

Three-Gun Max Finds A Friend

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It was after I'd made the city safe for Venus (began Max, as the Cyborg de Milo snorted contemptuously). I set my ship down a few hundred miles away, ready to take out a small alien army all by myself.

But before I did, I figured I owed myself a meal, since wiping out all those aliens figured to burn up a lot of calories. I was sitting there outside my ship, cooking some steaks over an open fire, far enough from the aliens so their sensors wouldn't be able to spot me, when I felt the muzzle of a screecher pressed between my shoulder blades.

"Raise your hands," said a thickly-accented voice, which I knew had to belong to one of the aliens.

"If I do, I'll burn the steaks," I said without turning around.

"So what?" asked the alien.

"If you're going to kill me anyway, it doesn't make any difference what I do with my hands ... but if you're not going to kill me, then it's be criminal to burn 'em."

"I hadn't thought of it that way," he admitted thoughtfully, walking around to the other side of the fire. He kept his gun trained on me while he tried to figure out what to do next.

"Well, if you're not going to shoot me," I said, "you might as well join me. There's enough food here for both of us."

"I don't mind if I do," he said, taking a plate and squatting down next to the fire. "It's been a long day, and I haven't eaten since sunrise."

"You got a name?" I asked.

"Wordsmith," he said. "How about you?"

"Max."

"I couldn't help noticing that you've got more hands than the usual human," he said.

"I never found it to be a disadvantage," I told him.

"That's curious," he said. "Everything I've learned about your society tells me that anyone as different as you should be an outcast, shunned by all."

"Just what is it you think you know about my society?" I asked.

"I've read all the books and seen the usual indoctrination holos," he replied. "I find your habit of eating newborn babies especially disgusting."

"I'm not aware of any humans ever eating babies."

"I suppose it's a secret ritual," he said sympathetically.

"I have a feeling that you're a victim of false doctrine," I said.

"False doctrine?" he repeated, puzzled.

"Propaganda."

"But I saw the holos!"

"You saw the wonders of computer animation and special effects," I said.

He stared at me for a long moment. "I don't know," he said at last.

"Did you see holos of people cooking babies?"

"No, just eating them raw."

"Well, there you have it," I said. "I'm living proof of the fact that Men always cook their meat."

"Yeah, I guess you are," said Wordsmith. "I can't tell you what a relief that is."

"Why?"

"I'm no warrior," he confessed. "I'm a poet. I joined the military after I read about what you did to babies. Now that I know you don't eat your young, I think I'll go back home and finish work on my first collection of poems. I specialize unrhyming hectometer."

"Will they let you leave?" I asked.

"Why not?" he said. "They have no use for a poet." He paused. "Actually," he added ruefully, "they have no use for anyone who doesn't kill, maim, and torture."

"Maybe you should think about coming over to our side," I suggested.

"I can't," he said. "Men despise anything that's different."

"More propaganda," I said. "A few hundred miles from here is a cyborg lady with more firepower built into her fingers than one of your battleships possesses. She has artificial eyes, and when the war's over, she's probably going to trade her real legs in for prosthetic ones. And yet, she's fighting for our side. She wouldn't be doing that if we ostracized her, would she?"

"No," he admitted. "No, I suppose not."

"Of course not," I said. "Maybe I ought to tell you Man's side of the story."

"I've got all night," he said.

So I explained to him about how Thomas Jefferson wrote the Magna Carta, and Pope John XXIII freed the Martian colonies, and I quoted as much of Babe Ruth's Gettysburg Address as I could remember, and pretty soon he started asking me more questions, and we talked clear through to the morning.

And when the sun finally rose over Henry V, he reached out, shook my hand, and announced that he saw now how he'd been brainwashed and that he was going to spend the rest of his life fighting for liberty, freedom, capitalism, and higher property values.

We spent the next couple of days together, just getting to know each other. He recited some of his poetry to me, but it didn't rhyme or have much of a beat to it, and hardly any of it was about war or women, which is just about all that's really worth writing about. I spent the rest of the time telling him about how a free society works, and why we on the Frontier don't pay taxes or vote or spend too much time worrying about the finer points of the law.

"But if you voluntarily give up your franchise, what is the point of fighting for the Commonwealth?" he asked.

"I'm not fighting for the Commonwealth, or the Monarchy, or whatever we're calling it this week," I said. "I'm fighting because you guys invaded the Henrys, and that's where I spend most of my quality drinking time."

He frowned -- as much as a member of his race can frown, anyway -- and tried again: "How is your government to survive if everyone flees to the Frontier and refuses to pay taxes?"

I could have explained that it just meant we'd conquer a few more alien races and tax 'em up to the eyebrows, but somehow I sensed that wouldn't elicit the reaction I wanted. So instead I told him that for every one of us who was bold enough to emigrate to the Frontier, there were millions who stayed behind.

"It's just simple logic," I explained. "If there weren't enough people to pay taxes, they'd either incorporate some of the Frontier, or they'd raise taxes."

"That sounds very reasonable."

"It is -- unless you're the guy whose taxes they raise."

"And if you are?"

I shrugged. "Then you head off for the Frontier and probably open up a new world or two, and eventually the government takes it over, and that's the way the galaxy gets itself civilized."

"There's a mathematical purity to that, isn't there?" he said. "I mean, a certain amount of dissatisfaction is always bound to occur, but as your society is set up it simply leads to expansion, which in turn leads to more government intrusion and hence to more dissatisfaction and more expansion..." He paused. "Why, at this rate, Man should be assimilating Andromeda and the other nearby galaxies any day now!"

"Do you find that threatening?" I asked.

"No," he said. "I find it exciting!"

"Your race has no notion of manifest destiny?"

Well, he didn't know what the term meant, so I had to explain it to him.

"What a wonderful notion: manifest destiny!" he exclaimed. "I like it. My race thinks only in terms of gaining a few systems here and there, and enjoying a little bloodletting. Nothing as grandiose as your race."

Well, before long he'd made up his mind to come to the Outpost and claim asylum. I explained to him that there was no one here who could grant it to him, and that if he really wanted asylum he'd have to go into the Monarchy and find some government agency that specialized in defectors, and that given the number of government agencies we had, that could take a couple of lifetimes. I finally convinced him to just come on back to the Outpost with me and get used to Men and freedom and unfettered capitalism in slow easy stages.

We decided to leave the next morning, but as I was cooking us up some eggs and hash browns prior to taking off we suddenly found ourselves under attack from Wordsmith's countrymen.

"Let's get the hell out of here!" I said, running to the ship.

"Watch out, Max!" he cried.

I looked around and saw an alien infantryman aiming his pulse rifle right at me. I knew as sure as I'm sitting here that I had about half a second of life left to me -- and then, just as he fired, Wordsmith leaped in front of me and took the energy ball that I would have sworn had my name on it.

I went a little bit crazy then. I killed the alien with my screecher, then put a gun in each of my three hands and started walking the countryside, screaming at them to come out of hiding and face me. A couple of dozen actually did, and I blew them away, ignoring the few minor flesh wounds they managed to inflict on me. When I'd finally killed them all, I went back to the ship and gave Wordsmith a decent human-type burial.

He was my friend, maybe the best friend I ever had. Lord knows he wasn't much to look at, and I never did understand his poetry, but he took a shot meant for me, and that's more than any Man ever did.

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The Earth Mother wiped away a tear. "I think that's beautiful," she said.

"So do I," said the Cyborg de Milo. "But I went over to that encampment after I cleaned out the city, and I didn't find any two dozen dead aliens out in the countryside."

"Maybe their companions took 'em back and buried 'em," said Max. "Or maybe the sunlight disintegrated 'em."

"I notice it didn't disintegrate the six hundred I killed," she said dryly.

"Look, that's my story!" snapped Max. "If you don't want to believe it, that's fine with me!"

The Cyborg de Milo shrugged. "It makes no difference to me."

Max turned to the Bard. "Well? You gonna use it?"

"In the absence of a contradictory version, I suppose I don't have much of a choice," he replied. "Besides, Wordsmith makes a wonderful metaphor."

"He wasn't a metaphor," said Max. "He was the ugliest sonuvabitch you ever saw -- and the most loyal friend."

"I suppose you can't ask much more than that," allowed the Bard.

"_I_ sure can't," said Max.

Big Red and Gravedigger Gaines entered just then.

"You just missed one of Max's stories," the Bard informed them.

"How can we ever live with the disappointment?" said Gaines. "Two beers, Reg!"

The two of them walked up to the bar.

"The war over?" Big Red asked me.

"Looks like," I said.

"Did we win?"

"As far as I can tell."

"Well, then I guess it was worth it."

"What was?"

"What I had to do to get off Henry IV."

"You going to tell us about it?" I asked.

"Try to stop him," said Max wryly.

"I'm kind of dry. Let me just take a little sip of this first," said Big Red, lifting the huge stein of beer to his lips and downing the entire contents in a single swallow. He wiped his mouth off with his sleeve. "Boy, I've missed that!"

"If that's all you've missed, you got some serious problems, son," said the Reverend Billy Karma.

"We're not all as single-minded and sex-starved as you, Reverend," replied Big Red.

"Sure you are," answered Billy Karma. "You're just not all as honest and forthcoming about it."

"I wonder if God's had any second thoughts about letting you be the one to state His case," said the Gravedigger.

"Not a chance," replied the Reverend Billy Karma. He held up the second and third fingers of his gold hand and pressed them tightly together. "Me and God are just like _this_."

"It must be a comfort," said the Gravedigger ironically.

"It does make the occasional sexual rejection more bearable," admitted the Reverend.

"_Occasional?_" said Sinderella, laughing aloud.

"Let thy women be silent in the House of the Lord'," quoted Billy Karma.

"In case it's escaped your notice, this isn't the House of the Lord," said Sinderella.

"If _I'm_ here it is."

"He just wants the women to be silent so they can't say No to him," said Max.

"Well, I'll be damned!" said Billy Karma. "You know, I never thought of that!"

"Somehow I'm not surprised," said Max.

"Are you _ever_ going to tell us how you escaped from Henry IV?" the Earth Mother asked Big Red.

"When everyone else stops talking," he answered.

"You could run smack-dab into Eternity before that happens," suggested Catastrophe Baker. "Just step right in and tell your story."

"Okay," said Big Red. "I suppose I might as well."