

## Big Red and the Aliens

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The tunnel was cold and damp, and it smelled like a sewer. Small alien animals scurried to and fro, and ugly alien insects clung to the ceiling. Big Red tried not to notice them.

He'd landed on Henry IV, well away from the main body of alien soldiers. Hurricane Smith had said to leave them for him, and he was more than happy to do so. His scanner found a prison in a deserted city halfway around the planet, and he landed near it with the intention of releasing any human prisoners who had been incarcerated there.

A mile from the city's walls he'd found the tunnel's exit. He'd come almost two miles now, and by his estimate he had to be near the center of the city. So far there'd only been two branches, neither of them any more promising than the main corridor.

It was possible, of course, that he'd walk for another couple of miles and find himself outside on the far side of the city, but he doubted it. The tunnel may have smelled like a sewer, but it wasn't constructed like one. It had to lead somewhere, and he was intent on following it to its end.

He proceeded another three hundred feet, and then the tunnel took a hard turn to the left. Twenty more feet and he came to a metal door.

He pushed against it. No luck. He tried to find a latch or handle to pull on. Nothing.

Finally he withdrew his laser and melted the door. Then he waited a few minutes so he wouldn't burn through his boots as he stepped over the molten slag.

He came to a ramp that led upward at a slight angle and followed it. Before he'd ascended halfway he heard alien voices, and he froze. He concentrated on the voices, but he couldn't differentiate them well enough to determine how many aliens were above him. He waited until he heard footsteps retreating, made sure his burner had recharged itself, and climbed silently to the top of the ramp.

Two aliens had their backs to him, and never knew what hit them. He pulled the corpses into a darkened area, then surveyed his surroundings.

Corridors jutted off in every direction. As he was trying to decide which one to follow, he heard a strong masculine voice singing a bawdy song about a young mutant maiden who had three of everything that could possibly be considered worthwhile.

He crept toward the voice, pistol in hand, peering into the darkness, ready for anything. The voice became louder (and the song even bawdier), and finally he emerged into a huge chamber surrounded by a number of prison cells. There were no doors on the cells, but he knew from the faint humming permeating the area that they were protected by a force field.

The voice had reached the point in the song where he had everything required to satisfy the mutant maiden grafted onto his body, and was just beginning the final verse when it stopped almost in mid-word.

"Watch yourself!" it said suddenly. "Everything's hot."

"I know," said Big Red. "Where are the controls?"

"On the far wall. Are you the advance party or the whole show?"

"The whole show," said Big Red, walking cautiously to the control box.

"Hey! I know you!"

Big Red turned and looked into the cell.

"I know you too!" he exclaimed. "You're Backbreaker Barnes! I saw you the night you fought for the title!"

"I wish you'd seen me on one of the nights I won," replied Barnes ruefully. "And you're the one they call the Quadruple Threat -- basketball, baseball, track, and ... and something else."

"Murderball," said Big Red. He indicated the control box. "Do you know if I can just melt this thing, or is it booby-trapped?"

"They're not expecting company. Go ahead and melt it."

Big Red fried the control box, which sparked and sputtered for a fraction of a second and then went dead.

Backbreaker Barnes walked to the front of his cell and cautiously extended his hand. When he didn't receive a shock, he smiled and stepped out into the corridor.

"I don't know what brought you here, but I'm mighty glad to see you. Big Red, isn't it?"

"Right. Are you the only one here?"

"I am now."

"What happened to the others?"

"I did."

"I don't understand."

"They captured about a dozen of us and locked us down here. Once or twice a day they'd drag two of us up to ground level, stick us in an arena, and make us fight to the death."

"You killed them all?"

"If I hadn't, the aliens would have. Those were the rules: two men went in, one came out. The first day I knocked Captain Mazurski out and refused to kill an unconscious man, so one of the aliens blew him away. The second day I got Mukande Nbolo so bloody and groggy he could barely stand up. I stopped fighting, even when they threatened me. I thought they were going to kill me for refusing an order, but instead they decided Nbolo was in no shape to fight again the next day so they shot him instead. After that I knew it was me or my opponent, that there was no way both fighters were ever going to be allowed to live, so I killed each of them as quickly and painlessly as possible."

"Well, I suppose I can't blame you for staying alive," said Big Red.

"It wasn't that hard," admitted Barnes. "I didn't have to fight anyone like, say, you." He stared thoughtfully at Big Red. "I wonder how you'd have done?"

"Let's be glad we'll never have to find out," said Big Red. "Now, how the hell do we get out of here?"

"The most direct way is straight up, but even if you loan me your screecher we're going to be outnumbered by hundreds to one. I suppose the best way is to go back the way you came."

"Right," said Big Red. "We'd better get going. I had to kill a couple of guards. For all I know, they're late calling in or reaching a checkpoint."

"Do you know the way back?" asked Barnes. "We were chained and blindfolded when they brought us here. The only way out I know is up through the arena."

"I'm pretty sure I can find it. I know it's on a lower level, and there were only a couple of branches the whole way."

"Okay, lead the way."

Big Red tossed him a sonic pistol. "Here, take this."

"Nice screecher," said Barnes admiringly. "Beautifully weighted."

"Believe it or not, I won it in a track meet."

"Are you still in shape?"

"I try to keep fit. Why?"

"That wasn't an academic question," said Barnes. "I just heard some footsteps coming in our direction. Let's get moving."

Big Red broke into a trot, his long, loping stride eating up ground as he descended to the tunnel level and began retracing his steps. Backbreaker Barnes, panting heavily, his muscular body built for strength rather than speed, followed as best he could. When Big Red pulled too far ahead, he slowed down so as not to lose contact with Barnes.

After a mile they stopped and listened for sounds of pursuit.

"I think they gave up," gasped Barnes.

"We'd better keep running anyway," said Big Red. "They can always signal ahead to others."

"How much farther have we got to go?"

"Maybe a mile and a half."

"I'm beat," said Barnes. "I can't run that far." Suddenly the sounds of footsteps and voices came to their ears. "They're going to catch us anyway," continued Barnes. "We might as well have it out right here."

"What are you talking about?" demanded Big Red.

"I'm undefeated. That's why they let me live." He took a fighting stance. "Besides, I like being the champion."

"Have you lost your mind?" said Big Red. "They're going to be here in another minute!"

"And they'll find me standing over your body."

Barnes dove for him, but Big Red was too quick. He sidestepped, and pushed Barnes head-first into a wall as he raced by. Barnes bellowed in pain and turned to face his opponent, but all he got for his

trouble were two quick kicks, one in the groin, the other to his left knee. He fell to the floor, cursing.

"I\_told\_you I played murderball," said Big Red.

The alien voices became louder.

"Help me up!" cried said Barnes, clutching his shattered kneecap. "They're almost here!"

"Give them my regards, Champ," said Big Red.

He started running again. He'd barely broken a sweat when he reached the safety of his ship and took off.