

The 73-Hour Rasslin' Match

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Truth to tell (began Big Red), I was doing pretty well for the first couple of days I was on Henry IV. I knew Hurricane Smith and his lady were also on the planet, causing havoc a few thousand miles away, which took a little of the pressure off me.

My method was pretty effective. Sneak up behind them in the dead of night and stab 'em before they knew what hit them. I might have kept it up for another few weeks when my knife hit something metal -- I still don't know what it was, maybe an ammunition belt slung around his neck. Anyway, the blade broke off with a loud snap, which wasn't anywhere near as loud as the alien's screams. A squad of about a dozen alien soldiers showed up within seconds, and suddenly I was staring down the muzzles of one hell of a lot of alien guns.

"He's the one who's been decimating us!" cried the leader. "I want him alive!"

I waited just long enough for his words to register with his troops, and then, figuring no one would disobey orders by killing me, I launched myself at the nearest of them. I'm no Catastrophe Baker, but I was giving a pretty good account of myself, felling aliens right and left, when one of them cracked me on the head with a laser rifle.

When I woke up, I was in a damp underground cell, and one of my arms was chained to a wall. Facing me across the cell was another human, chained to his wall.

"How are you feeling?" he asked me.

"I've been better," I admitted. "Where are we?"

"Under the arena."

"They've got an arena?" I asked. "They didn't strike me as all that sporting."

"It was built by a long-dead race," said my companion. "But our captors have put it to good use."

He looked familiar, and I kept staring at him, and finally I knew where I'd seen him before. "Hey, aren't you Backbreaker Barnes?" I asked.

"Yeah, that's me."

"I've seen you fight a couple of times," I said. "I still remember the night you wiped up the floor with Meyer the Maimer."

"One of my better bouts," he agreed.

"It was pretty even for a few minutes," I said. "Then you seemed to go berserk."

"The sonuvabitch made a comment about my mother, and I just plumb lost my temper."

"Insulted her, huh?" I said.

"No," answered Barnes. "He said she was a bright, good-looking woman and a fine cook." He paused and grimaced. "I _hated_ my mother."

"Well, I knew he said _something_."

He stared at me. "I think I recognize you too," he said at last. "Didn't I see you knock one out of the park against Iron-Arm McPherson?"

"That was a long time ago," I said.

"I remember it like it was just yesterday," said Barnes. "You're ... damn, I can't remember your name."

"Rasputin Raskolnikov Secretariat Lenin Man o'War Trotsky at your service," I said. "You can call me Big Red."

"Big Red!" he repeated. "That was it. I don't know how you remember your official handle."

"It took me a few years to learn it, I can tell you that," I said.

"Well, Big Red," he said, "I wish I could say I was glad to see you, but the truth of the matter is that I wish they hadn't captured you."

"Thanks for the kind thought," I said. "But at least we've got each other to talk to."

"Not for long, alas," said Barnes.

"Oh?"

He nodded his head sadly. "Yeah, I'm afraid one of us is gonna have to kill the other."

"Why? I'm not mad at you, and you don't look exceptionally annoyed with me."

"That's got nothing to do with it," he said. "The aliens get their amusement by taking us to the arena and having us fight against each other."

"What if we refuse?"

"Then they'll kill us both."

"Has this been going on long?" I asked.

"About two weeks," said Barnes. "Well, sixteen days to be exact."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because they took seventeen of us prisoner."

"You've been killing a comrade a day?" I asked.

"Don't look so disapproving," he said. "If I don't kill them, the aliens will. At least this way I'm still alive, and there's a chance, however small, that one day I'll be able to claim my just and terrible vengeance."

"What if a participant fakes being dead?" I asked.

"They toss the body into the river that runs through the city," he said. "It's filled with carnivorous fish can take all the flesh off your bones. If you're not dead when they throw you in, you will be about ten seconds later."

"I see."

"I'll make it as quick and painless as I can," he promised me.

"I appreciate the thought," I said. "But I was kind of planning on making it quick and painless for you."

"For me?" he said with a laugh. "I'm Backbreaker Barnes!"

"And I'm Big Red," I said. I was going to throw back my head and laugh like Barnes did, but I had this feeling that nothing would come out, so I just stared at him.

"Look," he said. "If you put up a fight, I'm going to have to soften you up for the kill. I'll probably have to break a couple of arms and legs, and maybe bust your ribcage with a bear hug. It'd go a lot easier with you if you'd just let me give your head a sharp twist and be done with it." He paused. "I swear I'll always honor your memory."

"It's not that I don't want to oblige you, Backbreaker," I said. "It's just that as an athlete, I was taught to always give my best. The paying customers deserve it."

"We don't have any paying customers," he pointed out. "Just godless aliens."

"Just the same, I'm going to have to give it my best shot."

"It's your decision."

"And if you feel yourself weakening," I continued, "let me know and I'll end it just as painlessly as I can."

"What do you know about killing blows?" he said contemptuously.

"I'm a quick study," I said. "Especially when my life is on the line."

"You ever do any freehand fighting, professionally or in college?" he asked.

"No," I replied. "I wrestled for a couple of semesters to keep in shape between track and baseball seasons."

"Yeah?" he said. Suddenly he smiled. "You know, maybe we could put on a real show for these bastards."

"What have you got in mind?"

"If we take turns throwing each other around the ring, and try some real crowd-pleasing holds, maybe they'll like it so much that they'll want an encore ... and they can't have an encore if one of us is dead."

"What the hell," I said. "It's worth a try. And it beats trying to kill each other."

"I wish we weren't chained to the walls, so we could practice a bit," said Barnes.

"Well, maybe we can just discuss it," I said. "You know, kind of create a scenario, so we know who throws who when."

"Why not?" he said enthusiastically.

So we fell to it, choreographing every move, every throw, every hold. We didn't want to hurt each other, so we devised ways to make the aliens think we were gouging out each other's eyes and banging each other's heads against the ring support posts when we were just pretending to do so.

We figured we could keep it up for maybe an hour or two, at which time we were dead sure that the aliens would be having such a good time that they'd insist on a rematch, which meant the two combatants

would have to be kept alive for another day.

Well, they gave us some slop to eat for dinner -- as food it wasn't much, but as gruel goes it was probably better than most -- and we fell asleep shortly afterward. Then it was morning, and they unhooked us from the walls and dragged us up a long ramp, and pretty soon we found ourselves in the middle of a huge arena, with maybe a thousand aliens in attendance.

One alien walked into the middle of the ring with us (I call it a ring, but it was on ground level and didn't have any ropes), and signaled the crowd to be quiet. Then he turned to us.

"You have no weapons, and there are no rules. The survivor gets taken back to his cell." He backed away from us. "Let the battle commence!"

I charged Barnes, and let him throw me with a flying mare. The aliens had never seen anything like that, and they screamed their approval.

I got to my feet, closed with him, and gave him a hip toss. He flew across the ring, and the crowd went wild.

Well, we spent about an hour taking turns throwing each other all the hell over the ring. Whenever we'd get tired, one of us would put a headlock or a body scissors on the other. We'd scream like we were in terrible pain, but actually it didn't hurt at all, and it gave us a chance to rest.

"How long do you figure we're got to keep this up?" I asked during one of the times he was giving me a fake bear hug.

"Beats me," he said. "I was hoping they'd have broken it up already."

They didn't show any sign of breaking us up, so we kept at it. By the fourth hour we'd run through all our choreography and started making things up as they occurred to us. I gave him a body slam, and he writhed in agony, so I knelt down to see if I'd actually broken anything.

"I'm fine," he whispered. "But I learned that if you land with your arms and legs splayed, it makes a hell of a noise and makes the crowd think you're all busted up."

"Let me try," I whispered, so he climbed painfully to his feet and slammed me, and it turned out he was dead right, and we spent the next half hour body-slamming each other.

The crowd started getting bored, so I invented the piledriver, and he invented the figure-four grapevine, and I invented the stepover toehold, and he invented the claw, and I invented the forearm smash to the jaw, and he invented the rabbit punch, and the next time we looked up it was morning again and we'd been at it for a full day and night.

"How are you holding up?" he asked as he applied a half-Nelson to me.

"I'm getting a little hungry," I said.

"Well," said Barnes, "if you're hungry, and I'm hungry, then they must be getting hungry. All we have to do is outlast 'em."

We kept at it another day and night, and by now the audience was getting kind of restless, either from pangs of hunger or unanswered calls of nature. But they had also become incredibly partisan, so much so that when Barnes threw me into the second row some of the aliens began pummeling me and sticking me with sharp objects until I could get back into the ring.

"They hate me!" I whispered as I invented the hammerlock and put it on him.

"Half of them were booing me when I tossed you out there," he said.

"Really?" I said. "Let me throw you into them and let's see what happens."

So I did, and what happened is that the half of the crowd that hadn't bothered me began hitting and kicking Barnes.

"You know," I said when he'd crawled back into the ring and we were taking turns pretending to stomp on each other's fingers, "there's a hell of a profit in this sport we're inventing. I think these aliens would rather watch us than fight the war."

"You've got a point," he said, grabbing my foot and twisting it. As I fell to the floor he said, "I figure we've been going at it for almost two and a half days. I don't know about you, but I'm going to need to visit a bathroom pretty soon now."

"I don't think they'll let us leave," I said, pretending to stick a thumb in his eye.

"We'll never know if we don't ask," he said, staggering over to the announcer. He jabbered at the alien, who seemed to consider what he said, then entered the ring.

"The combatants will take a ten-minute nourishment break," he said.

We were led off to the dungeon from which we had come.

"I don't want a nourishment break!" complained Barnes.

"I know," I said, "but it probably sounds better than saying he was stopping the fight so you could take a shit."

We were back ten minutes later, and we went at it tooth and nail, but truth to tell we were running out of inventions, and I knew we couldn't keep it up much longer, especially since we hadn't had any sleep.

When we'd been at it for just under 73 hours, I collapsed as Barnes swung at my head and missed by a good two inches. He knelt down next to me and pretended to pummel me.

"You got to make it look better," he said. "Everyone in the first two rows has got to know I missed you."

"Hell, the force of the wind from a missed blow could knock me down right about now," I answered. "I don't know how much longer I can keep fighting, Backbreaker. Maybe you'd better snap my neck right now."

"We started together, and we're going to finish together," he said. He sneaked a look around while gnawing on my ear. "I got it," he said.

"What?"

"See that big box along the back wall?"

"What about it?" I asked.

"I think that controls all the lights in here," he said. "What if I was to throw you into the crowd, and while you were climbing onto your feet you swiped a burner or a blaster and blew the box away? We might escape in the confusion."

"How far do you think we could get, two unarmed men on an alien world?" I asked, bringing my knee up into his stomach.

"There's a bunch of corridors below the arena, on the dungeon level," he said as he doubled over. "One of them leads outside the walls of the city, pretty near where you left your ship."

"It just might work," I agreed.

So, with that, he got up, grabbed me by the hair, lifted me high over his head, and threw me into the crowd. I landed three rows deep, and managed to get my hands on a burner as I was disentangling myself.

I fired it at the box, and the arena was plunged into total darkness. Suddenly I felt Barnes' hand on my arm, tugging me to my left.

"This way!" he whispered.

I followed him, and a minute later we were racing down the underground corridor. Some of the aliens tried to chase us, but even after 73 hours in the ring we were too fast for them.

We made it to my ship, and here I am.

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"So where's Backbreaker Barnes?" asked Max. "I thought you two were going to go into the phony rasslin' business."

"He said he felt too much like an actor and not enough like an athlete, so we parted ways," explained Big Red with a shrug. "But I still think there's money to be made staging rasslin' matches (which I prefer to think of as insincere rather than phony), and I aim to get rich proving it as soon as I find the right partner." He looked over at Catastrophe Baker. "How about you?"

"I still got a few years of heroing left in this old body," answered Baker, "but I appreciate the offer, and I'll sure consider it once I'm too old to rescue innocent damsels from fates more interesting than death."

"You really think people would waste their money watching phony wrestling?" asked the Gravedigger.

"Sure, why not?" responded Big Red.

"But sooner or later they'd figure out that it was all an act."

"Hell, people pay to go to the theater, don't they? Are you telling me they really think that's Hamlet up there?"

"It's not the same thing."

"You're right about that," said Big Red. "You go to a play two nights in a row, you know exactly how the second performance is going to go. But come to my new profession two nights in a row and you've got no idea what you might see the second night."

"Well," said the Gravedigger, "maybe aliens would pay to be flim-flammed like that, but not real Men."

"It's been my experience that it's easier to flim-flam real Men than just about anything else in the galaxy," said the Earth Mother.

"Amen," added Sinderella devoutly.

"Did someone mention flim-flamming?" said Bet-a-World O'Grady, entering the Outpost.

"Reg, give the man a drink," I said. "How did it go?"

"Not too bad, all things considered," said O'Grady, walking up to the bar.

"What particular things do we have to consider?" asked Max in bored tones.

"Flim-flamming, of course," said O'Grady. "That's what everyone was talking about, right?"

"Some of us were just drinking quietly and hoping they'd all shut up and go away," said Max.

"It figures an alien took a shot meant for you," said the Reverend Billy Karma disgustedly. "No human being would be that stupid."

"Sometimes I'm amazed at how stupid human beings can be," said Max, staring straight at Billy Karma, who shifted uncomfortably in his chair for a moment and then pulled out his copy of the Good Book and buried his nose in it.

"So," said Catastrophe Baker to Bet-a-World O'Grady, "you got some particular insight about flim-flamming?"

"Tons of 'em," answered O'Grady.

"Care to share any of 'em with us?"

"How's about the most recent one?"

"Okay," said Baker, leaning back on his chair. "How about it?"