

Reggie's Story

* * * *

Once upon a time (said Reggie) there was a gathering place for the most extraordinary people in the galaxy. It attracted heroes and bandits, artists and athletes, ministers, geniuses, prostitutes, bounty hunters, gamblers, even aliens. Since I am a robot and haven't been programmed for creativity, let's call it the Outpost for lack of a better name.

Unique people came to the Outpost to drink, to tell a story or two, and mainly to mingle with other very special people. It was a haven for them, a place to hide from the mundane and the commonplace, from the fawning adulation and the irrational resentment of the populace at large.

And because they were extraordinary people, they sometimes forgot that there was a galaxy of normal people out there, a galaxy that needed the kind of men and women who were drawn to the Outpost.

One day an alien fleet entered the system. The Navy tried to stand against them, but was destroyed. There was a moment, a single instant in time, when the heroes of the Outpost might have turned the tide of battle, might have driven the aliens not only from the system but from the entire galaxy. But instead of doing what they were born to do, they talked and they drank and they talked some more, and then the moment was gone. The aliens took advantage of their lethargy to destroy the Outpost and everyone in it, and within five years the entire Monarchy had fallen beneath their onslaught.

That's the story. It of course has nothing to do with this Outpost or these heroes.

Thank you for listening.

* * * *

Catastrophe Baker got to his feet.

"All right, Reggie," he said, walking to the door. "I was going out there anyway."

Reggie didn't answer.

"Did you hear me?" said Baker.

Still no answer.

"What's the matter with him?"

"He only talks when he's got something to say," said Little Mike Picasso.

"And now he's said it," added Nicodemus Mayflower.

Gravedigger Gaines got up. "I'll walk you out to the ships," he said to Baker.

"You ain't leaving me behind!" said the Reverend Billy Karma. "Me and the Lord got to protect that little cyborg lady."

Hurricane Smith turned to Langtry Lily. "I really should go with them."

She whispered something to him.

"Certainly, my dear," said Smith. "I'll be happy to have you come along."

In another minute Hellfire Van Winkle and Little Mike Picasso and Sahara del Rio and Sinderella and Nicodemus Mayflower and Argyle and Bet-a-World O'Grady and Sitting Horse and Crazy Bull and the Earth Mother and Achmed of Alphard and Silicon Carny all started making their way to their ships.

"What about you?" Max asked Willie the Bard.

"Somebody's got to wait here and write down the survivors' stories," said the Bard.

"If there are any survivors," said Max. He turned to Big Red. "You going or staying?"

"I'm going," he said. "That is, if I can leave my computer with Tomahawk."

"For safe-keeping?" I asked.

"For communicating with Einstein," said Big Red, indicating the blind genius who sat alone at his table. "His brain may prove to be the difference between victory and defeat."

He tapped out a good-bye to Einstein, then handed me the computer and walked out the door.

"How about you, Max?" I asked.

"Oh, I'm going off to slaughter aliens," he said. "There never was any question about it. But I see about half a dozen unfinished drinks sitting on various tables, and it'd be criminal to pour them out."

He began walking from table to table, downing all the half-empty glasses.

"Protect her, Max," said Reggie.

"Her?"

"The Cyborg de Milo," said Reggie. "She's half robot. I feel a remarkable affinity toward her."

"You got the hots for a lady cyborg?" asked Max.

"Just do what I asked."

"If half of what we heard about her is true, it makes more sense for her to protect me," said Max.

"Please," said Reggie in almost human tones.

Max stared at him for a long moment, then nodded. "Okay, Reggie -- you've got it."

"Thank you, Max," said Reggie.

"Remember this the next time Tomahawk tells you to water my drink."

Then Max went out to his ship, and the Bard, Reggie and I were alone again, except for Einstein. We fell silent, each wondering how such a mismatched bunch of heroes would fare against the alien invaders.

I had a premonition that we didn't have long to wait before we learned the answer.