

## \*Catastrophe Baker and the Ship Who Purred\*

\* \* \* \*

I figured it was up to me to end the war (began Baker), and I decided that the direct way was probably the best way. I knew there was a major encampment on Henry III, so I flew there as soon as I left the Outpost.

I didn't try to sneak up on them or nothing like that. I just walked into the middle of their camp, told 'em who I was, and offered to fight their champion, mano a mano.

My notion was that whoever won the fight won the war, but that didn't sit right with their chief, who didn't have the authority to surrender his garrison, let alone the whole Plantagenet system, to a force of one. While I was talking to him, I was introduced to a good-looking lady gun-runner, so I came up with a counter-offer: if their champion won, I'd fight on their side for the rest of the war, while if I won, they'd give me Queen Eleanor of Provence, which is what I'd named the gun-runner.

They decided I was so formidable that they ought to be able to throw a pair of champions at me at the same time, and they were such earnest little fellers that I agreed. I figure the whole fight took about two minutes, and I'm sure the thin one will walk again someday, though I got my doubts about the short muscular one.

Anyway, they were men of honor -- well, aliens of honor -- and they turned Queen Eleanor over to me. She wasn't none too happy about it, but I escorted her to my ship and, just to make sure she didn't run away, I stayed on the ground while she opened the hatch and entered the airlock. And then, before I could stop her, Eleanor locked the hatch and took off, leaving me standing on the ground looking foolish as all get-out.

The aliens laughed their heads off, and for a minute there I was thinking of challenging the whole batch of 'em to a freehand fight to the death, but then I decided that it wasn't really their fault that I'd found a lemon in the garden of love, so I had 'em show me her ship, which I figured was mine now.

It was the strangest-looking damned spaceship I'd ever laid eyes on, but I couldn't see no reason not to appropriate it just the same, so I bade all the giggling aliens good-bye after signing twenty or thirty autographs and climbed into the ship.

The control panel was like nothing I'd ever seen before. All the readouts were in some alien language, and the chairs and bulkheads felt kind of soft and almost lifelike. I didn't pay much attention to them, though. My main concern was trying to figure out how to activate the ship and take off.

\* \* \* \*

Hurricane Smith got up and walked to the door.

"I don't mean any disrespect, Catastrophe," he said, "but I've been keeping an eye on the time, and I really think I'd better go pick up Sheba on Adelaide of Louvain before she runs out of air."

"No problem," said Baker. "It wouldn't do to have your lady love suffocate while you stay here drinking and enjoying yourself."

"I'm glad you understand," said Smith. "I'll see you in a day or two."

\* \* \* \*

One button on the control panel caught my eye (said Baker). It was a little brighter and a little shinier than the others, and since I couldn't just stare at the panel all day and do nothing, I reached out and pushed it.

And heard a very high-pitched human squeal.

"Who's there?" I said, drawing my burner and spinning around.

"Me," said a feminine voice.

"Where are you hiding?" I demanded.

"I'm not hiding at all," said the voice. "I'm the ship."

"Are you a cyborg or an artificial intelligence?" I asked.

"Neither."

"I'm running out of guesses," I said.

"I'm a living, genetically engineered being."

"You sound female," I said.

"I am."

\* \* \* \*

Baker looked up and saw Hurricane Smith standing in the doorway.

"I thought you'd left," he said.

"I did," said Smith. "But I heard what you were saying, and I came back for the rest of the story."

"It's just about an alien spaceship," said Baker. "Or an alien that happened to be a spaceship."

"A female alien."

"I thought you had your own female alien to worry about," said Baker.

"You mean Sheba?"

"Right. Ain't she busy running out of air on Adelaide of Louvain?"

"She's got big lungs," said Smith with a nonchalant shrug. He walked back to his table, sat down, and leaned forward intently. "Go on with your story."

Baker stared at him for a long moment and finally shrugged. "Whatever makes you happy."

\* \* \* \*

"Do any of these make us take off?" I asked, hitting another couple of buttons on the panel (continued Baker).

"Oh, my God!" she breathed.

"Did I hurt you, ma'am?"

"Do it again."

So I pressed the buttons again, and the ship started purring just like a cat.

"You got a name, ma'am?" I said.

"Leonora," she sighed.

"Well, Leonora, ma'am," I said, "can you maybe tell me how to get the hell off Henry III before these here aliens decide to bust the truce I kind of threw on 'em when they weren't looking?"

"Just sit down," she said. "I'll take care of it."

So I sat down, and before I could strap myself into the chair its arms grabbed me and kind of wrapped themselves around me, and then I looked at the viewscreen and saw we were already above the stratosphere.

The arms released me and kind of stroked me here and there before they went back into place, and then I got to my feet again and continued looking around.

"What's your name?" asked Leonora.

"Baker," I said. "Catastrophe Baker."

"What a romantic name!" she crooned.

"You really think so?" I said. "I always thought Hurricane Smith and Gravedigger Gaines grabbed up the really good names." I walked to the back of the cabin. "Where's the galley? I ain't eaten since before I landed on Henry III."

A wall slid away. "Just enter this corridor," she said, "and it's the first room on the left."

So I took a step into the corridor, and the ship shuddered a little like it was going through a minor ion storm, and I stuck my arms out against the walls to make sure I didn't fall down.

"Oh!" said Leonora. And then: "Oh! Oh! Oh!"

"I'm sorry if I've discommoded you, ma'am," I said. "I don't mean to do you no harm."

"You're not doing me any harm!" she said, and I could have sworn she was panting.

Well, I kept walking down the corridor and she kept saying "Oh!" with each stop I took, and then I came to a room on the left, and I entered it, and sure enough it was the galley, though it wasn't like any galley I'd ever seen before. There was a table and a chair right in the middle, and all kinds of incomprehensible controls and gauges along one wall.

"What would you like, Catastrophe Baker?" asked Leonora.

"Maybe a sandwich and a beer, if it's no trouble, ma'am," I said.

"No trouble at all. Do you see the glowing pink button on the wall, just to the left of the holographic readout?"

"Yeah."

"Just press it."

"Don't I have to tell it what I want?"

"Just press it!" said Leonora urgently.

So I walked over and pressed it.

"Wow!" purred Leonora.

"What do I do now, ma'am?" I asked.

"Now you eat."

"What I mean is, where's my food?"

"On the table," said Leonora -- and sure enough, it was.

I sat down and started chewing on the sandwich.

"You're so much more considerate than my last owner," said Leonora.

"I ain't your owner, ma'am," I said. "I'm more like your borrower."

"We would make such a wonderful team!" she said. "Won't you consider it?"

"Well, sure, if you want me to keep you," I answered.

"Oh, yes!" she whispered.

"Well, as long as we're man and ship, how about heading over to Barleycorn II?" I said.

"Done."

"As simple as that?"

"Well, you could get us there faster by adjusting the navigational control," she said.

"How do I do that?"

A wall panel slid into the floor, revealing a whole new bunch of flashing lights and buttons and controls and such.

"Do you see that little wheel on the Q-valve?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"Turn it to the left."

"Whatever you say, ma'am."

I walked over to it and gave it a quick spin.

"Oh my oh my oh my!" she shrieked.

"Did I hurt you, ma'am?"

"No!"

"Is that it, or is there anything else I should do?"

Well, I never knew you had to fiddle with so many controls to adjust a navigational computer, but finally I must have hurt her because she told me she couldn't take any more, and I said that was okay, if we got there an hour or two later it wouldn't be no problem.

The trip took two days, and she was just the sweetest thing you'd ever want to meet or travel with. She insisted that I eat three meals a day, and we kept working on that navigational system whenever I had a chance, and then finally we touched down on Barleycorn and suddenly I noticed a note of concern in Leonora's voice.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"I'm off to visit an old friend," I told her.

"Will I ever see you again?"

"Sure you will," I said. "I don't plan to spend the rest of my life on Barleycorn II."

Actually I just planned to spend one night there, renewing an old acquaintanceship with the Evening Star, a lady embezzler who doubled as an exotic dancer. I took her out to dinner, and during the course of the meal I mentioned Leonora, and nothing would do but that I took her there later in the evening so she could see the living ship for herself.

"She's certainly cute," she said as we stood in front of Leonora.

"So are you," I said, kind of gently nuzzling her neck and ear and starting to subtly remove her tunic.

"And you got racier lines."

"My, you're impetuous!" she said, giggling and slapping my hand -- but not so hard that I took it away.

"Could be," I replied, since I hadn't never seen my birth certificate. "But my friends call me Catastrophe."

Well, we started renewing our friendship in earnest, right there in the shadow of the ship. We kind of did a little of this and a little of that, and by the time I took her back home she decided that no woman in her right mind would ever call me Catastrophe again.

It was when I came back to the ship that the trouble started.

"I've never been so insulted in all my life!" said Leonora.

"What are you talking about?"

"The second I turn my back you seduce that ugly little tart!"

"She ain't ugly, and besides, I done it in front of your back," I said, figuring I had to speak up for the Evening Star since she wasn't there to speak up for her own self.

"And you're filthy!" continued Leonora. "Get out of those clothes and take a bath immediately!"

"You're sounding a lot more like a mother than a spaceship," I complained.

"Did I upset you?" she asked.

"Yeah, a little."

"Good!" she snapped. "Then we're even!"

Well, from that moment on things just went from bad to worse. Every time I gave her a new location to visit, she gave me the old third degree about what woman I was planning to ravish. She wouldn't send or accept any subspace radio message that had a female at the other end. If I talked in my sleep and mentioned a lady's name, she'd wake me up and demand to know who I'd been talking about.

Finally, after three or four more days, she announced that she was taking me back to the Plantagenet system.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"I can't stand it any more!" she said. "I can't concentrate on navigation! I can't compute my fuel consumption! I can't focus on meteor swarms and ion storms!"

"You got some kind of headache?" I asked.

"I have a case of unrequited love, and it's driving me crazy!" she said. "You are my every thought, and yet I mean nothing to you."

"Sure you do," I said.

"As a woman?"

"As a spaceship."

She screamed in agony.

"I'm sorry, truly I am," I told her. "I wish I wasn't so goddamned attractive and irresistible to women, but it ain't something I can control. It just seems to go with being a practitioner of the hero trade."

She didn't say another word until we entered the atmosphere of Henry II. Then she asked in a very small voice: "Would you adjust my gyros, just once, for old time's sake?"

"Sure," I said. "Where are they?"

A couple of knobs started flashing.

"Well, I'll be damned!" I explained. "I thought you used them to home in on different radio frequencies."

I reached out and started turning the knobs.

"Mmmmmm!" said Leonora.

I spun the left-hand one.

"Ohhhhhh!" she said.

I twisted the right-hand one.

\_"Oh God! Oh God! Oh God!"\_ she screamed. Then: "Was it good for you, too?"

We landed a couple of minutes later, and then she let me out and took off for parts unknown.

And that's the true story of the Ship Who Purred.

\* \* \* \*

"Did she give you any hint about where she might be going?" asked Hurricane Smith.

"No," answered Baker. "Last I saw of her, she was heading out toward the Quinellus Cluster."

"How much of a start did she have?"

"On who?"

"On me, damn it!"

"Ain't you got a ladyfriend what's fast running out of oxygen on Adelaide of Louvain?" said Baker.

"Never interfere with someone else's romance!" said Smith severely. He looked around the room, and finally his gaze fell on Billy Karma. "You're broke, right, Reverend?"

"Well, I always got the Lord and the Good Book," replied Billy Karma, "but truth to tell, neither of 'em bring will all that much of a price at a pawn shop."

"How'd you like to make a quick two thousand credits?"

"Who do I have to crucify?"

"Just fly to Adelaide of Louvaine and pick up my ... uh ... this female alien named Sheba, and bring her back here."

"It's a big moon, and I assume she's just a normal-sized godless alien heathen," said Billy Karma. "How will I find her?"

"I'll transmit her position to your ship's computer."

"Sounds good to me," said Billy Karma. "But I'll want the money up front."

Hurricane Smith pulled out his wad and peeled off a pair of thousand-credit notes. He handed one to the Reverend and one to me.

"Half up front, and Tomahawk will give you the other half when you show up with Sheba. And Reverend?"

"Yeah?"

"Leave right now and go as fast as you can. If she suffocates, I'm going to want my money back."

"I'm on my way," said Billy Karma, running to the door.

"I'd better go with him," said Big Red, getting up from his table.

Hurricane Smith looked at him curiously.

"I assume you want her brought back intact as well as alive," explained Big Red.

"If possible," answered Smith without much interest.

"You ought to know that you never send the Reverend out without a chaperone." Big Red took Billy Karma by the arm and walked out the door. "Let's go, Rev."

Hurricane Smith turned to Baker. "The Quinellus Cluster, you say?"

Baker nodded his head. "That's right."

He walked to the door. "Wish me luck."

Then he was gone.

"Best luck I could wish him is that he never finds her," said Baker, emptying his glass.

"But it would make a nice story," remarked the Bard.

"Yeah, it probably would." Suddenly Baker turned to him. "I want you to sell that goddamned book before you die."

"I'll do my best," said the Bard, surprised. "But why do you care?"

"That book's my immortality," continued Baker. He took a deep, heroic breath. "And on days like this, I feel like I just might want to live forever."

"Trust me, you will," promised the Bard. He patted his notebook. "I'll see to it."

Those who were left drank and told stories deep into the night. Then, one by one, they began leaving.

Little Mike Picasso offered to capture Silicon Carny on canvas. She liked the notion, and they went off together to his studio on Beethoven IV.

Bet-a-World O'Grady remembered that there was a high-stakes game on Calliope, the carnival world, and decided that if he left at dawn he just had time to make it.

Sitting Horse and Crazy Bull went home to spend a little time with the other Injuns and replenish their cash supplies.

Truth to tell, I don't know where the Cyborg de Milo went. One minute she was sitting there, and the next she was gone. I never even saw her leave.

Einstein announced that he'd come up with a new approach to transmuting base metals into gold that was even more efficient than the last such method he had devised, and Gravedigger Gaines offered to fly him into the Commonwealth so he could register it at a patent office.

Catastrophe Baker stayed a few hours longer, but I could tell he was feeling restless. Finally he decided it had been too long since he'd encountered any Pirate Queens, so he borrowed a ship and went out looking for some at the edge of the galaxy.

So it was just Three-Gun Max and the permanent residents -- me, Reggie, and the Bard -- for an afternoon. But this is the Outpost, and it never stays empty for long.

Doc Arcturus showed up at twilight, followed by Treetop Quatermaine, and the Sapphire of Sappho, who could have given Silicon Carny a run for her money. By sunset they were arriving in force, Cyclone Jim Crevich and the alien Br'er Rabbit and Spidersilk Sally and Billy the Blade and the Titanium Kid and a couple of dozen others.

Before long there wasn't an empty chair in the place. Then Snakeskin Malone walked in, strode across the floor like he was still outside on one of his beloved jungle worlds, and had Reggie pour him a tall one.



"Hi, Snakeskin," said Max. "Long time no see. What have you been doing with yourself?"

"I've been out making history," he replied.

"Let's hear about it," said the Bard, pulling out his pen and notebook so he could graft yet another story onto his epic chronicle before both the adventure and the adventurer were lost forever.

That's pretty much what we do at the Outpost -- live a little history, make a little history, tell a little history. It's not an easy place to find, but if you ever get here, I think you'll agree that it was worth the effort.