

Gravedigger Gaines and the Aliens

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Henry VIII didn't have much to recommend it. The atmosphere was chlorine. The temperature was almost 100 degrees below zero Celsius. The gravity was 17% heavier than Galactic Standard, which made every step an effort. The day lasted for 1,273 hours, and so did the night. About the only thing of note was the sky, which was illuminated by the six sparkling Wedding Rings reflecting the light of the distant sun.

Why the hell would anyone hole up here?, wondered Gravedigger Gaines, as he trudged across the rocky terrain. Especially a force that had blown the Navy out of the sky. If there was a single thing to recommend Henry VIII, he sure as hell couldn't think what it might be.

Still, he knew the men and women from the Outpost were covering all the other Henrys (except for I, which was molten, and a few moons that had checked out clean), and since his sensors had spotted a small group of aliens on the eighth Henry and he was used to hunting down killers on worlds with wildly diverse atmospheres and gravities, he had decided to take care of this group himself.

Visibility was close to nil, but his instruments told him that the aliens' camp was about half a mile ahead of him, and their ship was even closer. That suited him just fine; if he couldn't see them, they couldn't see him.

He found their ship, melted the ignition and destroyed the life-support system, then approached to within two hundred yards of the aliens. He could barely make out the outlines of the dozen Bubbles that housed the them. When he was a young man he might have charged into the camp, spraying bullets and laser beams right and left, looking his foes in the eye. But over the years he had seen how messy death could be, and how unnecessary heroism was. He'd decided that he liked living, and planned to die only with the greatest reluctance. So he'd started playing it safe, and that had led to greater and greater successes until he'd made his fortune and chucked the whole business.

Now he took out his laser rifle, sat down on the ground, supported the barrel on his knees, and fired.

There was no reaction, which showed him that he had missed. He shrugged. Missing from two hundred yards when the enemy didn't even know they were being fired upon was a lot better than missing at ten yards when they were shooting back at him.

He aimed again and pulled the trigger. This time a Bubble shattered and four aliens staggered a few paces, gasping for air, then collapsed.

It was like shooting fish in a barrel. Before the first of the aliens suited up and fired back, he'd blown apart ten of the twelve Bubbles. Then, since they could only tell where he was based on where the laser bursts were coming from, he got to his feet, walked fifty yards to his left, and fired again. The eleventh Bubble exploded, and he changed positions again.

He was about to fire at the twelfth and final Bubble when his suit's radio picked up a voice.

"Is that you, Gaines?"

He didn't want anyone pinpointing his position based on his radio signal, so he remained quiet.

"It's just you and me," said the voice. "You can answer, Gaines. I know it's you."

He maintained his silence.

"Come on," said the voice. "If I'm going to die, I want to know who killed me."

Gaines moved about twenty yards to his left.

"It's just you and me. All the others are dead."

"What makes you think I'm someone called Gaines?" asked the Gravedigger at last.

"I know you were at the Outpost," replied the alien. "And I know your methods."

"How?"

"I'm the one that Men call the Gray Salamander."

"I put you away back on Barracuda IV," said Gaines, surprised. "I thought sure they'd give you life."

"They did."

"So what are you doing here?"

"I escaped."

"How many guards did you kill in the process?"

"Enough."

Gaines moved again, just in case the Salamander had some way of homing in on his signal. "This time I'll have to kill you," he said.

"Why? They say you quit the bounty hunting business."

"We're at war, remember?"

"I'm not at war with anyone," said the Salamander.

"Then what are you doing here?"

"I like killing things."

"You've done all the killing you're going to do," said Gaines. "Only one of us is leaving this planet, and it's not going to be you."

"Bold words for a man who's lived more than half his life, Gravedigger Gaines. I'm still in my prime, and unlike you, I know the territory."

Gaines fired at the final Bubble and saw it explode. Then he raced to a point thirty yards away, just before the Salamander's energy pulse hit the spot where he'd been.

Now he cautiously began making his way back to his ship, weaving his way along the terrain, careful never to move more than ten yards in a straight line. The Salamander kept taunting him, and he kept replying, but he concentrated solely on getting back to his ship in one piece.

And then, finally, after almost half an hour, it came into view. He approached it via a serpentine route, just in case the Salamander had found it first and was waiting for him, but he couldn't make himself believe that was the case. If the alien had found his ship, he'd surely have bragged about it by now.

He climbed aboard, closed the hatch, and inspected every inch of the ship to make sure he was alone on it.

"I'm getting tired of this hide-and-seek game," came the Salamander's voice.

"So am I," answered Gaines.

"Then you'll face me?"

"No. I concede the game. I'm leaving the planet."

"I don't understand," said the Salamander. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm saying good-bye to you."

"You're a lot of things, Gaines, but you're no coward. You'd never leave without beating me."

"I've already beaten you," said Gaines.

"Beat me? You haven't faced me yet!"

"Facing you is for young men with big egos. My job is winning -- and I've won."

"You're crazy!"

"I may be crazy," agreed Gaines pleasantly, "but I've blown away all twelve of your life-support Bubbles, and before I did that I disabled your ship. I've got a year's supply of oxygen on my ship. How much have you got in your suit?"

The Gray Salamander was still cursing at him when he broke out of orbit and lost radio contact.