

\*The General Who Hated His Private\*

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I guess it was called the Peloponnesian War (began Mayflower) because the enemy was a race that called themselves the Peloponnes.

I worked for ComPelForCom HQ (that's Commonwealth Peloponne Forces Command Headquarters) back then. In fact, I was General Bigelow's driver, pilot, orderly, and all-around gofer.

Bigelow was an imposing-looking man, and never more so than when he was in full dress uniform. He had enough medals to go from his chest to his ankle, and his biggest problem was figuring which ones to wear and which to leave in his trunk.

The war on Peloponne V was to be General Bigelow's farewell to organized butchery. He'd been sent in with a force of a few thousand and told to pacify the natives. It was after fully half his men went over to the enemy that he realized he had a little problem.

"What the hell is going on?" he used to complain to me. "Men never desert! Would you desert if I sent you to the front line?"

"I don't think I would, sir," I would reply. "But I didn't think anyone else would, either."

Then he'd rant and rave for another half hour or so, open a bottle, and drink himself to sleep -- and in the morning we'd have lost another twenty or thirty men to the enemy.

Finally he decided that a unique situation -- and this certainly qualified -- demanded a unique solution, so he sent for Hurricane Smith. Even then Hurricane was wanted on about half a hundred worlds and had a huge price on his head, but General Bigelow agreed to pardon him for all his outstanding crimes if he'd come to Peloponne V and help clear up the situation. Hurricane considered the offer, asked for a quarter of a million credits in addition to the pardon, and enlisted when the General agreed to his terms.

Bigelow wanted to make him a colonel, but Hurricane hated officers, and insisted on being a private. The General sent for him the second he touched down, and Hurricane showed up wearing his usual outfit, which was made from the furs of various alien polar animals.

"Why are you out of uniform?" demanded the General.

"I'm in uniform," said Hurricane.

"I want you in a military uniform."

"You hired Hurricane Smith. This is what I wear; it's my trademark."

"Not when you're in my army, it isn't."

Hurricane turned and headed toward the door. "Nice knowing you, and good luck with your war."

There were six armed soldiers guarding the door, but no one made a move to stop him. After all, he was Hurricane Smith.

"Wait!" yelled Bigelow.

Hurricane turned to face him.

"All right," said Bigelow with a sigh. "Wear whatever you want."

"Thanks," said Hurricane. "I will."

"First thing tomorrow morning, I want you to move to the front."

"And start blowing away aliens. I know."

"No," said the General. "I want you to find out why my men are deserting and going over to the enemy."

Hurricane shrugged. "You're the boss," he said. "But if it was me, I'd kill all the bad guys first."

"Just do as you're ordered," snapped the General.

Hurricane nodded and started walking to the door again.

"Just a minute, Private," said Bigelow.

"What now?"

"You're supposed to salute."

"I don't do that," said Hurricane. "It's a silly custom." He walked out of the office.

"This may not have been the brightest decision I ever made," Bigelow said to me. "I don't think I like that man very much."

"He's supposed to be one of the best at what he does, sir," I said.

"What he does is plunder and rob and kill."

"This is the army. He should fit in just fine, sir."

We didn't see him again for two days. Most of us concluded that he'd developed a serious distaste for military life and had left the planet, though a small minority thought he'd joined all our men who'd gone over to the Peloponnes. Then, just after sunrise on the third day, he wandered into headquarters.

"I found out why all your men have been deserting," he announced. "Other than the obvious reason, that is."

"The obvious reason?" repeated Bigelow.

"They don't like you very much," said Hurricane. "Can't say that I blame them," he added thoughtfully.

"But the real reason is a little more complicated." He paused. "Have you ever actually seen a Peloponne?"

"I've seen holographic representations of them. Big, ugly insectoid beings."

"Well, yes and no."

"What do you mean?" demanded Bigelow.

"They're shape-changers."

"Even so, how can they terrify my men into deserting?" asked the General. "After all, how fearsome can they make themselves appear?"

"They don't appear fearsome at all."

"Then what shape \_do\_ they take?"

"Ripe naked women. Ripe, \_passionate\_ naked women. Ripe, \_lonely\_, passionate naked women. Except near the 6th Battalion, which is composed entirely of women. To them they appear as wealthy, elegantly-dressed, sophisticated gentlemen who drink vodka martinis and love to dance the rhumba."

"But surely once our men and women have ... ah...\_experienced\_ them, they realized they've been duped by the enemy and have given away their precious honor to hideous, disgusting, insectoid aliens."

"Well, the way \_I\_ found out what we were up against was to go off with one of the Peloponnes," answered Hurricane.

The General failed to repress a shudder of revulsion. "And?"

Hurricane contemplated his answer for a moment. "I have to admit that as women go, she wasn't especially memorable," he said thoughtfully. Then he smiled. "But for a twelve-legged four-eyed insect, she was a knockout."

"You are as disgusting as \_she\_ is!" thundered the General.

"Watch your tongue when you speak about my fiance," said Hurricane ominously.

"Get out!" screamed Bigelow. "I don't want to hear any more of this!"

"One word of warning," said Hurricane. "There are more human soldiers on their side than on ours. If you don't leave Peloponne V soon, I think they'll probably mount an attack."

"This is outrageous and disgusting!"

"You think so?" asked Hurricane mildly. "Wait until they cut your belly open and deposit a few thousand eggs. Now, \_that's\_ outrageous and disgusting."

"How can you run off with such a creature?" demanded Bigelow.

"Beauty is only skin deep," said Hurricane Smith, as he walked to the door for the last time. He paused and turned to the General. "But ugly goes all the way down to the soul."

I got to thinking about what Hurricane had said, and when word reached me that +++Lance Sterling+++ was looking for recruits, I borrowed a ship one night and took off to join him. Never did see a Peloponne. Saw the General a few hundred times, which in retrospect was more than enough for any war.

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"I got there after Hurricane Smith left," said Max.

"And I showed up after Max," said the Gravedigger. "So he should tell his story next."

"Makes sense," agreed Max. He took a swallow of his drink. "Things had gotten a lot worse when I arrived on the scene."

"Was General Bigelow still there?" asked Catastrophe Baker.

"Sure. It was his last campaign, and he wasn't leaving until he wiped out the Peloponnes -- those that he could distinguish from naked ladies, that is."

"Must have been a mighty interesting job -- differentiating the one from the other," offered Baker.

"Me and God could have doped it out," said the Reverend Billy Karma with absolute and enthusiastic certainty.

"The mind positively boggles with the various tests one could devise," added Little Mike Picasso.

"The General didn't have your aesthetic sensibilities," said Max. "He sent all the women home, waited until they were all off the planet, and then shot anything that even remotely resembled a woman."

"Efficient," admitted Little Mike. "I'll give him that."

"Wasteful," said Baker.

"So how did the war end?" asked the Bard, scribbling furiously.

"Not exactly the way you'd expect," answered Three-Gun Max.

"So are you going to tell us or not?" persisted the Bard.

"Try and stop him," said Baker.