

The Sergeant Who Hated Everyone

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I wasn't there to fight a war (said Gaines). I was a bounty hunter, not a soldier.

I'd spent the better part of a year looking for Mad Jesse Wilkins. He'd killed more than three dozen men back in the Monarchy, as well as a fair number of women, children, dogs, cats, and alien pets. He lit out for the Frontier when he found out that I was on his trail. I just missed him by a day on Roosevelt III, and I was no more than half an hour behind him when he made his escape from Far London.

He headed toward the Albion Cluster, changed his identity and signed on as a sergeant in the Peloponnesian War -- a neat little riff on the notion of the coward hiding out in the middle of a battlefield.

By the time I got there the war was over. There was nothing but a huge crater where the human headquarters and landing field had been --

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"Just call me Bullseye Max!" shouted Max with a laugh. "I never miss what I aim for!"

I had an urge to order the men's room servo-mech to tell everyone whether Max always hit what he aimed for, but I was more interested in hearing the rest of the Gravedigger's story, so I kept quiet.

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Anyway (continued Gaines), I couldn't find any sign of life ... but I knew Mad Jesse's skills, and I figured he was a little harder to kill than most men, so I decided to do a systematic search of the planet.

That's when I found out that most of the men were still alive, and that they'd made their peace with the Peloponnes even if their officers hadn't. At first I thought they were unwittingly laying the groundwork for another war, one that would be fought over all the Peloponne women they'd accumulated, but then I learned that each Peloponne female laid about ten thousand eggs a year, and that the larvae reached maturity in about five years, so no one was apt to mind a few hundred of them choosing to live with the former enemy.

As a matter of fact, the men had all pretty much decided to go back to human worlds, since it was a lot easier for their womenfolk to pass as humans than for them to pass as insects. Now that the war was now officially over, the Monarchy was preparing to rebuild the planet and throw all kinds of money at the Peloponnes. They were also willing to do just about any favors that were requested, which included transporting all the men and their ladyfriends to other worlds.

I checked each man as he left, and Jesse wasn't among them. (It's pretty hard to disguise yourself when you're 400 pounds and have steel teeth and wear a patch over one eye.)

I found him a few days later, holed up in a cave halfway up a mountain, still wearing his sergeant's uniform. I waited until he went out to gather some firewood and got the drop on him when he returned.

"Hi, Jesse," I said, pointing my screecher right at him.

"Either shoot or get the hell out of my way," he said without slowing his pace. "I got things to do."

"Shut up and listen to me," I said. "There's a million-credit price on your head. I'll make you the same proposition I make everyone I hunt down: pay me the million credits yourself and you can walk away a

free man."

"Some lawman!" he snorted contemptuously.

"I'm not a lawman," I said. "I'm what you might call an independent contractor. My only loyalty is to whoever pays me. That could be you."

"I ain't got a million credits," said Mad Jesse. "And if I did, I wouldn't give it to you anyway."

"You spent all the money you got for killing all those men and women?"

"Nobody paid me nothing," he said. "I _like_ killing people."

"Well, that makes it kind of awkward," I said. I looked around. "You got any partners here?"

"You mean those sniveling little turncoats?"

"Does that cover _all_ the deserters, or just the ones you don't like?"

"Both. I don't like none of 'em."

"What about a woman?"

"Don't have much use for 'em," said Jesse. "Besides, they shipped 'em all home months ago."

"I mean a Peloponne."

"I _hate_ bugs!" he exploded. "And I especially hate bugs that look like women!"

Well, I spent about half an hour with him, and at the end of that time I still didn't know what he _liked_. He hated his fellow man, he hated women, he hated children, he hated the army, he hated the government, he hated aliens. He wasn't real fond of dogs or cats or birds either.

I offered him a drink while I was trying to decide whether to kill him on the spot or take him back to stand trial. He took one sip, spit it out, and hurled my flask down the side of the mountain.

"I hate bad booze!" he bellowed.

"That was real Cygnian cognac!" I said.

"What do _you_ know about taste, asshole?" he said.

It was a real dilemma. If I shot him where he was, I'd have to take him a third of the way across the galaxy to claim the reward, and he didn't smell all that good _now_. On the other hand, if I took him back alive, I'd have to listen to him all the way, and I figured I couldn't take much more than an hour before I killed him anyway.

And then the perfect solution occurred to me.

I got up, motioned him to enter the cave, and kept my screecher trained on him.

"Good-bye, Jesse," I said.

He just stared at me uncomprehendingly.

"I've been a bounty hunter for most of my life. I deal with nothing but the scum of the galaxy -- and I have

to say that you are the most unpleasant man it's ever been my displeasure to meet."

"You ain't gonna kill me?" he said.

"No."

"Or take me back?"

"No."

"Why the hell not?"

"Because I've come to the conclusion that the worst punishment you can undergo is to be stranded on a world populated by nothing but giant bugs who don't like you any better than you like them. Before I leave I'll tell them that you're here, and I'll make sure they know how dangerous you can be, so that they never wander anywhere near you alone or unarmed."

"You can't do this to me!" he bellowed. "What about your reward?"

"I've decided that the thought of you spending the rest of your life here is all the reward I want or need," I said.

And it was.

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"I just love stories of death and carnage!" enthused the Reverend Billy Karma. "They're so religious, if you know what I mean."

"Did you ever go back to see what had become of Mad Jesse?" asked Max.

The Gravedigger shook his head. "For all I know he's still there, living off fruits and berries and eating an occasional grubworm for protein." He smiled, which he didn't do more than once a month or so. "At least, I like to think so."

"I find it amazing that the three of you fought in the same war on the same side and never once met each other," said the Bard.

"I didn't fight in the war," Gaines corrected him. "It was over by the time I got there."

"How long did it last, start to finish?" asked the Bard.

"Too damned long," said Max. "I'd like to get my hands on whoever thought up that particular war." He paused thoughtfully. "It couldn't have been General Bigelow. He wanted to leave worse than anyone."

"Who knows?" said Little Mike Picasso with a shrug. "People have been thinking up wars for thousands of years now -- and then getting other people to go off and fight them."

"Which brings up an interesting question," said Nicodemus Mayflower.

"Yeah?" said Little Mike. "And what question is that?"

"Who thought up the very first war?"

"Hell, who invents anything?" chimed in Catastrophe Baker. "There's no way to know. Probably it was some caveman with a club."

"That's not really true," said the Bard. "Most inventions are carefully recorded and documented."

"Yeah?"

"Absolutely. Don't take my word for it. Ask Einstein."

"Ask him?" repeated Baker. "I don't even know how to let him know I'm here, short of sticking a pin into him."

"Just ask your question," said Big Red, pulling out a pocket computer. "I'll transmit it to him."

"I don't know what the hell to ask," said Baker. He paused for a moment, then came up with a solution. "Have him tell us about some of the most important inventions."

Big Red alternately whispered into his computer and tapped on its screen. A moment later Einstein's computer started buzzing and whirring, and he quickly tapped in his answer.

"Well?" asked Baker as Big Red stared at his screen.

"A Domarian named Kabbis Koba invented eating three billion and twenty-seven years ago, at 9:15 on a Sunday morning," replied Big Red. "It became wildly popular, since people hadn't really been able to figure out what to do with their mouths when they weren't talking, and it quickly spread to other planets." He paused, staring at the tiny screen. "Here's another. Not only did Moses lead his people out of bondage to the Promised Land, but he also invented the very first dessert. Einstein's a little vague on the recipe, but it seems to have involved figs, honey, and whipped cream."

"That's the stupidest thing I ever heard in a long lifetime of listening to stupid things in barrooms!" snorted Baker.

"Don't be so sure of that," said Argyle. "Just because your race doesn't codify its history doesn't mean the rest of us don't."

"What particular history have you got in mind?" demanded Baker pugnaciously.

"My own ancestor, Quillot Tariot III, invented the sneeze," said Argyle proudly.

"You don't invent something like a sneeze," said Baker. "You just do it."

"Well, someone had to do it first."

"I don't believe any of this."

"Okay," said Argyle. "Who do you think invented the sneeze?"

"How the hell should I know?" said Baker.

"Hah!" said Argyle triumphantly. "And I repeat: Hah!"

"That's quite an accomplishment," said Crazy Bull.

"Thank you," said Argyle.

"Of course, our race invented both the pun and the double entendre, as well as the crude off-color remark."

"And colors," added Sitting Horse. "Don't forget -- we invented colors too."

"And a damned good thing we did," said Crazy Bull. "You can't imagine how dull the universe was before that. It looked exactly like a black-and-white holoscreen, only bigger."

"It was still dull," interjected Sahara del Rio. "Until my race invented singing."

"Your race did that?" asked Crazy Bull, surprised.

"You want a demonstration?" she asked.

"Sure, why not?"

She promptly hit Q over high C, and shattered six of my crystal glasses.

"Well, maybe we didn't invent singing," said Hellfire Van Winkle, "but I'll lay plenty of eight-to-five that we invented yodeling."

"I wonder who invented gambling?" mused O'Grady. "That's what makes life worth living."

"Wait a minute," said Big Red. "I'm getting another message from Einstein."

We all waited until it finished scrolling across his screen.

"He says you're all wrong, that singing and colors and gambling and even yodeling are all well and good, but there was only one invention that can truly be credited with making life worthwhile."

Everyone fell silent, for Einstein was almost never wrong.

"Is he gonna tell us what it is?" asked Max.

"Yeah," said Big Red, staring at the tiny screen. "It's coming up now."