

Catastrophe Baker and the Fall of the House of Usher

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It all took place on Moebius IV (began Baker). I'd just finished hunting Demoncats. They're currently the most endangered large predators in the galaxy -- they weren't endangered at all when I started, but one of 'em charged me early on and got my blood up -- and I'd decided that I owed myself a little R&R, except that I called it F&F.

I'd heard that the best whorehouse in that sector was the one that Ugly Jim Usher ran on Moebius, so I headed there to kind of reward myself for a job well done. Turns out that most of what I'd heard was right. Ugly Jim ran a hell of an operation, and since he's a pretty broad-minded soul (no pun intended) he stocked it with the best-looking females from most of the better-looking races in the galaxy. There were human woman, and Balatai women, and even a couple of Peloponnes (though they didn't hold a candle to you, Mrs. Smith, ma'am). I think the strangest may have been the one they called the Spider Lady: she had eight legs evenly spaced around her body, but except for that she looked as human as any woman there.

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"Uh ... I hate to interrupt," said Hurricane Smith. "But if she had eight legs, how many ... ah...?"

"Four," said Baker.

"Amazing!" said Big Red.

"And how did you ... uh...?" said Smith.

"Pretty much the usual way," answered Baker. "Except that four of us could do it at once and never get in each other's way. Well, as long as she stayed on her feet, that is."

"Fascinating," said Smith. "I wonder if -- "

Langtry Lily uttered a warning hiss.

"It's merely academic interest, my dear," said Smith.

She leaned over and whispered something to him.

"I wouldn't dream of it!" he said in injured tones. "In fact, I've already forgotten that she can be found on Moebius IV."

Another hiss.

"I misspoke," said Smith with a little tremor of desperation in his voice. "I've already forgotten that she can be found on MacBeth IX."

She stared at him expressionlessly.

"Reggie!" he hollered. "Some more sugar for the lady!" As Reggie brought out another pound of sugar, Smith turned to Baker. "Go on with your story."

"You sure?" asked Baker, trying to suppress a grin of amusement. "I mean, I'd be just as happy to wait until she dissolves you or rips you to shreds."

"No, go right ahead," said Smith uncomfortably. "You were listing all the alien prostitutes?"

"I was telling about my memorable experience in Jim Usher's whorehouse," Baker corrected him. "The rest was just scene-setting and window-dressing."

"It was?" said Smith, obviously disappointed.

"Right. Are you still interested, or should I quit?"

Smith took a quick peek at Langtry Lily, who looked like she was ready to spit in his eye if he came up with the wrong answer.

"No, I'm dying to hear it," said Smith.

"Good," said Baker, still grinning. "I'd hate to think all this talk of alien whores was boring you."

"Just tell the fucking story!" bellowed Smith.

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I wish that was the kind of story it was (said Baker): a fucking story, that is.

Though, to be honest, it certainly started out that way.

Like I was saying, I stopped by Ugly Jim Usher's place, downed a couple of pints of 150-proof whiskey imported from New Kentucky, and gave the ladies the once-over to see who I was going to honor with my patronage.

And all of a sudden, damned if I didn't think one of them Demoncats had done my retina some serious damage, enough to make me see triple, because standing in front of me were three of the sexiest ladies I'd ever laid eyes on -- and if you'd have put a gun to my head I couldn't have spotted the tiniest difference between them. I just stood there staring at them with my jaw hanging open until all three of 'em started giggling.

"Don't feel embarrassed," said the one on the left. "Everyone reacts like that the first time."

"Well, I can see why," I said. "I could have sworn that two of you were holographs of the third."

"Oh, we're real, all right," said the one on the right.

"Want us to prove it?" asked the one in the middle with a wicked grin.

"Why not?" I responded. "In a long lifetime filled with nothing but interesting adventures, this sounds like it could be the most interesting of all. By the way, have you girls got names?"

"I'm Fatima," said the one on the left.

"I'm Fifi," said the one on the right.

"And I'm Felicity," said the one in the middle. "We're the DeMarco Triplets."

"Identical in every way," said Fatima.

"I got no problem believing it," I said.

"Wait'll you take us to bed," promised Fifi. "You'll find that I'm much more identical than they are."

"That's a pretty daring challenge," I noted.

"Are you up to it?" asked Felicity meaningfully.

"I been up to it (so to speak) since the second I laid eyes on the three of you," I told her.

I didn't feel the need to waste any more time talking, so I went over and told Ugly Jim that we needed a small room with a big bed.

"You want all three of them?" he asked.

"Sure do," I said.

"At the same time?"

"Relatively," I said.

He named a price that I thought was five times too high. I paid it without an argument and off the four of us went.

Well, I won't describe the next couple of hours, since my pal Hurricane would probably find it boring, and the rest of you might just faint dead away from excitement -- but I will say that it was one of the more satisfying experiences of my life, to say nothing of being one of the most exhausting.

In fact, the more I thought about it the more I couldn't see no reason why we shouldn't all get satisfied and exhausted every night for the rest of our lives, so before we left the room I asked all three of 'em to marry me, and damned if they didn't say Yes.

Ugly Jim was only too happy to accommodate me when I told him I was buying drinks for everyone in the house, males and females, humans and aliens alike, to celebrate my good fortune. It was only when I told him what my good fortune was that he hit the roof and looked like he was having a seizure, or at the very least conniption fits.

"You can't do this to me!" he screamed. "They're my three biggest earners!"

"I'm not doing it to you," I pointed out. "I'm doing it to them."

"It's out of the question!"

"I don't recall asking you no questions," I said. "But since I'm a reasonable man, name your price and I'll buy 'em from you."

"I don't sell human flesh," he said with dignity. "I just rent it."

"Okay," I said. "I'm renting 'em for the next 50 years."

"I absolutely refuse," said Ugly Jim. "The business can't survive without them."

"Sure it can," I said. "I'm going out to my ship to get my bankroll. Have a number ready when I get back, and we'll haggle over it for awhile, and I'll pay you too much, and we'll all be happy, especially me and the DeMarco Triplets."

Before he could say anything, I went to my ship, hit the combination to the safe, and brought out a wad of bills that would have choked a dinosaur. I decided to give Ugly Jim a few minutes to calm down, so I took a drink from my private stash, counted to 500, and finally returned to the whorehouse.

Ugly Jim was waiting for me with a triumphant grin on his face.

"I got some money to share with you," I said. "You look like you got a joke you want to share with me."

"It's a joke, all right," said Ugly Jim. "And it's on you."

"What are you talking about?"

"The DeMarco girls," he said. "They ain't going anywhere."

"I'll believe it when I hear it from them," I said. "Where are they?"

"In their rooms upstairs," he said.

I was up the stairs in two giant leaps, and a second later I busted down the first door I came to. A couple of seconds after that I was apologizing mightily profusely, more to the guy who was tied to the cross than to the nun who was beating him with her rosary beads.

I busted down two more doors before I came to the first of the DeMarco girls. She was lying on her bed, and her right hand was chained to a spike that had been driven deep into the wall behind the headboard.

"I'll get you out of this, Fifi," I said, walking over to her.

"I'm Felicity," she replied.

"How the hell am I suppose to know the difference?" I asked her.

She pulled my head down to her lips. "I'm the one who..."

Well, once she recalled the event to me, I knew she was Felicity, all right.

Anyway, I put my foot against the wall, grabbed the chain with both hands, and pulled -- and nothing happened.

Now, it ain't usual for me to pull on something and not get instant results. I pulled again, even harder, and the spike still stayed in the wall.

So I figured if I couldn't pull the spike out of the wall, I'd just have to pull the wall down around the spike. I covered Felicity with a blanket so she wouldn't get cut by no flying debris, and then I balled up my fists and started pounding on the wall in a regular rhythm. It only took about ten or twelve blows to shatter the whole wall, and suddenly the spike was dangling from the chain, and I uncovered Felicity and told her that I'd find a way to get it off her wrist once we were on my ship.

I busted down three more doors (and saw some mighty unusual and memorable sights) before I came to Fatima, who was in the very same fix. I knew better than to pull at the chain, so I just started hammering at the wall, and sure enough, it crumbled in about twenty seconds.

By the time I hit Fifi's room, I'd done some pretty serious damage to the place, what with having busted down two walls and maybe a dozen doors. I spent three or four minutes pounding on her wall when I realized that it wasn't like the other two, that Fifi's spike had been driven through the wall into a main support beam. Even after the wall fell down, the spike was still stuck in that damned beam. Now, a lot of men would have been discouraged, but that just got my dander up, and I began pounding harder and faster, and finally the beam split in half, and Fifi was free.

I gathered the three girls and started down the stairs with them when the whole building began shaking. We just made it out the door before it collapsed -- and that was the Fall of the House of Usher."

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"What happened to the DeMarco Triplets?" asked the Bard.

"I'm a man of my word," said Baker with dignity. "I married 'em."

"You've got three wives?"

"I got six wives," replied Baker. "Unhappily, Fifi, Fatima and Felicity ain't among 'em no longer."

"What happened?"

"I guess our love life must have been a little too rigorous for them," said Baker. "They finally ran off with some salesman who was pushing potency cures."

"You mean impotency cures," said the Bard.

"I know what I mean. Somehow he'd become convinced that people wasted even more time on sex than on eating, and he was bound and determined to put an end to it."

"And he actually made a living selling this cure?"

"Nope," said Baker. "But he sure as hell collected a lot of women." He paused. "Hell, now that I think of it, maybe I'll go into the potency cure business myself one of these days."

"When you come up with a potency cure, give it to the Reverend," said Sinderella. "I'll pay for it."

"Hell, you could cure my potency," said Billy Karma. "For a few minutes, anyway."

"Uh ... I don't want to be the bearer of bad tidings," interrupted Hellfire Van Winkle, "but either morning has come a few hours early or they're lighting up the sky with one helluva lot of explosions."

"Our sky?" asked Three-Gun Max.

"Just whose sky did you think I was talking about?" demanded Van Winkle.

"I meant, you're sure it's Henry II and not Henry III or IV?"

"I can't even see the other Henrys," said Van Winkle. "But don't take my word for it. Stick your head out the window and tell me what you see."

Max walked over to the window. "What I see," he said, looking out, "is a woman walking toward the Outpost."

"Is she alone?" asked Baker.

"Seems to be."

"What does she look like?"

"Wait another ten seconds and you can see for yourself," said Max. He turned to Hellfire Van Winkle.

"By the way, the sky is dark again."

"Well, it was bright as day a minute ago," said Van Winkle defensively.

Max was about to reply, but just then the door opened and the woman walked in. She was tall and lean, and she had a hard look about her eyes. Her hair was kind of short, she didn't use any make-up, and there was just something about her that said if Catastrophe Baker or the Reverend Billy Karma or any of the others tried anything fancy with her they'd be hobnobbing with God or Satan a couple of seconds later.

Suddenly Achmed of Alphard stood up. "It's you!" he exclaimed.

"Hello, Achmed," said the woman. "What are you doing out here on the Frontier?"

"Hiding from God, Jasmine Kabella, and the tax collectors," answered Achmed. "Not necessarily in that order."

"You gonna introduce us to your friend?" interrupted Baker.

"Certainly," said Achmed, though most of us had already guessed her identity. "Ladies, gentlemen, and aliens -- this is the Cyborg de Milo."

Big Red's computer came to life. "Einstein says hello again."

"Hello right back at him," said the Cyborg de Milo.

"What brings you to the Outpost?" asked Achmed.

"A better ship than the ones that were chasing me," she answered.

"Chasing you?" repeated Little Mike Picasso. "You mean we might be getting some visitors at any minute?"

"No, that's not what I mean at all." She paused for a moment. "A trio of alien ships took after me when I entered the system. I'd heard about this place, so I headed for Henry II with the three of them hot on my tail. What they didn't know is that my ship's got the latest generation of heat shield on its nose. I plunged into the atmosphere at a steep angle, one that produced a lot of friction with the air molecules. They followed me, and a minute later all three of them went up in the brightest flames you ever saw."

"See?" said Van Winkle triumphantly. "I told you it looked like daylight out there!"

"What's the situation?" asked Little Mike. "How's the war progressing?"

"What war?"

"What do you mean, what war? The one between the aliens and the Navy."

"I didn't see any sign of the Navy," she replied. "Either they've all been blown to pieces, or else they cut and ran. Either way, the only ships up there are alien ships." She walked over to the bar and signaled to me. "Bring me a beer."

"Yes, Ms. de Milo," I said.

"And call me Venus."

"Coming right up, Venus," I said, and ordered Reggie to draw a tall one. When he handed it to her, she downed it as fast as Catastrophe Baker ever drained a glass, then wiped her mouth with the back of her

hand.

"Thanks," she said. "I needed that."

"Killing aliens can be mighty thirsty work," agreed Baker.

"I plan to kill a lot more of them," said Venus grimly.

"There's no hurry," said Baker. "Sit down, relax, and have another beer. They'll still be there when you're done."

"Doesn't it bother you that a bunch of beings you've never met before are out there plotting to kill you?" demanded Venus.

"Hell, if I ever woke up one morning and there _weren't_ a bunch of beings I didn't know plotting to kill me, I just might keel over and die from shock." He smiled at her. "Catastrophe Baker at your service, ma'am."

"_You're_ Catastrophe Baker?" she said. "I've been hearing stories about you since I was a little girl!"

"Every last one of 'em true," Baker assured her. "Except for them what ain't."

"It will be an honor to fight side by side with you against the aliens," she said.

"Well, I do a lot of things side by side with women of all types, shapes and sizes," said Baker. "But fighting aliens is one of the things I do best alone."

"Side by side or on our own, we'll decimate the bastards!" she said enthusiastically.

"Maybe we'll just invite 'em in for a drink and try to find out what got 'em so all-fired riled in the first place," said Baker.

Venus threw back her head and laughed. "You've got a wonderful sense of humor, Catastrophe!"

"I know I have," he replied. "But I ain't taken it out of mothballs yet today."

"Maybe we _should_ give some thought to facing off against the aliens," said Big Red.

"Are you in that much of a hurry to meet your maker, son?" asked the Reverend Billy Karma. "Don't count on sitting at His right hand if things go wrong. I was speaking to Him just this morning and He never mentioned you." He turned to the room at large. "Leave us not rush foolishly into a situation that can be just as foolishly avoided."

"_Men!_" muttered Sinderella disgustedly. "All talk and no action!"

"I keep offering you some action, honey," said Billy Karma, "and you keep turning me down."

"You should have said Yes to him," interjected the Earth Mother. "The odds are he wouldn't have done a damned thing about it."

"Oh yeah?" Billy Karma shot back. "What makes you think so?"

"Experience."

"You never had no experience with me."

"I've had more than my share of experience with men, and I've come to the conclusion that you're all a bunch of totally worthless blowhards."

"I take exception to that remark!" snapped the Reverend.

"See? Sinderella was right -- all talk and no action."

"What kind of action do you want?" demanded Billy Karma. "I could knock your teeth out if that'd make you happy."

"You try it, and ten seconds later you'll know for sure if there's an afterlife or not," replied the Earth Mother.

The Reverend stared at her for a long moment, then decided not to find out if she was telling the truth.

"Ah, what would you know about action anyway?" he settled for saying.

"More than you, that's for sure," said the Earth Mother.

"Hah!" he responded. "Who'd ever want you?"

"Lots of men."

"Name one."

"Gladly," said the Earth Mother. "Moses Jacoby Zanzabell."

At the sound of the name, a hush fell over the Outpost.

"_The_ Moses Jacoby Zanzabell?" asked the Reverend Billy Karma at last.

"There's only one."

"But he's the richest man in the galaxy!"

"That's right."

"And he took a liking to you?"

"Liking is an understatement," said the Earth Mother. "He wanted me so badly that he _bought_ me."

"_This_ I gotta hear," said the Reverend Billy Karma.

"Me, too," said Max.