhaps we may see him before he reaches—"

He broke off at the word "spaceship" but he noticed a reserved expression on Klaft's pointed face. His aide had probably reached a conclusion similar to his own.

They climbed back into the cabin and Klaft gave brisk orders to the lean young pilot. A moment later, Kinton saw the ground outside drop away.

Only upon turning around did he realize that two armed Tepoktans had materialized in time to follow Klaft inside.

One was a constable but the other he recognized for an officer of some rank. Both wore slung across their chests weapons resembling long-barreled pistols with large, oddly indented butts to fit Tepoktan claws. The constable, in addition, carried a contraption with a quadruple tube for launching tiny rockets no thicker than Kinton's thumb. These, he knew, were loaded with an explosive worthy of respect on any planet he had heard of.

To protect him, he wondered. Or to get Birken?

The pilot headed the craft back toward Kinton's town in the brightening sky of early day. Long before the buildings of Kinton's institute came into view, they received a radio message about Birken.

"He has been seen on the road passing the dam," Klaft reported soberly after having been called to the pilot's compartment. "He stopped to demand fuel from some maintenance workers, but they had been warned and fled."

"Couldn't they have seized him?" demanded Kinton, his tone sharp with the worry he endeavored to control. "He has that spear, I suppose; but he is only one and injured."

Klaft hesitated.

"Well, couldn't they?"

The aide looked away, out one of the windows at some sun-dyed clouds ranging from pink to orange. He grimaced and clicked his showy teeth uncomfortably.

"Perhaps they thought you might be offended, George," he answered at last.

Kinton settled back in the seat especially padded to fit the contours of his Terran body, and stared silently at the partition behind the pilot.

In other words, he thought, he was responsible for Birken, who was a Terran, one of his own kind. Maybe they really didn't want to risk hurting his feelings, but that was only part of it. They were leaving it up to him to handle what they considered his private affair.

He wondered what to do. He had no actual faith in the idea that Birken was delirious, or acting under any influence but that of a criminally self-centered nature.

"I shouldn't have told him about the ship!" Kinton muttered, gnawing the knuckle of his left thumb. "He's on the run, all right. Probably scared the colonial authorities will trail him right down through the Dome of Eyes. Wonder what he did?"

He caught himself and looked around to see if he had been overheard. Klaft and the police officers peered from their respective windows, in calculated withdrawal. Kinton, disturbed, tried to remember whether he had spoken in

Terran or Tepoktan.

Would Birken listen if he tried reasoning, he asked himself. Maybe if he showed the man how they had proved the unpredictability of openings through the shifting Dome of Eyes—

An exclamation from the constable drew his attention. He rose, and room was made for him at the opposite window.

In the distance, beyond the town landing field they were now approaching, Kinton saw a halted ground car. Across the plain which was colored a yellowish tan by a short, grass-like growth, a lone figure plodded toward the upthrust bulk of the spaceship that had never flown.

"Never mind landing at the town!" snapped Kinton. "Go directly out to the ship!"

Klaft relayed the command to the pilot. The helicopter swept in a descending curve across the plain toward the gleaming hull.

As they passed the man below, Birken looked up. He continued to limp along at a brisk pace with the aid of what looked like a short spear.

"Go down!" Kinton ordered.

The pilot landed about a hundred yards from the spaceship. By the time his passengers had alighted, however, Birken had drawn level with them, about fifty feet away.

"Birken!" shouted Kinton. "Where do you think you're going?"

Seeing that no one ran after him, Birken slowed his pace, but kept walking toward the ship. He watched them over his shoulder.

"Sorry, Kinton," he shouted with no noticeable tone of regret. "I figure I better travel on for my health."

"It's not so damn healthy up there!" called Kinton. "I told you how there's no clear path—"

"Yeah, yeah, you told me. That don't mean I gotta believe it."

"Wait! Don't you think they tried sending unmanned rockets up? Every one was struck and exploded."

Birken showed no more change of expression than if the other had commented on the weather.

Kinton had stepped forward six or eight paces, irritated despite his anxiety at the way Birken persisted in drifting before him.

Kinton couldn't just grab him—bad leg or not, he could probably break the older man in two.

He glanced back at the Tepoktans beside the helicopter, Klaft, the pilot, the officer, the constable with the rocket weapon.

They stood quietly, looking back at him.

The call for help that had risen to his lips died there.



"Not their party," he muttered. He turned again to Birken, who still retreated toward the ship. "But he'll only get himself killed and destroy the ship! Or if some miracle gets him through, that's worse! He's nothing to turn loose on a civilized colony again."

A twinge of shame tugged down the corners of his mouth as he realized that keeping Birken here would also expose a highly cultured people to an unscrupulous criminal who had already committed murder the very first time he had been crossed.

"Birken!" he shouted. "For the last time! Do you want me to send them to drag you back here?"

Birken stopped at that. He regarded the motionless Tepoktans with a derisive sneer.

"They don't look too eager to me," he taunted.

Kinton growled a Tepoktan expression the meaning of which he had deduced after hearing it used by the dam workers.

He whirled to run toward the helicopter. Hardly had he taken two steps, however, when he saw startled changes in the carefully blank looks of his escort. The constable half raised his heavy weapon, and Klast sprang forward with a hissing cry.

By the time Kinton's aging muscles obeyed his impulse to sidestep, the spear had already hurtled past. It had missed him by an error of over six feet.

He felt his face flushing with sudden anger. Birken was running as best he could toward the spaceship, and had covered nearly half the distance.

Kinton ran at the Tepoktans, brushing aside the concerned Klast. He snatched the heavy weapon from the surprised constable.

He turned and raised it to his chest. Because of the shortness of Tepoktan arms, the launcher was constructed so that the butt rested against the chest with the sighting loops before the eyes. The little rocket tubes were above head height, to prevent the handler's catching the blast.

The circles of the sights weaved and danced about the running figure. Kinton realized to his surprise that the effort of seizing the weapon had him panting. Or was it the fright at having a spear thrown at him? He decided that Birken had not come close enough for that, and wondered if he was afraid of his own impending action.

It wasn't fair, he complained to himself. The poor slob only had a spear, and a man couldn't blame him for wanting to get back to his own sort. He was limping ... hurt ... how could they expect him to realize—?

Then, abruptly, his lips tightened to a thin line. The sights steadied on Birken as the latter approached the foot of the ladder leading to the entrance port of the spaceship.

Kinton pressed the firing stud.

Across the hundred-yard space streaked four flaring little projectiles. Kinton, without exactly seeing each, was aware of the general lines of flight diverging gradually to bracket the figure of Birken.

One struck the ground beside the man just as he set one foot on the bottom rung of the ladder, and skittered away past one fin of the ship before exploding. Two others burst against the hull, scattering metal fragments, and another puffed on the upright of the ladder just above Birken's head.

The spaceman was blown back from the ladder. He balanced on his heels for a moment with outstretched fingers reaching toward the grips from which they had been torn. Then he crumpled into a limp huddle on the yellowing turf.

Kinton sighed.

The constable took the weapon from him, reloaded deftly, and proffered it again. When the Terran did not reach for it, the officer held out a clawed hand to receive it. He gestured silently, and the constable trotted across the intervening ground to bend over Birken.

"He is dead," said Klaft when the constable straightened up with a curt wave.

"Will ... will you have someone see to him, please?" Kinton requested, turning toward the helicopter.

"Yes, George," said Klaft. "George...?"

"Well?"

"It would be very instructive—that is, I believe Dr. Chuxolkhee would like to—"

"All right!" yielded Kinton, surprised at the harshness of his own voice. "Just tell him not to bring around any sketches of the various organs for a few months!"

He climbed into the helicopter and slumped into his seat. Presently, he was aware of Klaft edging into the seat across the aisle. He looked up.

"The police will stay until cars from town arrive. They are coming now," said his aide.

Kinton stared at his hands, wondering at the fact that they were not shaking. He felt dejected, empty, not like a man who had just been at a high pitch of excitement.

"Why did you not let him go, George?"

"What? Why ... why ... he would have destroyed the ship you worked so hard to build. There is no safe path through the Dome of Eyes."

"No predictable path," Klaft corrected. "But what then? We would have built you another ship, George, for it was you who showed us how."

Kinton flexed his fingers slowly.

"He was just no good. You know the murder he did here; we can only guess what he did among my own ... among Terrans. Should he have a chance to go back and commit more crimes?"

"I understand, George, the logic of it," said Klaft. "I meant ... it is not my place to say this ... but you seem unhappy."

"Possibly," grunted Kinton wryly.

"We, too, have criminals," said the aide, as gently as was possible in his clicking language. "We do not think it necessary to grieve for the pain they bring upon themselves."

"No, I suppose not," sighed Kinton. "I ... it's just—"

He looked up at the pointed visage, at the strange eyes regarding him sympathetically from beneath the sloping, purple-scaled forehead.

"It's just that now I'm lonely ... again," he said.