

The Lost Treasure of Margaret of Anjou

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I was heading to Henry VII, hopefully to fight side-by-side with Hurricane Smith, when I ran smack-dab into a pair of alien ships just past Henry VI (began Little Mike Picasso). I immediately began evasive maneuvering, and just about the time I thought I'd lost them, a lucky shot managed to disable my subspace radio and my navigational computer.

I figured I'd better set the ship down and see what I could do about repairing the damage. I knew there was a major alien garrison on Henry VI, so I landed on Margaret of Anjou, its moon, instead.

The radio was a total loss, and while the damage to the computer didn't look too serious, I'm an artist, not a computer tech, and I didn't begin to know how to go about fixing it.

I decided that the only reasonable course of action was to return to the Outpost and see if I could either borrow a ship or hook up with someone else -- but before I did so, I decided to get into my spacesuit and look around, just in case there was some stunning aspect of the landscape I might want to sketch for future use.

I opened the hatch, climbed down to the ground, and began walking. The rock formations were interesting, but I've seen -- and painted -- better ones. There was no air and no water, and of course no foliage of any kind, and just about the time I decided there was nothing of any value to see, I spotted something strange off in the distance. I couldn't quite tell what it was, but it didn't look like it belonged there, so I began cautiously approaching it.

It turned out to be an alien building. Not erected by the aliens we were fighting, but something infinitely older and stranger. I don't think I'd ever want to meet the creatures that could pass comfortably through that oddly-shaped doorway.

Centuries worth of dust puffed up from the stone floor with every step I took. I activated my helmet's spotlight and looked around. I was in a huge chamber, maybe fifty feet on a side, and there were a lot of smaller rooms off of it, each with that same strange doorway.

I went into one of the rooms. It was empty. So was the second. But in the third I struck paydirt. Evidently this was a storage building, constructed either by some wealthy aliens from Henry VI who wanted to hide their valuables from thieves, or else built by the thieves themselves as a place to keep stolen goods until they could sell them on the black market.

It was like an ancient Egyptian tomb. Grave robbers (or the equivalent) had stolen all of the jewelry, but they'd left the artwork behind because they had no idea what it was worth -- and what a treasure trove it was! There was a Morita sculpture, and a Tobin bronze, and a pair of Dalrymple holo paintings. There was even a Rockwell from old Earth itself!

I started carrying them back to the ship piece by piece, which took the better part of the day. I spent the next week exploring Margaret of Anjou, hoping against hope that I would find another ancient treasure cache, but one was all there was. Still, given the money that museums and art galleries would pay for my haul, I had precious little reason to be disappointed.

I waited until I saw the last of the alien ships leave Henry VI. I figured they'd never have done that if they hadn't been ordered to retreat, and that meant the war was over, so I got into my ship and brought it back here, using a slide rule and a pocket calculator.

Now I plan to celebrate with a bottle of Tomahawk's best Cygnian cognac, and then I'm off to the Commonwealth to see what my treasure's worth on the open market.

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"That's it?" asked the Bard.

"That's it," answered Little Mike Picasso. "How much are you going to use?"

"None of it."

"Why?"

"It's obviously a total fabrication."

"Have it your way," said Little Mike. "You going to be here for another couple of minutes?"

"I live here," said the Bard.

"Good," said Little Mike, walking out the door.

"You're really not going to use it?" I asked.

"It's a fabulous story!" said the Bard, finally letting his enthusiasm show. "I'm going to use every word of it. I just didn't want to say so to that arrogant little bastard!"

Little Mike re-entered, carrying a holographic painting of a purple alien landscape.

"A genuine Dalyrimple!" he announced. "Worth at least three million credits back in the Commonwealth." He turned to the Bard. "So you write your history and I'll sell my treasure and we'll see who winds up happier."

"Nice painting," said Max. He reached out and pointed. "I especially like this weird-looking tree."

"Don't touch it!" snapped Little Mike, slapping Max's hand.

"Sorry."

"I'd like to see what else you have in your ship," said the Bard.

"Even though you're not writing it up?" said Little Mike.

"I'm an open-minded man," said the Bard. "Convince me I'm wrong."

"Let's go," said Little Mike. He carried the painting out the door, followed by Willie the Bard.

"Nice painting," remarked Baker. "If you like ugly alien landscapes."

"Paint's still wet, though," said Max with a grin, holding up a purple forefinger.

"Should we tell him?" asked Big Red.

"And rob history of a story like that?" said Max.

The Bard returned a few minutes later.

"Where's Little Mike?" I asked.

"Wrapping his paintings back up. You don't leave treasures like those just sitting around, you know." The Bard lit a smokeless cigar. "Him and his silly propositions! As if he could pull the wool over my eyes!"

"You saw right through him, huh?" asked Max.

"The way I see it, everything about his story was true except where it took place. He probably never set foot on Margaret on Anjou. He made that part up, just to throw us off the track in case there are more treasure caches wherever he got the paintings. My guess is that he was probably on one of Henry I's moons."

"Well, it sure makes sense when you explain it that way," said Max, just before Little Mike returned to the Outpost and sat down next to the Cyborg de Milo. She immediately got up and moved to an empty table.

"It's time for me to go," said the Earth Mother, getting up and walking to the door. She turned to me. "Good-bye, Tomahawk. I should be back in six or eight months."

"Good luck," I told her.

"You know," said Nicodemus Mayflower, "it's time we left on our honeymoon." He escorted Sinderella to the door. "See you around."

They followed the Earth Mother out to the landing field.

"Our noble little group seems to be getting nobler and littler," remarked Max.

"Well, we aren't going anywhere," said Crazy Bull.

"At least, not as long as our credit's good here," added Sitting Horse.

"Hey!" said the Bard suddenly. "You two never told me what you did during the war."

"You never asked," said Crazy Bull.

"I'm asking now."

"Too late," said Crazy Bull. "Now it's gonna cost you."

"Right," said Sitting Horse. "You want a story, you pay for our booze while we tell it."

The Bard nodded to me. "Put their drinks on my tab."

"You're a gentleman and a scholar," said Crazy Bull.

"I guess this means we don't get to scalp him, huh?" added Sitting Horse.

Reggie brought them each a refill.

"Okay, you're drinking my liquor," said the Bard. "Now let's have the story."

"Who gets to tell it?" asked Sitting Horse.

"You told the last one, so it's my turn," said Crazy Bull.

"What 'last one'?" interrupted the Bard. "You guys have never told me any of your adventures before."

"You think you're the only hot-shot historian on the Frontier?" shot back Crazy Bull. "There's a guy on Modesto III who not only buys us drinks but pays for our room while we're there."

"Yeah," chimed in Sitting Horse. "He pays for first-rate stories, so that's what we give him. I can't say what you're going to get, since you're only buying us whiskey -- and cheap whiskey at that."

"In fact, if the whiskey was any cheaper," said Crazy Bull, "I'd probably tell you a story where the aliens win."

"Are you going to tell me your story, or are you going to bitch all day?" demanded the Bard.

"Art can't be rushed," said Crazy Bull.

The Bard signaled to me. "Tell Reggie that's all the booze I'm paying for."

"History, on the other hand, can be rushed all to hell and gone," continued Crazy Bull quickly.

"Then get on with it."

"Right."