

\*Three-Gun Max and the Aliens\*

\* \* \* \*

Three-Gun Max was in a foul mood.

He had followed the Cyborg de Milo to Henry V at Reggie's request. She had radioed him not to land, but he paid no attention to her warnings and set his ship down next to hers.

She was waiting for him as he climb downed from his ship's hatch.

"Stop following me!" she demanded.

"I'm just making sure you don't get into any trouble," he replied.

"There's only one person here who's in trouble," she said, "and it's not me."

"Look, lady, I'm just keeping a promise to that robot bartender."

"The one they call Reggie?"

"He's got a crush on you," said Max with a grin. "He wants me to make sure no harm comes to you."

She stared at him. "I don't believe a word of this."

Max raised a hand to the sky. "I wouldn't kid you."

"It makes no difference. I work alone."

"I notice you didn't feel obligated to work alone when you thought Catastrophe Baker might come along."

"He's a hero, known throughout the galaxy. You're just a three-handed barfly."

Max glared at her. "Don't hassle me, lady. I get ugly when I'm riled."

"You're not all that good-looking \_un\_riled," said the Cyborg dryly. "Now leave me alone or suffer the consequences."

"What consequences?"

She pointed a finger at him, and a burst of laser fire shot out, just missing his head.

"Oh," said Max. "\_Those\_ consequences."

He turned around and climbed back into his ship.

The Cyborg de Milo stood on the ground, hands on hips, as if she half-expected him to emerge again. He waited until he was certain she wasn't leaving until he left first, then activated the ship and shot into the atmosphere.

He had tried his best to keep his word to the damned robot, so his conscience was clear. Now he was free to go anywhere he wanted.

Still, he was already at Henry V; it didn't make any sense to fly to one of the other Henrys at long as there were aliens to be confronted right here. He tightened his orbit, had his sensors scan the surface, and

found alien encampment about six hundred miles to the west of the city that the Cyborg de Milo had staked out as her own territory.

He set the ship down some twenty miles from the encampment and considered his next move. He didn't have the firepower to approach the aliens and take them all on. Besides, that was the kind of thing men like Catastrophe Baker bragged about, but no one ever really did.

If he was carrying any bombs he could have flown low over the encampment and dumped his payload, but his ship was a lightweight flyer that wasn't even equipped with defensive weapons. If he knew where they stockpiled their weaponry, he could sneak in under cover of night and blow up an entire munitions building -- but he didn't know if there was a munitions building (and he had to admit that even if he did know, he had no idea how to blow it up. Explosives were not among his fields of expertise.)

So, distasteful as he found the idea, it looked like the only way to do any damage to the aliens was to march off and confront them. He checked his screecher, his burner, and his blaster, made sure all were fully powered, and began walking toward the encampment.

He had covered about seven miles when he saw a two-legged figure approaching him. At first he thought it was another Man, but as it neared him he realized that it was an alien.

He pulled his burner and aimed it at the alien's chest.

"Hold it right there!" he yelled.

The alien stopped, startled. "I didn't see you," he said in heavily-accented Terran.

"Drop your weapons," ordered Max.

"I don't have any," said the alien.

"I'm not kidding!" snapped Max.

"Neither am I. I'm a deserter."

Max approached the alien cautiously and made sure that he was unarmed.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he said. "Where the hell did you think you were going?"

"Away."

"Just away?"

"I'm a poet," said the alien. "I have no business here in the middle of a war."

"Truth to tell, I can think of a lot of places I'd rather be," said Max, pulling out a flask and taking a long swig. "Here. Can your metabolism handle this stuff?"

"I'll never know if I don't try," answered the alien, taking the proffered flask and lifting it to his lips.

"You know, you're not so bad for a godless planet-raping alien," allowed Max.

The alien wiped his mouth and returned the flask to Max. "You're not so bad yourself," he said. "For a xenophobic, imperialistic swine whose race is out to enslave the galaxy."

"You got a name?"

"Of course I have a name. You couldn't pronounce it, but the closest translation is Wordsmith."

"You were born with that moniker?"

"Certainly not. I took it for myself after I reached my majority."

"You're a major?"

"I'm a private."

"Then what's this majority crap?"

"That means I'm an adult."

"Good," said Max. "God knows how many interstellar laws I'd be breaking giving booze to an underage alien."

"Speaking of which, might I have some more?"

"Sure," said Max, handing him the flask. "That's what it's for."

"Thank you," said Wordsmith. "It's really quite stimulating, isn't it?"

"There's those who would say yes, and then there's some who would say absolutely."

"Have you a name?"

"Max. Or, more formally, Three-Gun Max."

"You're not sensitive about having three hands?"

"Hell, no. If we start arm-wrestling, I've got a spare. Have you?"

"I've never encountered any other Men with three hands," said Wordsmith.

"We're a small but select group of superhumans," admitted Max.

"How many are you?"

"The downstate returns aren't all in, but so far, at last count, rounded off, it comes to one -- me."

"Are you a mutant?"

"I prefer to think of myself as gifted."

"Why are you here at all?" asked Wordsmith. "You seem like a reasonable sentient being. Why fight a war when you have the whole galaxy in which to avoid it?"

"You know," replied Max, "not thirty minutes ago I was asking myself that very question."

"And what was your answer?"

Max shrugged. "I like to fight."

"All right," said Wordsmith. "I can accept that."

"You can?" asked Max, surprised. "I would have thought you'd disapprove."

"No. If you'd have come here because you believe in the nobility of war, or because you cherish the glory of military victory, then I would have disapproved. But you descend from a race of predatory apes. It is your nature to kill, and you are simply reacting as untold generations of murderous progenitors would have reacted."

"You think so?"

Wordsmith nodded his head sagely. "You cannot help what you are."

"And does your race descend from predators, too?"

"Of course. Almost all sentient life does." Wordsmith smiled. "That does tend to let us all off the hook, philosophically speaking."

"So how come \_you\_ don't like fighting?" asked Max.

"I am a fourth generation poet," answered Wordsmith with dignity. "We have created a new genetic branch of my race's ancient tree."

"So you'd rather rhyme than rape?" suggested Max.

"I don't believe I said anything remotely like that," Wordsmith corrected him. "I'd rather rhyme than kill. Raping is another matter altogether."

"You know," said Max, "if it weren't for this fucking war, I think we could become lifelong friends."

"I feel an affinity for you, too."

"Let's go back to my ship and I'll break out some more drinking stuff," said Max.

"I was about to ask if you had any more," said Wordsmith, falling into step beside the human.

"By the way, if you don't mind discussing it, just how the hell did the war start, anyway?"

Wordsmith shrugged. "I have no idea."

"But you're here, fighting in it."

"I was drafted."

"So you don't know who fired the first shot?"

"No. I do know that we fired the next thousand -- but we're a very masculine race, rugged and competitive and filled to overflowing with testosterone."

"Sounds like we have a lot in common."

"Of course," said Wordsmith. "Races that don't have those traits in common surrender immediately."

"A telling point," admitted Max.

Suddenly the alien stopped and swayed dizzily.

"Is something wrong?" asked Max.

"I believe my system is having a little difficulty metabolizing your intoxicants," said Wordsmith. "I'll be all

right in a moment." The swaying stopped. "There. The dizziness has left me."

"What do you guys drink?" asked Max.

"Anything that's wet."

"Heavy drinkers, huh?"

"Especially poets."

"You've got that in common with most of the human poets I've known," said Max.

"Have you got a female, Max?" asked Wordsmith.

"You mean to share with you?"

"No. I mean, do you have a life mate?"

"Not yet. Maybe one of these days. I'm still testing the waters."

"You copulate in water?"

"Well, it's been known to happen, but that's not what I meant. It's a figure of speech. It means I'm still searching for a life mate -- or, to be more accurate, still auditioning potential life mates." He paused.

"How about you? Have you got a lady alien waiting at home for you?"

"Yes," admitted Wordsmith. "I miss her terribly. I suppose that's the real reason I deserted. I long to be back with her again."

"Forgive me for pointing this out, but deserting the place where you keep all the spaceships probably wasn't the brightest way to go about getting reunited with her."

"I hadn't considered it until I was miles away from camp," confessed Wordsmith. "And by then it was too late."

"Well, what the hell," said Max. "We'll sit the war out on my ship, drink up all my booze, and then I'll take you to your ladyfriend."

"Do you mean it, Max?" asked the alien.

"Sure," said Max. "What are friends for?"

Wordsmith took off the metal necklace he was wearing and handed it to Max. "I want you to have this as a gesture of my friendship."

"What is it?"

"My military ID. I realize it's a common and inexpensive present, but it's all I have."

"Then I'll be honored to accept it," said Max.

They continued walking and talking, and in another hour they came to the ship. Max broke out a couple of fifths of his best whiskey and brought two chairs down to the ground, and they spent a pleasant afternoon drinking and telling stories. Then, just before sundown, Wordsmith clutched at his stomach.

"Something's wrong," he began. "I don't feel very well..." He stood up, took a tentative step toward the

ship, and then collapsed.

Max dragged him into the ship and laid him out on a cot. He didn't know what else to do, so he applied cold compresses to the alien's head.

Wordsmith remained almost motionless for twenty hours, then opened his eyes.

"That stuff is really bad for my metabolism," he said weakly.

"Is there anything I should be doing for you?" asked Max. "Your pulse rate has doubled and your color has deepened. I don't know if those are good signs or bad ones."

"Just let me lie here until I get my strength back."

"Whatever you say."

The alien lost consciousness again, and didn't awaken until he began vomiting five hours later. Max cleaned him up as best he could and offered him some water. He refused it, and since Max didn't know if his race even drank water, he didn't force the issue.

Wordsmith slept for another day and night before regaining consciousness again.

"I feel awful," he moaned.

"I'd better send for one of your medics," said Max.

"No," said Wordsmith. "They'd shoot me for desertion and kill you as an enemy."

"But you can't just lay here getting weaker by the hour," protested Max.

"Why not? It's very pleasant here, and it's keeping you out of the war."

He passed out again.

Max kept watch over him day and night for a week. Then one morning he checked the alien's pulse and couldn't find it. He held a mirror to Wordsmith's nose and mouth; there was no trace of breath. He knew the alien's death wasn't his fault, but he couldn't help feeling guilty since he had been the one to supply the whiskey.

He dug a shallow grave, laid Wordsmith in it, and covered him over with dirt. Then he checked his weapons, as he had done more than a week before, and prepared to walk to the encampment.

When he got there he found it deserted.

He returned to his ship and flew to the city where he had left the Cyborg de Milo. There were hundreds of alien corpses, but no sign of her.

\_Son of a bitch,\_ he thought. \_Did I just drink and doctor my way through an interstellar war?\_