

\*Catastrophe Baker and the Dragon Queen\*

It was a couple of years ago (began Baker), and I was out on the Spiral Arm, doing a little mining in the Parnassus asteroid belt.

Well, I didn't do any actual digging or blasting -- I mean, hell, I wouldn't know raw plutonium from raw beef -- but I did hang out in the little Tradertown they set up on Parnassus II. Had a tavern, a lot like this one only smaller and without no high-quality work of art hanging over the bar, and there were some sleeping rooms, though I was between fortunes at the time and slept in my ship. Like all Tradertowns it had an assay office, and I figured that if I ever saw a miner approach the assay office before he stopped for a drink, he'd probably hit on something interesting, and I planned to make it my business to relieve him of his burden.

Which is how I wound up with thirty pounds of fissionable material. I don't know from fission, but I know it's worth its weight in prettier baubles, and I know you keep it locked in lead containers and don't spend overmuch time playing with it, and I decided that if the Monarchy paid well for it, the Canphorites and Setts and Domarians would probably pay even better. I was pretty well-known in the Arm by then, due to a series of unfortunate misunderstanding in which I was always the innocent party, and when I approached the miners who'd made the claim they just took one look at me and suddenly remembered that they had urgent business elsewhere. Well, all but one, anyway, and making wrong decisions in such matters is what you might call genetically self-limiting.

After I loaded the booty into my ship, I headed off for the Rim, where I figured to hold an informal little auction. I had to stop at the space station that orbited Bellabionda IX to refuel, and while I was sitting there sampling half a dozen different brandies, I suddenly felt the barrel of a screecher bury itself in the middle of my back. I would have turned and had harsh words with the gentleman who was at the other end of the weapon, but I also found my nose about half an inch from the business end of an ugly-looking burner. I chanced a pair of quick glances to my right and my left, and discovered things didn't look more promising in them directions.

Now, the guy facing me was almost as big as I was, which is pretty rare, at least in this universe, and I can't speak for noplac else. He had squinty eyes, and a couple of gold teeth, and he hadn't shaved in a mighty long time, and he hadn't washed in even longer than he hadn't shaved, and he kind of learned forward and said, "Catastrophe Baker, you took something that didn't belong to you."

"I've taken \_lots\_ of things that don't belong to me," I said right back at him. "That's what I do for a living."

"Yeah," he said, "but this particular thing belongs to the Dragon Queen, and she's charged me with conveying the fact that she's more than a little annoyed with you."

"Okay, you conveyed it," I said. "Now go away and let me finish drinking in peace."

The man with the gold teeth frowned. "I don't believe I'm getting through to you at all," he said. "You stole thirty pounds of prime plutonium from her, and she wants it back."

"There must be some mistake," I answered. "I stole \_my\_ plutonium off five miners in the Spiral Arm."

"Well, it's probably true that they owned the plutonium, but \_she\_ owns \_them\_."

I pondered that for a minute and finally said, "In my opinion it's miserly to own people \_and\_ fissionable material. Tell her she can keep the men (except for the one I removed from Nature's game plan) and I'll keep the plutonium."

Old Goldtooth kind of sighed and shrugged. "I just knew this was going to happen," he said unhappily. "I told her and told her that a man like you was never going to give her what she wanted just because we threatened to rip out your eyes and cut off your ears and pull your arms and legs from their sockets. I explained that even after we roasted you over a slow fire and put slime spiders in your ears and started extracting your vertebrae one by one that you wouldn't tell us what we wanted to know."

"Since we're both agreed on that," I said, "what do you plan to do instead?"

"Beats the hell out of me," he admitted. "Maybe we'd just better take you to her and let her decide."

"Couldn't we torture him just a little?" asked the guy who was poking the screecher in my back. "Just for fun?"

Another sigh from Goldtooth. "No," he said after some serious consideration. "You know what happened to the last four or five prisoners I let you play with."

"I got carried away," came the petulant answer. "It won't happen again."

"That's what you said last time."

"How about if I just castrate him?" said the guy with the screecher. "Won't stop him from talking, and if she decides to torture him herself, he'll still be 99% whole."

"Stupidest suggestion I ever heard," replied Goldtooth. He turned to me. "You have to forgive him," he said apologetically. "He's very young. He just doesn't realize that these Dragon Queens always have their motors running."

Well, truth to tell, I hadn't ever encountered a Dragon Queen. But I'd seen my share of Pirate Queens, which in my long experience could always be identified by their lustful natures, their soul-destroying greed, and their proud, arrogant bosoms, and I figured if Dragon Queens were related to Pirate Queens, or were even some kind of regional offshoot, that maybe I'd fallen out of the frying pan and into the featherbed, to coin what I had every reason to hope was a new and accurate expression.

"So should I put the manacles on him?" asked one of the others.

Goldtooth turned to me. "If we don't shackle you, do you promise not to try to escape or overpower us?"

"You have my word as a gentleman," I told him.

"Get the manacles!" he hollered.

Which is what they did, and which is how I was led into the Dragon Queen's presence a couple of days later, when we finally landed on Terlingua.

We were in an audience chamber that could have housed half a dozen athletic events. The doorways were all different shapes, as if most of them were made to be used by aliens. The walls kept changing colors, and there was a mural maybe 50 yards square painted on the ceiling that I'll swear was never painted by any human.

Now, you people don't know me, so you don't know that I ain't much given to exaggeration, but take my word for it: the Dragon Queen was the most beautiful female I had ever seen in a lifetime of admiring female critters of almost every race and species.

Her hair shone like spun gold. Her eyes were the blue of the clearest lagoon. Her lips were a brilliant red, and moist as all get-out. And one look told me that if she was a typical Dragon Queen, then Dragon Queens made Pirate Queens look like schoolgirls from the neck down.

She'd been poured into a skin-tight metallic dress. She had breasts that just out-and-out defied gravity, and the tiniest waist, and smooth, silken thighs, and I tried real hard not to pay much attention to the fact that she was toting even more weapons than I tended to carry myself.

"Have you got a stiff neck?" she asked after a couple of moments in a voice that was a little bit harsher than I expected from someone that beautiful.

Well, that wasn't quite where I was stiff, if you catch my delicate and subtle meaning, but I assured her that my neck was just fine.

"Then look at my face," she commanded.

I did so, and suddenly spotted something I'd missed the first time around, which was that she was wearing a golden tiara, and smack-dab in the middle of it was the biggest, most perfect ruby I'd ever seen.

"Miss Dragon Queen, ma'am," I said, "I hope it don't embarrass you, but I have to declare that you are unquestionably the most beautiful woman I have seen in all my wanderings across the length and breadth of the galaxy, to say nothing of its height and depth."

"You may call me Zenobia," she said, and now her voice was more like a purr than a snarl.

That didn't surprise me none, because I'd met eleven Pirate Queens in my day, and eight of them were called Zenobia, and I figured that if you were an exquisitely-built young woman possessed of unbridled lust and an overwhelming desire to conquer the galaxy, Zenobia was the name that just naturally appealed to you.

"It's a name fit for a Dragon Queen," I assured her.

She stared at me through half-lowered eyelids. "You interest me, Catastrophe Baker," she said. Suddenly she snapped to attention, which produced an effect most men would pay good money to see. "But first, to business. You stole 30 pounds of my plutonium. I want it back."

"What does a pretty little thing like you need with enough plutonium to blow up half dozen star systems?" I asked.

She smiled. "I plan to blow up half a dozen star systems," she said.

"Just for the hell of it?" I asked, because you never knew what Pirate Queens might do when they felt irritable, and I figured Dragon Queens weren't much different.

"There are six warlords out here on the Rim. As my first step in the conquest of the galaxy, I plan to assimilate their empires."

"Well, why didn't you say so in the first place?" I said. "Hell, assimilating empires is something I've always had a hankering to do. I think we should become partners."

"You're hardly in a position to make demands!" she snapped.

I held up my hands. "You mean these things?" I asked, indicating the manacles. "I just let them put 'em on

me so I could meet you. There ain't never been a chain that could hold Catastrophe Baker."

And so saying, I flexed my muscles and gave one mighty yank, and the manacles came apart. Four or five of her bodyguards -- did I forget to tell you she had a small army of bodyguards? -- jumped me, but I just leaned down, straightened up, and sent 'em flying in all directions.

She stared at me, wide-eyed, and I could tell that she was torn between yelling "Off with his head!" and "Off with his clothes!"

"I may have even more uses for you than I thought at first glance," she said at last.

"Then we're partners?"

"Why not?" she said with a shrug that went a lot farther and lasted a lot longer than your standard shrug.

"Well, if we're partners," I continued, "I'd sure be interested in knowing why you're a Dragon Queen rather than a Pirate Queen."

"And so you shall, Catastrophe Baker," she said, walking over and taking me by the hand. She smelled good enough to eat. "Come with me."

She led me to a small door I hadn't seen, since it was hiding behind a bunch of her bodyguards. They stepped aside, and she ordered the door to open, and it did, and suddenly we were in a bedroom that was probably a little smaller than the Navy's flagship and had a few less windows than the governor's palace (the old palace, not the new, fortified one), and right in the middle of it was a bed that could have accommodated a dozen Dragon Queens and still have some room left over for their gentleman friends.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"It's right impressive," I acknowledged. "But it still don't explain why you're a Dragon Queen."

"It's a result of inbreeding and radiation and genes gone astray," she said, putting a hand behind my neck and pulling my head down to hers.

"Looks to me like every gene is sitting right where it's supposed to be for optimum effect," I opined.

"I'm a genetic sport," she whispered, and suddenly her breath became real warm. "When I get hot, I get hot! I'm like a dragon in that respect."

She smiled, her eyes gleamed and flashed, and twin needles of smoke and fire shot out from beneath her lips.

She directed my gaze down south of her waist where still more smoke was escaping.

"You see?" she said. "I'm so constituted that I can't hide my desire for you, Catastrophe Baker."

And sure enough, she couldn't.

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"Just a second," interrupted Three-Gun Max. "Are you trying to tell us that she actually was smoking down there?"

"That's right," said Baker.

"I don't believe it!"

"\_I\_ was there," said Baker pugnaciously. "Were \_you\_?"

"No, but if you're gonna tell us you took her to bed without getting some real important part of your masculine anatomy fried to a crisp, I'm gonna have a hard time believing any part of this story."

Baker glared at him until he kind of shrunk into himself, and then the huge man looked around the room, his hand kind of toying with the pearl handle of his burner. "Has anyone else got a problem with my story?"

Nobody said a word, and finally he relaxed and began talking again.

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As a matter of fact (continued Baker), I never had a chance to find out just how hot a number she was, figuratively or literally, because at just that instant we heard a huge commotion outside the bedroom, and then there were a bunch of screams, and I could hear the hum of burners and the whine of screechers and the report of bullets.

"The warlords!" she cried. "They've found out about the plutonium and launched a preemptive strike!"

"That ain't no problem," I said. "Give me a couple of them weapons you're wearing and I'll send 'em packing."

She tossed me a couple of guns, and I walked to the door, opened it, and gently announced my presence by blowing away eight or nine men who were wearing uniforms that were different from her bodyguards.

Then I looked across the room and saw six men all done up in fancy-looking tunics with rows and rows of medals on their chests, and I knew right away that these had to be the six warlords, so I picked up one of their bigger henchmen, twisted his head around a couple of times until he stopped squirming, and used him as a shield as I began crossing the room.

"Be careful!" the Dragon Queen cried out.

"Hell, there's only six of 'em -- and they're little ones at that!" I hollered back.

Twelve or fifteen warriors jumped me, but I just shrugged 'em off. Another one grabbed my leg, and I kicked him clear across the room; he hit the far wall on the fly, which has to constitute some kind of record if I just knew what record book to report it to.

When I was maybe fifty feet away from the warlords, I raised the body over my head and hurled it at 'em. Four of 'em went down in a tangled heap. The other two reached for their weapons, but I was too fast for 'em, and after I broke their arms they kind of fell to the floor, and having nothing better to do they started kissing my feet and begging for mercy.

I looked around and saw that the rest of the invaders were either dead or at least not in any mood to continue the fight, and then the Dragon Queen raced over to me and threw her arms around me and gave me one hell of a passionate kiss.

(See this here black tooth? That's what caused it. Burned the enamel top to bottom. I really ought to replace it with a gold one, but it's almost all I got to remember her by.)

Anyway, after she ordered her bodyguards to drag the warlords and the surviving soldiers off to the

dungeons and have a little fun with them, she turned back to me and said, kind of sultry-like, "Catastrophe Baker, as a reward for your heroism, you may have any single thing in this room."

"Well, Miss Dragon Queen, ma'am," I said, "that seems like a pretty easy decision, since I ain't never seen a woman to measure up to you."

"Surely a man of your broad experience has seen many beautiful women."

"Yeah, but you're head and shoulders and other things ahead of 'em all."

"It's kind of you to say so," she said modestly, "but there must be three or four others in the galaxy who are even lovelier."

"You really think so?" I asked seriously.

"Out of trillions and trillions of women? Surely."

"Well, then, it's an even easier choice," I said.

"Yes, my love?" she said eagerly.

"Absolutely, my love," I replied. "If you tell me there are prettier women in the galaxy, I got no reason not to believe you. But," I added, plucking the ruby from her tiara, "I know there ain't no more perfect ruby, so I'll just take this as a remembrance of my short but happy stay on Terlingua."

"I don't believe it!" she said furiously.

"As a token of my high esteem, I'll dump the plutonium before I leave," I told her.

"You are a fool, Catastrophe Baker!" she said. "Think of what you could have had!"

"You won't never be far from my mind, Miss Dragon Queen, ma'am," I said.

And sure enough, I think of her every time I sit by a blazing fire.

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His story done, Catastrophe Baker displayed the ruby again.

"And that's how I came into possession of the most perfect ruby in the galaxy."

Everyone seemed properly impressed with his story. Everyone except Hellfire Carson, that is. The grizzled old man walked up to Baker, held out his hand, and asked to see the ruby.

"Handle it carefully, old man," said Baker, offering it to him.

Carson rolled it around in his hand for a few seconds, then held it up to the light and peered at it. Finally he tossed it back to Baker.

"You made a bad bargain," he said. "You should have took the Dragon Queen."

"What are you talking about, old man?" demanded Baker.

"That thing ain't no ruby."

"The hell it isn't!"

"The hell it is."

"What do you think it is?" I asked him.

"Not a matter of 'think'. I know what it is. I seen enough of 'em in my day." He paused. "It's an eyestone."

"A what?"

"A Landship's eye. That's what we used to call 'em when we hunted 'em back on Peponi."

"And what's a Landship?" asked Baker.

"Landships were big suckers," answered Hellfire Carson, staring off into the past. "Burly, too. Stood maybe sixteen feet at the shoulder, and they were covered top to bottom with shaggy brown fur. Their heads were enormous, and each one had a long prehensile lower lip that seemed almost as useful as a human hand. Their ears were small and rounded, and their noses were big and broad. They looked awkward, but they could move pretty goddamned fast when they were charging."

He stopped long enough to take a swallow from his bottle. "Most interesting thing about 'em was their eyes. Red crystal they were. Looked just like rubies, except here" -- he pointed to some scratchmarks -- "where the jeweler removed the pupil. They always got rid of the pupil; people didn't like to be reminded where their trinkets came from."

"And you really hunted them for their eyes?" I asked.

"Their eye\_stones\_," Carson corrected me. "Fetched about 5,000 credits for a good pair. Probably worth a little more these days" -- he grinned at Catastrophe Baker -- "but not as much as a Dragon Queen."

"How do you know so much about Landships?" asked Max.

"Because I killed the very last one," said Carson.