

High Noon on Henry VIII

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I hope Nicodemus and Sinderella don't spent their honeymoon on Henry VIII (said the Gravedigger). It's got a chlorine atmosphere, terrible visibility, heavy gravity that wears you out after a few steps, and the temperature's more than halfway to absolute zero.

I claimed Henry VIII for my own, because I've had more experience in hostile environments than anyone else here except maybe Hurricane Smith. I knew they had a small garrison there, and I made it my business to take it out.

I used my ship's sensors to spot them, landed maybe half a mile away -- and found a dozen of them waiting for me, guns drawn, as I clambered down to the rocky ground.

"Kill him!" ordered one of the officers.

"No!" cried another voice. "He's _mine!_"

I looked around and saw a familiar alien face peering at me through his helmet. It was the Gray Salamander."

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"I thought he died on Daedalus IV a few years back," said Baker.

"I heard he'd bought it in the Roosevelt system," chimed in Hurricane Smith.

"Last time I checked the Wanted posters, he was worth half a million credits dead or alive," said Baker.

"And there was a footnote that no one really wanted him alive," added Smith. He turned to the Gravedigger. "So it was really him?"

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Yeah, it was really him (continued Gaines). He made his way through the aliens that were crowded around me until he was just a couple of feet away.

"You arrested me on Barracuda IV," he hissed. "I've never forgotten you for that. I think of you with my every waking moment and curse your name. I've planned and plotted and prayed for the day I could face you again -- and now here you are at last."

"It's your move," I said. "What do you plan to do with me?"

"Kill you, of course," he said.

I didn't see any way to stop him with a dozen burners and blasters trained on me, so I just kept my mouth shut and waited for him to speak again.

"You are the only being ever to defeat me in any form of combat," he said at last.

I could see where he was leading, so I thought I might as well encourage him.

"It wasn't all that hard," I said. "I know ten or fifteen Men who could have done it, as well as a handful of aliens."

"We shall see!" he screamed. "I have spent the past decade dreaming of the day when we would meet again and I could demand a rematch!"

"You'll just lose again," I said.

That seemed to drive him crazy. He began jumping up and down and yelling so loud and so fast that my translator couldn't make out what he was saying.

Finally he calmed down a little and leaned forward, so his helmet was touching mine.

"You will be allowed to retain your weapons if you promise not to use them on my companions."

"If they don't fire on me, I won't fire on them," I said.

He turned briefly to his soldiers. "You will not interfere upon pain of death." Then he faced me again. "We will meet when the sun is at its zenith. Visibility will be minimally better then."

"Where?" I asked.

He pointed to his left. "There are a dozen Bubbles housing our garrison half a mile in that direction. I will meet you on neutral ground, halfway between your ship and our garrison."

"Fair enough," I said. "By the way, how long before the sun's at its zenith?"

"About an hour," he said. "Don't be late. It will be almost thirteen hundred hours before it reaches its zenith again."

And with that, he turned and led his men back to their Bubbles, though I lost sight of them before they'd gone fifty yards.

Since I had an hour to kill before high noon, I wandered around, trying to acquaint myself with some of the landmarks. I came to their ship after about twenty minutes, marked its location in my mind, and then walked over to the area I had mentally designated as Main Street and waited for the Salamander to show up.

He could probably have shot me before I even knew he was there -- his race has much better eyesight than ours in the pea soup that passed for atmosphere on Henry VIII -- but his honor had been challenged, and I wasn't surprised to see him emerge from the fog and approach to within twenty yards of me.

"How I have longed for this day!" he said.

"I didn't know you were in that much of a hurry to die, or I'd have hunted you down again," I replied.

He reached for his burner, but I'd had more experience with heavy gravity worlds. I had my screecher out first, and an instant later it shattered his helmet, and that was the end of Salamander Jones. I gave a moment's thought to collecting the bounty on him, but he was such a pulpy mess there was no way anyone could have identified him.

I'd promised not to fire on his companions, and I kept my word. I walked over to their ship, disabled the life support and ignition systems, and went back to my own ship. If the garrison hasn't run out of air yet, it will soon -- and that will be the official end of the war.

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"But if he'd been on Henry VIII longer than you, how come he hadn't adjusted to the gravity?" asked Silicon Carny.

"He'd adjusted to all the normal activities," answered the Gravedigger, "but reaching for your weapon is an instinct. When he went for his gun, gravity pulled his hand half a foot too low."

Hurricane Smith was busy studying the clock on the wall.

"Was it that dull?" asked Gaines.

"I enjoyed it," said Smith. "But it made me think about Sheba."

"What about her?" asked Baker.

"She's on Adelaide of Louvain with a limited air supply. I really ought to be leaving in the next few minutes."

"Got time for one more drink?" asked Baker. "I'm buying."

Smith glanced up at the clock again, which was just to the left of the painting of Sally Six-Eyes. "Yeah, I suppose so," he said.

The Gravedigger turned to Willie the Bard. "So can you use it?" he asked.

"Of course," answered the Bard enthusiastically "It's like a shootout in the Old West. I'll make it as famous as the shootout between Billy the Kid and Jesse James at the O.K. Corral!" He paused. "I don't think I'll mention what you said about the gravity."

"Why?" asked Gaines.

"Men need heroes, not scientific explanations," replied the Bard. "And so does history."

"I thought history needed facts."

"History interprets facts," said the Bard. "It's a whole different union."

"And it gets you off the hook," said Max dryly.

"Not if I get it wrong," answered the Bard.

"Now even I'm confused," said Max. "If you interpret facts instead of report 'em, how can you get it wrong?"

"You never heard anyone interpret something the wrong way?" asked Baker.

"Yeah -- but I was on the spot to point it out to them. A hundred years from now, who'll know if Willie interpreted things right or wrong?"

"If I do it wrong, no one will know, because no one will read the book," replied the Bard patiently. "The job of the historian is to make history come alive for those who weren't around to experience it. You make the wrong choices, it just lays there like a dead fish."

"I thought the job of the historian was to report the facts as accurately as possible," said Hurricane Smith.

"The greatest history of all is the Good Book that the Reverend Billy Karma totes around in his pocket," answered the Bard. "How accurate do you think it is?"

"So much for setting down the facts," said Max.

"Sometimes you got to sweep the facts aside to get at the truth," said the Bard.

"I thought they were one and the same," said Baker.

The Bard shook his head. "If I've learned anything listening to all the stories at the Outpost, it's that more often than not facts are the enemy of Truth. (You can't see it, of course, but I just spelled Truth with a capital T.)"

"You mean I keep telling all these true stories," said Baker, "and you keep rewriting 'em so that they fit your notion of truth?"

"I told you before: I don't rewrite, I embellish."

"What's the difference?"

"I keep the basic structure of your stories -- the who, what, when, why, and where of them. But I try to make them more meaningful, so that future generations will understand that great things were taking place here."

"And what if they weren't?" asked Max.

"They'll still feel some pride in your accomplishments, however trivial they really were," said the Bard. "Is that so sinful?"

"I never said it was sinful at all," said Max. "Just dishonest."

"Why can't I make you understand that there's a difference between lying and embellishing?" said the Bard in a frustrated voice.

"Maybe because there ain't any in his life," suggested Baker.

"Look," said Max. "He's an historian. He's supposed to tell the truth. He lies. That's wrong. It's as simple as that."

"You never shot a man with a gun you had hidden in your third hand?" asked Baker.

"Sure I did," said Max. "But that's different."

"It wasn't dishonest?"

"It was a matter of life and death."

"So is what Willie's writing," said Baker.

"How do you figure that?"

"It ain't his life or death," explained Baker. "It's ours. Somebody picks his book up two hundred years from now, I'll be alive for as long as they're reading about me. Once they close it I'm dead again. That's the life part. The death part takes place if he never sells it or no one ever reads it."

"Sonuvabitch," said Max. "I never looked at it that way." He turned to the Bard. "You have my permission to lie whenever you want."

"Embellish," insisted the Bard.

"Whatever," said Max.

"There's one story I haven't had a chance to improve upon, because I haven't heard it yet. How about it, Catastrophe?"

"Me?" said Baker.

"You fought in the war, didn't you?"

"Not enough to work up a sweat."

"I'd like to hear about it anyway," said the Bard, notebook at the ready.

"What the hell," said Baker with a shrug.