

\*A Wedding Ring in the Wedding Rings\*

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I hadn't planned to wind up in the Wedding Rings at all (said Sinderella). But after I wiped out a trio of ships that were headed to Henry VII, I decided that it might not be a bad idea to hide in the Rings until they found something better to do than hunt me down.

But a bunch of them found her even among all that space garbage (said Mayflower), and I headed out to try to rescue her.

To assist me (Sinderella corrected him).

To assist her (Mayflower agreed). The problem is, it's damned hard to find a ship that's hiding in the Rings. I mean, hell, each Ring must have close to a billion chunks of rock and ice in it, maybe more, and by the time I'd gotten there they'd crippled her ship.

Well, to tell the truth (said Sinderella), I think it's more likely that a rock hit the ship. But the result was the same: none of the controls worked, and the structural integrity of the hull was compromised.

In other words (put in Mayflower), she was losing air. Her radio still worked, though, so she was able to tell me that she was in Anne Boleyn, the second Wedding Ring. It became a race between me and the aliens to see who would find her first. I had her fire a couple of flares, but it's a mighty big ring and they were mighty small flares, and I couldn't spot them. Then I finally got the idea of having her climb into her spacesuit and leave the ship after overloading the nuclear pile. I figured when it blew I'd be able to pinpoint the explosion, pick her up, and fly us both to safety.

Well, the explosion was visible, all right. I think you could have seen it from the surface of Henry VIII. Having my instruments get a bearing on it was easy, but --

But we had another problem (interjected Sinderella). I wasn't all that far away from my ship when it blew, and the force of the explosion sent me rocketing backward at a phenomenal rate of speed. I knew if I hit any of the rocks I was done for -- and no sooner had I figured that out when I saw that I was on a collision course with a huge chunk of ice. I jettisoned about half my air supply, which acted as a jet and allowed me to miss the iceberg -- but I was still racing through space in the middle of all these rocks, and I couldn't use the jet trick again without asphyxiating myself. Then a tiny rock crushed my suit's radio, so I couldn't keep in contact with Nicodemus any longer, and I figured I was done for.

But my sensors had spotted her (said Mayflower), and I started maneuvering through Anne Boleyn, slowly closing the gap between us. After about ten minutes I got within sight of her, and was getting ready to bring her aboard when she pulled out her laser pistol and began firing it wildly -- or so I thought. You see, I had told her to fire it at my ship's nose when she spotted me; it couldn't do the ship any harm, and it would help me pinpoint her location.

But she was firing about ten degrees to the left and above me, and since she was only a few hundred yards away, I couldn't figure out what was wrong -- and then, at the last moment, I realized that she was trying to warn me that there was an alien ship coming up on my left. I turned my laser cannon on it just a second or two before it could fire its pulse torpedo at me, and I blew it to pieces. This caused even more problems for Sinderella, because some of the pieces started flying straight toward her. Then I saw what I hoped would be her salvation, and I fired a laser beam at this huge rock, almost an asteroid, that was fast approaching her.

She immediately grasped the possibilities, and instead of trying to avoid it, she carefully maneuvered

herself so that she could land on it. It didn't have much gravity, but it was moving fast enough so that as long as she stayed on what I'll call the front end of it, she wasn't going to get thrown off.

The rock protected her from all the flying debris, and I was finally able to maneuver my ship right next to it.

I never thought an airlock could look like paradise (added Sinderella), but this one sure did once Nicodemus opened the hatch. He was standing inside it, and he threw me a line. Well, he tried to throw me a line, but since there was no gravity it didn't work very well. Finally he just signaled for me to push off from the rock and aim myself in his direction. I was scared to death, but I did what he wanted, and a moment later I felt his hand close on my arm.

We spent the next two days hunting down the remaining ships that had come after me. They were good, those pilots, but my Nicodemus is superb, and eventually we found them and blew them away. Then it was just a matter of getting out of the Rings and returning here.

As man and wife (said Mayflower proudly). Show 'em your ring, Honey.

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"Who married you?" asked Max.

"I did," said Nicodemus Mayflower.

"You ain't no preacher," said the Reverend Billy Karma.

"But it's my ship, and a ship's captain has always been able to perform marriages."

"Pity," said Billy Karma. "I'd have presided over one hell of a shindig for a not-unseemly fee."

"Yeah," said Mayflower. "But you'd probably have kissed the bride, and then I'd have had to kill you."

"Good God, why?" demanded Billy Karma.

Sinderella smiled sweetly. "I'd have insisted."

"It was lucky you had a wedding ring handy," remarked Max. "Not a lot of people go to war prepared for that particular eventuality."

"Actually, I didn't," said Mayflower. "But after we wiped out the alien ships and decided to get married, I took the busted radio on her spacesuit apart and made the ring she's wearing from its innards." He smiled. "Now every time she looks at it, she'll remember how we got together, and that as long as we're a team nothing can defeat us."

"I find that a noble and touching sentiment," said the Gravedigger.

"Truth to tell, we just came back to make sure we'd won the war," said Mayflower. "We'll have another drink or two, and then we're off on our honeymoon."

"Where are you going?" asked the Earth Mother.

"Who cares, as long as we're together," replied Sinderella.

"I hear Serengeti is a great planet," offered Big Red.

"The zoo world?" said Mayflower.

"Yeah. Species from all over the galaxy, all of 'em roaming free."

"If he can't think of something better to look at on his honeymoon than a bunch of animals, I married the wrong man," said Sinderella.

"Now that you mention it," said Billy Karma, "you did marry the wrong man, and there's still time to get out of it and run away with me."

"Now I know how we Christianized so many alien worlds and races," said Big Red. "The man just refuses to take No for an answer."

"You know, now that I come to think of it, I ain't never run into an alien evangelist," said Baker. "I guess their gods ain't into recruitin' as much as ours is."

"How about you Injuns?" asked Max. "What's your God like?"

"Beats me," said Sitting Horse.

"You don't know?"

"He doesn't make house calls," said Crazy Bull.

"Could be worse," said Max. "Could look just like Billy Karma, the way he thinks ours does."

The Earth Mother looked from Billy Karma to Catastrophe Baker and back again. "It's hard to believe you were both created in God's image." She paused. "If He's really God, He probably looks more like Catastrophe Baker."

"What makes you think so?" demanded the Reverend.

"Because I'd like to think I worship a God Who has good taste," replied the Earth Mother. Then she added: "Though probably She looks more like Sinderella or Silicon Carny."

"Are you gonna start that sexist bullshit again?" said Billy Karma.

"There's only one sexist in this room, and it's not me," said the Earth Mother. Then she shrugged. "Well, maybe five or six." She looked at the painting of Sally Six-Eyes that hung over the bar as if seeing it for the first time. "Including Tomahawk."

Little Mike Picasso grinned. "See? I told you you should have let me be the one to paint Sally for the Outpost."

"Would it have been any less sexist if you'd painted her?" I asked.

"Probably not," he admitted. "But she'd have looked a lot better. Right off the bat, I'd have gotten rid of four of her eyes."

"But that's not the way she looks," I said.

"Art doesn't have to mirror Nature," said Little Mike. "Sometimes it improves Nature instead."

"Isn't that dishonest?" asked the Bard.

"You're taking everyone's word about what happened in the war without checking them out," replied

Little Mike. "Isn't that dishonest?"

"Apples and oranges," said the Bard. "History doesn't try to improve Nature."

"No -- but what you're doing improves History."

"I'm just making it a little more interesting, so it won't be stuck in a musty library, or a musty computer, and only read by academics and historians," replied the Bard defensively.

"I thought academics just pontificated," said Max. "You mean they actually read?"

"On rainy nights, when there are no cocktail parties," said the Bard.

"You're ducking the subject," said Little Mike. "I still want to know what's the moral difference between my painting Sally with only two eyes and you writing about something that didn't take place."

"You're changing what she looks like," said the Bard. "That's dishonest. I'm just embellishing what Catastrophe and Hurricane and the others tell me. That's simply literary license."

"But what if what they tell you is a lie?"

"Why would anyone lie to an historian?"

"Maybe because it makes them seem more heroic," suggested Little Mike. "Or maybe they lie for the sheer love of lying."

"Highly unlikely," said the Bard uncomfortably.

"Let's put it to the test," said Little Mike. "I'll tell you the story of what I did during the war. Some of it might be true and some might not be. When I'm done, you tell me what you're going to write and why."

"Fair enough," said the Bard, accepting the challenge.