

Enter Q'aa'l

Q'aa'l had been on the planet for sixteen local spins and was starting to get the hang of the borrowed body. The host was strictly male, rather boringly heterosexual and was indeed quite the ugliest thing Q'aa'l had ever laid eyes on. Long, thin, excessively muscular, standing on two rear limbs, of which there were only four. The only nice thing was the colour. It was a warm umber-sepia brown. In his own body, umber was one of the colours of deep thought and sepia indicated a mid-level meditative state. The fact that it stayed that exact colour all the time was a little disconcerting but at least it was a nice hue.

Q'aa'l had done his homework. He had written a short speech that would help set the scene. Just enough relevant information to interest his client without intimidating. He took his brief seriously and had worked out how to impart the necessary knowledge without breaking the promise to keep quiet about his origins.

His first meeting, as mentioned by Xianlath'un, was with a creature called Frank. He still couldn't help smirking about that. Q'aa'l's scan showed that his guy was currently deep in conversation with another human in one of their recreational buildings. As Q'aa'l approached the building, he went through his opening speech one last time.

Inside Bar 517, the door to the street rattled open and Frank looked up, horrified that someone else was joining the tableau. But the door was locked! As the tall, dark form emerged from the silhouette of bright outside light, Frank could see what was possibly the most beautiful man he had ever laid eyes on. The figure looked around briefly, spoke a few words to Nancy, saw Frank and made towards them with a ridiculous grin on his perfect face.

As he neared their table, the tall man grabbed wildly at a chair, placed it at the edge of the booth and very clumsily sat down, almost missing and having to readjust his position. Never taking his eyes from Frank, he launched into his speech.

"Hi! My name is Q'aa'l. I am from another planet. I hear you guys are in trouble. I am here to help." He looked at Michael, back at Frank, then down to Frank's barely touched pint of IPA.

"Ah, liquid. Great."

Awkwardly clutching the glass, Q'aa'l raised it to his mouth, drank it down in one go and clumsily put it half on, half off the table. It immediately toppled, fell to the floor and smashed. Q'aa'l looked at it with great interest for a second and then emitted a three-second-long reverberating belch that echoed around the empty bar. He sat back and looked at Frank and Michael in turn.

Michael looked at Frank. Frank looked at Michael. Both hoped that the other could shed some light on this impromptu but, for Frank, not unwelcome intrusion.

"Is he..." began Frank

"...with you? Finished Michael.

Both men shook their heads and turned to look at this strange man.

"So..." began Frank, hesitantly, "You are from another planet?"

"Dammit." said Q'aa'l, "How do you know that?"

"It was, like, the second thing you said." Offered Michael.

"It was?" Q'aa'l looked down at the broken glass on the floor beside him.

"Oh." He said, before trailing off into silence.

"You said that we are in trouble?" Prompted Frank. And that you can help?"

“Oh yes. I have some information for you. You guys are leaving soon and there are a few things you need to know before you go. Just so you don’t screw it up.”

“Leaving ... to go where?” Asked Michael.

Q’aa’l jabbed a finger skywards and continued beaming at them.

This stranger knew they were all going to die. What could he possibly want us to know that would make any difference? Thought Frank.

“Any more liquid?” Q’aa’l asked.

“I’ll get it.” Said Frank, wanting to get away to think, as much as to see how Nancy was holding up.

“What are you doing here?” asked Michael angrily. “We are in the middle of something important.”

“I’m really only here for Frank.” said Q’aa’l, not really looking at Michael. “But we can engage in small talk, if you like.”

“I have no interest in small talk and we only have a short time left.” Said Michael.

Q’aa’l, entirely without malice, completely ignored him and was looking around the bar.

“Why are you here?” Michael spat. “And where, exactly, are you from?”

“I am from the fifth planet in a star system just over three-quarters of the way along the *kringiam* arm. We map stars relative to specific points on the central bar, their position on the arm and their radial distance from the theoretical lateral axis of the galaxy. For poetic reasons, we assign values for magnitude and spin direction. Numbers and music equate in our system, so our star’s name is a rather beautiful song. It goes like this...”

Q’aa’l commenced to hum a jarring, ten second isorhythmic motet.

“Let’s just wait till Frank gets back.” said Michael.

Frank arrived with two pints of IPA. He placed them on the table and sat down slowly in his chair, all the while staring at Q’aa’l.

“So, Carl...”

“No, it’s Q’aa’l.” said Q’aa’l.

“Carl?” Said Frank.

“Q’aa’l.” Corrected Q’aa’l.

“That’s what I said. ‘Carl’.”

“No. It’s *Q’aa’l*.” Repeated Q’aa’l.

“Yes. Carl.” Replied Frank, bewildered.

“No! It’s ... oh, for *thleeg’s* sake ... just call me Carl.”

Q’aa’l was beginning to think this mission was not going to be just as easy as he thought. These creatures were weird. And stupid.

Frank and Michael exchanged a puzzled look. Frank had always supposed aliens to be technologically and intellectually superior. He wondered exactly *how* Carl was going to help them in their current situation ...