

The Pirates of Dawn

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Ever hear of Solomon (began Max)? It's a mining world out on the Rim. Rich in diamonds, lots of other precious stones. Not a bad place, really. Good atmosphere, only about 80% Standard gravity. They built a hospital for heart patients out there, since the gravity puts so little stress on them.

But they had a problem. Same problem you'd expect any world with that many diamonds to have.

Security at the mines was tight, and not many diamonds were smuggled off Solomon. A couple of local warlords tried to raid the place, but they didn't have much luck.

But then came the Pirates of Dawn and they made out like, well, pirates.

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"So why were they called the Pirates of Dawn?" asked Big Red.

"I'm coming to that," said Max irritably.

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They were aliens. Nobody knew where they came from. They never made a daylight raid, and they never came in the dead of night. Twilight didn't seem to interest them either. They always came just as the sun was rising, and let me tell you -- they were tough motherfuckers. First raid they made, they killed seventeen security guards and made off with about forty million credits' worth of gemstones. Didn't lose a single man, either.

(Well, "man" is the wrong word for 'em. They had three legs, which made running a bit of a problem, but you couldn't knock one of 'em off his pins no matter how hard you hit him. Matter of fact, they were three-sided all the way up, with three arms, each a third of the way around the trunk of the body from the last one, and three large eyes spaced evenly around the head. Only one mouth, but it wasn't always pointed in the direction they were going.)

They never gave any warning before their raids. They just showed up, blazing away with some kind of pulse weapons. To this day no one knows why they were interested in diamonds, but my guess is they traded them to some renegade humans for bigger weapons and faster ships.

Anyway, they made seven raids the first year, and when the dust had cleared they'd damned near bankrupted the colony -- those members of it that were still alive.

I'd heard about Solomon's problems, and having nothing better to do, I showed up one morning and offered my services. They were so desperate that they didn't even haggle about my fee -- one diamond for each Pirate killed, and a 10-diamond bonus if I could kill them all or chase 'em away for good -- so I took a room in the best hotel in town, a place called The Uncut Diamond, and waited for them to come back.

Problem was, I couldn't really plan anything until I knew they were on their way, and like I said, they never gave any warning. They'd just show up out of nowhere, take what they wanted, and vanish just as quick.

I'd been there 27 days when the next raid occurred. I'd been sitting out every night, and going to bed at midday, and this particular day I saw about fifteen of 'em walking toward the brand-new reinforced assay

office where the stones were kept before being shipped back to the Monarchy. Some of the security guards started firing away, but the Pirates never even flinched. They just fired back with deadly accuracy, and a minute later eight guards lay dead on the ground.

I studied them carefully. I knew we'd killed one, so they couldn't be impervious to our weapons, but nothing we'd fired that morning seemed to damage them. Then I realized that what looked like military uniforms were actually suits of armor based on same alien scientific principle that let them could repel the heat from burners and the noise from screechers. About the only way to take one of the Pirates out was to blow his head off, and from two hundred yards -- which was the distance at which our men started firing -- a head shot with a hand weapon would be a stroke of dumb luck. The Pirates' weapons were a lot more accurate, and with those huge eyes they didn't need any telescopic sights.

I waited until they entered the assay building. Then I moved forward and took up a safe defensive position about thirty yards away behind a trash atomizer, and waited for them to come out, which they did about five minutes later.

I drew a bead on the first one's head, fired, and blew him to Kingdom Come. I nailed the second one behind his ear, and the rest took off like bats out of hell. They weren't exactly graceful on those three legs, but they kept spinning around as they ran, and I couldn't manage another head shot.

I didn't want to step out in the open and chase them because I knew their eyesight and handguns were better than mine, so I waited until they vanished in the distance. When their ship took off a moment later, people began pouring out into the street to tend to the dead security guards.

As for me, I walked over and examined the bodies of the two Pirates I had killed, but it was a useless exercise. There wasn't enough left of the heads to learn anything, and the bodies were so well-armored that it wasn't worth the effort to hunt for weak spots.

Next I examined them for anything remotely resembling a religious artifact, and was relieved as hell when I couldn't find one, because that showed me the way to beat the sons of bitches.

I waited for the mayor to appear -- he'd lagged behind until he was dead certain the ship wasn't coming back -- and I demanded two diamonds for killing the Pirates. The mayor countered that I owed Solomon eight diamonds for the dead guards, and that came to a net payment of six diamonds.

"Bullshit!" I said. "This is Three-Gun Max you're talking to, and if you don't pay me what you owe me, I ain't gonna tell you how to defeat the Pirates of Dawn."

"You know how?" he asked, surprised.

"Yeah, I know how," I answered. "And if you want me to share that knowledge with you, I want my two diamonds right now."

The mayor and the city council started whispering amongst themselves for a minute or two. Then they all straightened up and turned to me.

"Come to my office in half an hour and I'll pay you your diamonds," said the mayor.

"Fine."

"Now -- how do we kill the Pirates?"

"Come to your office in half an hour and I'll be happy to tell you thirty seconds later," I said. "Assuming I've been paid in the interim."

Well, suddenly he couldn't see no reason not to go directly to his office, so I followed him there and waited patiently until he unlocked his safe and withdrew a couple of fine-looking diamonds.

"All right," he said, handing them to me. "Here's your payment. Now, how do we kill the Pirates of Dawn?"

"By recognizing that they are the Pirates of Dawn," I said, "and asking yourself why."

"I don't understand," said the mayor.

"Look," I said, "even though we haven't had much luck to date, they know we can kill them. So they have some alternatives -- they can attack under cover of night, when they're almost impossible to see, or they can attack in daylight, when we'd be sitting ducks if we tried to pick them off. But they don't do either -- they always attack at dawn. Why?"

"I don't know."

"Neither did I," I admitted. "Until I examined the two I killed."

"What did you find?"

"Nothing," I said. "And that was the key."

"Finding nothing was the key?" he repeated, puzzled.

"Yeah. If they'd been carrying anything that implied that they worshipped the sun or the moon, even something that showed they felt the summer and winter solstices were special, it might have explained why they always attack at dawn. But they weren't carrying anything like that -- so it had to be those huge eyes. They can't attack in daylight; the sun blinds them."

"Why not at night, then?" asked the mayor.

"Because Solomon doesn't have a moon, it's the only planet in its system, and it's sixteen light years from the closest star. Your nights are pitch black, so that even the Pirates of Dawn can't see without using some kind of torch that would attract immediate attention and pinpoint their whereabouts."

"Okay, it makes sense," said the major. "But that just explains why they attack at dawn. It doesn't explain how to defeat them."

I shook my head sadly. "You're so dumb I really ought to double my fee," I said. "But what the hell, a bargain is a bargain. Give me ten men, and we'll be ready for them the next time."

And we were. They showed up exactly thirty days later, and we were waiting for them with the brightest spotlights money could buy. We turned them on when the Pirates were maybe fifty yards from the assay building, and picked them off at our leisure while they staggered blindly through the streets.

We let one survive and make it back to the ship so that he could tell all the other Pirates that Solomon had doped them out and they'd better plunder other worlds from now on. And from that day to this, the Pirates of Dawn have never returned.

As for me, I lived like a king for almost a year before I ran into Bet-a-World O'Grady out near the Delphini system and lost the remainder of my diamonds to him in a single night at the poker table.

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"Don't feel too bad," said O'Grady to Max. "I only had them for about three days before I lost them to Underlay McNair." He shook his head ruefully. "It was bluffer's heaven. I lost 50 million credits with nothing to the nine. The sonuvabitch was sitting there holding nothing to the jack."

"Underlay McNair," mused Catastrophe Baker. "I've heard of him."

"He used to be a bookie," said O'Grady. "Remember the big heavyweight freehand championship match between Backbreaker Mahoney and the Penjak Kid?"

"Who could ever forget it?" interjected Big Red. "It was the only fight in history where both men died in the ring."

"Right," said O'Grady. "And since they both died, the bookies didn't have to pay off. Old Underlay, he was sitting there on maybe 15 million credits' worth of bets, so he decided that with a grubstake like that it was time to quit booking bets and start making them."

"I saw the Penjak Kid once," said the Gravedigger. "I always figured the only two men in the galaxy who could take him were Catastrophe Baker and me -- and I wasn't so sure about me."

"I don't know about the Kid," said Hurricane Smith, "but I was there the night Backbreaker Mahoney whipped Jimmy Steelfist, and I think I could have taken him."

Big Red's computer screen came to life.

"Einstein says you're all wrong," said Big Red. "Only one person could have beaten either Mahoney or the Kid."

"Who was he?" asked Gaines.

Big Red transmitted the question, then smiled as the answer came onto his screen.

"It wasn't a he at all."

"An alien?" said Gaines.

"No," said Big Red. "A woman."

"I don't believe it!" scoffed Gaines.

"Einstein's never wrong."

"He is this time."

Einstein tapped away and a new message appeared on the holo screen.

"He wants to know if you've ever heard of the Cyborg de Milo," said Big Red.

"The Cyborg de Milo?" repeated Gaines. "Is he making this up?"

"No," said Achmed of Alphard from across the room. "I knew her. She exists."

"And she's called the Cyborg de Milo?"

"Now she is. I knew her as Venus."

"I'm not going to even ask what her full name was," muttered Gaines.

"Who cares about her name?" said O'Grady. "Tell us why Einstein thinks she was capable of beating Backbreaker Mahoney and the Penjak Kid."

"He doesn't think it," Big Red corrected him. "He knows it."

"And he's right," added Achmed.

"Still why?"