

Catastrophe Baker and the Siren of Silverstrike

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It all began (said Baker) when I decided to pay a visit to my old friend Bloody Ben Masters, who'd been the first one to hit paydirt on Silverstrike. He'd made a few million credits off his silver mine, then sold it for a few million more, built himself a castle with an acid moat around it, and retired.

When I got there I learned that poor Ben was no longer among the living -- seemed he'd got a snootful one night and decided to see if he could swim the moat without taking a breath. He got the last part right, because I don't believe there was enough of him left to breathe about three seconds after he dove in. Anyway, there I was with some time on my hands, so that night I mosied into town to see what the locals did for entertainment besides jump each other's claims, and that's when I found Old Doc Nebuchadnezzar's All-Star Carnival and Thrill Show.

They had all the usual carny stuff: a null-gravity ferris wheel, a Tower of Babel for the menfolk and a Gomorrah Palace for the ladies, a couple of fights to the death between Trambolians and a pair of the local Men, a magician who volunteered to cut your spouse in half -- I don't recall remembering him promising to put her back together, now that I come to think of it -- and the usual surgically-altered six-armed jugglers and knife-throwers and the like, but none of 'em especially interested me.

In fact, I was about to leave when I heard a trumpet blare and a little guy in a bright plaid suit got up on a floating platform and announced that the moment we were all waiting for had arrived, and that anyone with twenty credits to spend could come into his Bubble and see the Siren of Silverstrike in all her sensual glory.

Well, the last time I saw so many people move so fast all at once was when me and Bloody Ben had had one of our little disagreements back on Bilbau II and I threw a couple of poker tables through a window and demanded a little more fighting room, and he threw the bartender out after the tables and allowed that that was a right good idea, and I figured anyone or anything that got everyone so motivated was probably worth twenty credits and then some, so I gently shoved a few folks out of my way, tried not to listen overmuch to their howls of anger and agony, and forked over my money.

Once I got inside the Bubble, I kind of shouldered my way to the front, hardly discommoding anyone at all except six or seven men who refused to step aside as quick as they should have for a newcomer to their fair planet, and then I took a seat.

I didn't have long to wait, because the second I sat down the music started, and suddenly the Siren of Silverstrike appeared onstage, and you got to believe me when I tell you that she was about as lovely a critter of the female persuasion as I'd ever seen up to that time. Her hair hung down almost to her waist, and it was striped with rows of iridescent colors: red, blue, yellow, green, and the pattern repeated a couple of times. Real striking and artistic, you know?

She held up an almost-transparent little sheet or towel or some such thing in front of her and began her dance, and I noticed when she spun around that she wasn't wearing nothing but her dancing shoes, and that the rest of her hair also came in the very same rows of colors. I think that might have been the instant I decided I was hopelessly and eternally in love with her.

I couldn't figure out why such a lovely young piece of femininity was working in a carnival, and then it occurred to me that this Nebuchadnezzar feller had probably kidnapped her when she was just a little girl, before she'd blossomed into the fullness of womanhood, so to speak, and that she was just waiting for some handsome hero-type to rescue her from this life of enforced slavery and take her home so she could dance every night just for him as a way of showing her gratitude.

I waited until her dance was over, and then it took another five minutes for the audience to stop cheering and stomping and whistling, and finally the bubble emptied out, and I hopped onto the stage and found the little exit at the back and walked through it, and a few seconds later I found myself in the Siren's dressing room.

She was sitting, stark naked, on a little stool that floated in front of a vanity and a tri-dimensional mirror, brushing her multi-colored hair. There were dozens of holos of her in various states of dress and undress on the walls, and a couple of missives which were either love letters or glowing testimonials. There were a bunch of little fussy dolls on a shelf, and a row of ugly-looking porcelain dogs that yipped a nonstop musical tune, and some paintings of big-eyed alien children who all looked pretty much alike, even though a couple were four-armed and one was insectoid and another was a chlorine-breather.

When the Siren finally saw my reflection in her mirror, she turned to face me.

"Who are you?" she demanded, either totally forgetting that she wasn't wearing nothing or else not much caring about it.

"I'm Catastrophe Baker, here to declare my everlasting love for you and to rescue you from a life of indentured servitude," I told her.

"I'm flattered," she said, looking me up and down, "but I don't want to be rescued."

"That's because Old Doc Nebuchadnezzar has brainwashed you," I explained. "Spend a few months traveling the galaxy with me and you'll be as good as new. What do you say, Siren?"

"I say no, and my name's not Siren."

"What is it then?" I asked. "If we're going to spend a lifetime of sexual rapture together, I suppose it's one of the things I ought to know."

"It's Melora, and we're not going to spend any time together at all."

"Melora," I repeated. "It must be fate."

"What must be?"

"I've always had a soft spot for naked sirens named Melora," I said. "Purtiest name in the universe, if you ask me."

"I didn't ask you," she said. "Now go away."

"I can't leave you to this life of misery."

"I'm deliriously happy here," said Melora. "I've only been miserable for the past three minutes."

"You're looking at this all wrong," I explained. "I'm in the hero business -- at least when I ain't running from various gendarmes -- and that means one of the things I do is rescue damsels in distress."

"I'm not in distress," she insisted. "Now leave me alone."

"How can I leave you alone?" I said. "I'm in love with you."

"Well, I'm not in love with you!" she shot back.

"That's because you don't hardly know me," I said. "After ten or twelve years of fun and hijinks together

you'll fall like a ton of bricks."

"What does it take to make you leave?" she demanded.

I realized then that my approach had been all wrong, that she viewed me as just another unwashed and uncouth member of her audience, so I figured it was probably time to display my class and erudition by saying something poetic that would sweep her off her feet. I racked my mind trying to remember some of the more touching love stories I'd read as an adolescent, and finally I hit upon a phrase that I just knew would win her over.

"Melora," I said, placing a hand over my heart to indicate my sincerity, "my throbbing love engine cries out for you."

"You can take your throbbing love engine and shove it!" she snarled.

"That's exactly what I had in mind," I replied, pleased that my little ploy was working. "I'm glad to see we're thinking along the same lines."

She stood up, walked to a wall, took a robe off a hook, wrapped it around her, and faced me with her hands on her hips. "I'm asking you for the last time: are you going to leave peacefully?"

"Peacefully, yes," I said. "Alone, no."

"All right," she said. "But don't say you weren't warned."

She opened her mouth and gave forth a scream that just got higher and higher and louder and louder. Pretty soon the mirror cracked, and a bunch of little glass doodads on the vanity shattered, and by the time she reached M over High Q all the fillings had fallen out of my teeth, and still she kept it up. I could hear people howling in pain outside the tent, and then I couldn't hear nothing any more, and the next thing I knew she was slapping my face and telling me to wake up.

"What happened?" I mumbled. All the porcelain dogs had shattered, so at least the experience wasn't a total loss.

"They don't call me the Siren of Silverstrike for nothing," said Melora with a satisfied look on her face.

"Okay, so you're a siren," I said, running my tongue gingerly over all the holes in my teeth. "What did you have to do that for?"

"Because I'm not going anywhere, and you needed convincing."

"But why not?" I persisted.

She stared at me. "Because I'm Old Doc Nebuchadnezzar. I own this show, and nothing pulls in more money than the Siren of Silverstrike. Now do you understand?"

"Why didn't you just say so in the first place?" I said. "If you can't go, I'll just move in with you."

This time she hit H over high Z.

"I like living alone," she said when she'd slapped me awake again.

"You're one of the hardest ladies to romance that I've ever encountered," I said. "But Catastrophe Baker don't give up easy."

Well, she screamed three or four more times, and I kept passing out, and finally some of the townsfolk came by and asked her to stop because she'd busted every window within three miles.

"_Now_ will you leave?" she asked, staring at me when I woke up again.

"All right, all right, I get the picture," I said. "But the day will come when you'll regret throwing away such a perfect and unselfish love as I'm offering you in exchange for just fifty percent of the carnival's take."

But nothing could budge her, and I soon saw that I'd been blinded by her physical beauty, or maybe even just by her dye job, and after seeing a dentist and getting my fillings replaced I went back out amongst the stars, a couple of days older and a little lonelier and a lot wiser.

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Silicon Carny chuckled. "Now I'm starting to understand why they call you Catastrophe!" she said.

"There are other reasons just as valid, Ma'am," said Baker, "and I'm sure the survivors could tell you all about it -- if any of 'em have been released from their various hospitals."

"Humans are always talking and singing about unrequited love," complained Sahara del Rio.

"Of course they are," said Achmed of Alphard, who was probably a little less human than most. "It's the most ennobling emotion of all."

"The most frustrating, anyway," chimed in Three-Gun Max.

"But what good does it do?" said Argyle, who was still sitting in a corner with the Reverend Billy Karma. "When it's time to procreate, the female comes in season, the males fight for the right to perpetuate their genes, and then all is quiet until the next hurricane season."

"That ain't exactly the way it works with us," answered Baker.

"All right," amended Argyle. "The next planet-freezing blizzard. Big difference."

"You got part of it right," said Bet-a-World O'Grady. "The males do fight for the females. Or sometimes, like in the case of people like our friend Baker here, just for the exercise."

"You think the females don't fight every bit as hard?" asked Sinderella with a sly, knowing smile. "We're just more subtle about it."

"With all this fighting, it's a wonder anyone has the energy to procreate," said Argyle.

"It can get nasty," agreed Max. "To say nothing of awkward."

Suddenly the old man sitting by himself in the farthest corner spoke up. "What do you know about it?" he demanded. "Hell, what do any of you know? There's only one word for it, and that's _tragic_."

"What's so tragic about sex?" asked Baker.

"I'm not talking about sex," said the old man. "I'm talking about love."

"Who are you, and what do you think you know about it?"

"My name is Faraway Jones, and I've sought after it in its purest form for more than forty years."

"Faraway Jones!" exclaimed Nicodemus Mayflower. "Didn't I hear about you on Bareimus V?"

"Can't be the same Faraway Jones I heard about on Sparkling Blue," said Max.

"There was supposed to be a Faraway Jones on New Burma, out on the Rim," added Gravedigger Gaines.

"They were all me," said Jones. "I've been to all three of those worlds, and maybe seven hundred more."

"Are you an explorer?" asked Big Red.

"No, though I've been the first to set foot on a bunch of worlds."

"An adventurer?"

"Not on purpose, though I've had my share of them."

"What then?" persisted Big Red.

"A searcher," answered Jones.

"For what?"

"Well, now, that's my sad and tragic story."