

Little Mike Picasso and the Aliens

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Little Mike Picasso looked at his viewscreen. There was nothing but rocks as far as the eye could see.

"Can I breathe the air?"

"Yes," answered his ship's computer. "Of course, the first breath will kill you within five seconds, but..."

"Where the hell are we?" he demanded.

"I have no idea," came the answer.

"Well, you're supposed to know!" he snapped.

"I beg to differ," said the computer. "You could have added an HT10547 state-of-the-art Navigational Computer to me before you came to the Inner Frontier, and you chose not to. It is hardly my fault that you have forced me to perform operations for which I was not programmed."

"All I said was get me to one of the Henrys where the aliens were."

"I know what you said. I have audio, video, and holographic recordings of it, and can instantly reproduce them should the need arise. That in no way alters the fact that I am not an HT10547 state-of-the-art Navigational Computer. I have done the best I could do under exceptionally trying circumstances."

"You couldn't find your nose with your finger," complained Little Mike.

"I possess neither a nose nor a finger," replied the computer.

"You know damned well what I meant," said Little Mike. "Not only didn't you find a world with aliens on it, but you don't even know where we are."

"I have not denied my limitations," said the computer. "But it is unfair of you to keep referring to them, to say nothing of unkind and -- dare I suggest it? -- petulant."

"Go fuck yourself."

"And vulgar."

"Look," said Little Mike, "I am the best goddamned artist in the galaxy, maybe the best who ever lived. I make Michelangelo and Picasso and Morita look like amateurs. I can't excel at everything, so I don't think it's asking too much for my spaceship to know where the hell we are."

"There's a logical flaw in your argument," the computer pointed out. "Being the best goddamned artist in the galaxy has nothing to do with -- "

"It wasn't an argument, it was a statement!" growled Little Mike. "We're going to wipe these bastards out. I mean, hell, if Catastrophe Baker and Hurricane Smith and Gravedigger Gaines are all fighting on the same side, then the aliens are doomed. I've got to find them before the war's over, so I can paint them and capture them for posterity."

"If you plan to capture them for posterity, why not paint them after you've captured them?" asked the computer.

"I'm going to capture them on canvas, not in the flesh," said Little Mike. "I'm five foot three, I weigh 120 pounds dripping wet, and I've never fired a weapon in my life. How the hell am I going to capture aliens that can blow the Navy out of the spaceways? My job is creating a masterpiece or two while there are still some of them left."

"Perhaps you should have attached yourself to Catastrophe Baker or Hurricane Smith at the outset. From what you've told me, they are almost certain to come into contact with the aliens." The computer paused. "In fact, I could signal one of them right now, and -- "

"And if the aliens are closer to us than Baker or Smith, you'll have broadcast our position to them."

"Ah -- but I don't know our position," said the ship triumphantly.

"Then how the hell would you expect Baker or Smith to find us?"

"They're heroes," answered the ship. "Heroes always find a way."

"Who told you that?" asked Little Mike.

"It's on my library crystals."

"Fiction or non-fiction?"

"I cannot differentiate."

"Some computer!" snorted Little Mike.

"You get what you pay for," answered the computer calmly. "You could have bought me the ability to make value judgments, which would require me to instantly know the difference between fiction and non-fiction. You chose not to. Now you must live with the consequences of your penury."

"Let's get back to the problem at hand, instead of making groundless accusations. Where the hell are we?"

"My accusations were not groundless," said the computer.

"Fine, they're not groundless," said Little Mike with a defeated sigh. "Now where are we?"

"I don't know."

"Check your fuel gauges, and your internal chronometer. How far did we fly? How long did it take? What can you deduce from that?"

"Everything is relative," answered the ship. "I know how much fuel I used, of course, just as I know the duration of our trip. But to know precisely where we are, I must calculate the speed at which the Tudor/Plantagenet system is moving in relation to the galaxy, and indeed the speed of the galaxy in relation to all the other galaxies. In response to your query, I shall commence my calculations now. Please do not interrupt."

Little Mike sat patiently for five minutes, then ten more, and finally another hour. Finally he spoke up.

"How long is this likely to take?"

There was no response. For a moment he thought the computer had gone dead, but then he heard the gentle whirring as it computed the size and speed of every moving object in the universe.

"There's a war going on, you know," said Little Mike.

The computer blinked an acknowledgment, but couldn't spare any brainpower to respond.

Little Mike made himself a sandwich, opened a container of beer, watched a holo show, and went to bed. When he woke up in the morning, the ship's computer was still lost in its calculations.

"This is ridiculous!" he snapped. "Cancel the order."

Another acknowledgment blinked, but once again the computer couldn't spare even the slightest portion of its brainpower to reply.

After six more days had passed, Little Mike ran out of food. The beer was gone a day later.

Just as he was certain that he would die of starvation before the ship determined where they were, the computer suddenly came to life.

"I am pleased to announce that we are on Margaret of Anjou, the moon of Henry VI."

"Good!" said Little Mike. "Now let's get the hell out of here!"

"Where would you like to go?"

"Wherever the action is."

"Oh," said the computer. "Did I neglect to tell you? The war's as good as over."