

Argyle and the Aliens

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"I'm approaching Henry V," said Argyle. "I should make contact with the aliens any moment now."

"Have you gone crazy?" demanded Gravedigger Gaines's voice on the subspace radio. "Most of their forces are on Henrys IV and V!"

"Well, there wouldn't really be much sense going to Henry I, would there?" replied Argyle.

"Three-Gun Max is already on V, and I think Venus is on her way there. Leave the fighting to them and get your ass out of there."

"I'm no fighter," said Argyle.

"Then why aren't you back at the Outpost?" said Gaines.

"They're aliens. I'm an alien. They just might listen to me."

"Idiot!" snapped Gaines. "You're as much an alien to them as you are to us."

Argyle frowned. "I hadn't thought of it that way," he admitted.

"Then maybe it's time for you to start thinking, and get the hell out of the system."

"Thanks for your concern, but I really think someone has to try reasoning with them."

"The time for reasoning was over when they blew a hundred Navy ships out of the sky." Gaines paused.

"I'm going to have to break off communications with you. Even with a scrambled signal, you're getting close enough to the planet for them to home in on you."

"I'm not trying to hide my presence," said Argyle. "There must be someone on the other side who will listen to reason."

"Your giant computer listened to reason," noted Gaines, "but it didn't do either of you a hell of a lot of good, did it?"

"We're not savages. Neither are they. Surely history is on our side."

"History is usually on the side with the best weapons," said Gaines. "Over and out."

Argyle maintained his distance from the planet until the aliens signaled his ship.

"Identify yourself."

"My name is Argyle. I'm a native of -- "

"Your vessel, fool!"

"It's a spaceship. What do you wish to know about it?"

"Registration. Point of origin. Duration of current voyage. Destination. Armaments."

"I'm having my computer feed you all the data now."

"What is your purpose for being in this system?"

"I was having a drink with my friends on Henry II," said Argyle.

"Are you a human?"

"No."

"Are you a member of a race allied with the Commonwealth?"

"Yes, I am."

"Remain in orbit. Two of our fighter ships will approach you and escort you to the planet's surface."

"I will do as you request," said Argyle. "Then I would like to speak to someone in charge."

"That was an order, not a request."

"Then I will do as your order," Argyle corrected himself. "But I would still like to speak to someone in authority."

There was no response, and a few minutes later two fighter ships showed up. They flanked him and herded him to the hastily-assembled spaceport.

Once on the ground he was escorted, at gunpoint, to an interrogation room, where the slightly bored alien bureaucrat was waiting for him.

"We have no record of an Argyle owning a ship with the registration number of RP1034CB."

"That is because my true name is not Argyle. That is a name given to me by my human friends."

"Why should a member of any other race have human friends?"

"They are an interesting race, not without aspects of nobility and compassion," said Argyle.

The alien muttered an untranslatable sound.

"Anyway, to answer your question, my true name, and the name on the ship's registration, is Quilbot Phylnx Quilbit."

"And why are you here, Quilbot Phylnx Quilbit?"

"I have come to reason with you."

"We're very busy fighting a war. Why should we take the time to listen to you?"

"Because I am not a Man."

"But you have obviously been contaminated by Men."

"They do not wish this war."

"That is hardly my concern," said the alien.

"Whatever your grievances, I'm sure we can address them without resorting to war," persisted Argyle.

"There is ultimately no justification for two races killing each other."

"Nonsense," said the alien. "Do you know how many men and industries we'd put out of work if we were to stop the war just because a few bleeding hearts think we can talk out our grievances?"

"But there are peaceful means of settling your differences!"

"Peaceful, perhaps," said the alien. "Glorious, no. And economically advantageous, never."

"There is nothing glorious about death," said Argyle.

"Why do I get all the pacifists?" muttered the alien. "I've put in my time. I don't make waves. I deserve better."

The alien sighed and pointed his pistol at Argyle's head.

"You will not shoot me," said Argyle confidently. "That would be irrational."

"What is so very advantageous about being rational?" asked the alien, slipping off the safety device. "It simply makes you more predictable. That was the very first thing we learned in officer's candidate school."

"But I am your last hope!" insisted Argyle. "All the others are prepared to fight. Only I am willing to find an alternative."

"Thank goodness for small favors," sighed the alien. "For a moment I was afraid they were all like you."

He fired the weapon, and Man's last best hope for peace -- indeed, its only one -- fell dead upon the floor.