

\*Catastrophe Baker in the Hall of the Neptunian Kings\*

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Before Baker could even begin, Three-Gun Max spoke up.

"There ain't no Neptunian Kings," he said.

"What makes you think so?" retorted Baker.

"There ain't nothing at all on Neptune except a lot of empty real estate and a bunch of air nobody can breathe."

"Well, they told me it was Neptune," answered Baker, "but I suppose it could have been Jupiter."

"Ain't nothing there neither," said Max. "Only there's a whole lot more of it."

"Actually," offered Big Red, "there used to be a hockey team called the Neptunian Kings. But I don't think they ever got within two thousand parsecs of Neptune." He paused. "They weren't very good, anyway."

"Who's telling this story anyway?" demanded Baker pugnaciously.

"Go ahead and talk," said Max. "But I reserve the right to get up and leave if you start telling any whoppers."

"Fair enough," said Baker. He tapped the pearl handle of his burner. "And I reserve the right to blow your balls off if you even think of getting up."

"It figures to be true," added Nicodemus Mayflower. "After all, it's not as if he's talking about the Hall of the Neptunian Priests."

"Or hockey players," said Big Red.

"Or oversized killer roaches," muttered Hurricane Smith under his breath.

"Are you all gonna listen or not?" roared Baker, and suddenly a hush fell over the Outpost.

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It happened maybe four years ago (began Baker, glaring at Max until he was sure he wasn't going to be interrupted again.) I'd just left Oom Paul, the little diamond-mining world out by Antares, and I'd heard tell that Fort Knox wasn't radioactive any longer, and that all you had to do was just waltz in and carry out as many gold bars as you wanted, and there was nothing there to stop you except maybe thirty or forty guards, and that they were mostly little ones at that.

But my navigational computer and I got to telling dirty jokes to one another, and playing poker, and otherwise amusing ourselves to combat the boredom of the long voyage, and damned if we didn't combat it so well that the computer forgot to pay attention to where we were, and all of a sudden we were orbiting Neptune (or maybe Jupiter) rather than Earth.

Problem is, I didn't know it until we landed, and the ship told me I'd better put on a spacesuit and helmet. It struck me as kind of a strange request, but I just figured we'd touched down near a toxic waste dump. It wasn't until I stepped out of the ship that I realized that the landscape didn't bear a lot of resemblance to all the holos I'd seen of Earth.

I was about to climb back in and give the computer a piece of my mind when I saw a huge building off in the distance. It had all kinds of strange angles, and stained-glass windows with colors I hadn't never seen before, all of which roused my curiosity, so I decided to take a closer look at it.

I headed on over to it, and found myself facing a door that must have been seventy feet high. I pushed against it, but it was latched or bolted from the inside and it didn't give an inch. This just made me more interested to see what was on the inside, so I walked around the whole of the building, which must have been about half a mile on each side, looking for a way in.

When I couldn't find none -- there were maybe ten other doors, all of them locked -- I decided to climb up the side of the of the building and ease myself in through one of the windows.

Well, let me tell you, that was a lot easier said than done. Oh, the building was easy enough to climb, because it was covered with weird carvings and strange-looking gargoyles, so I had no trouble getting handholds and footholds -- but when I reached the window, which was maybe forty feet above the ground, I discovered that it was locked too, and strong as I am, I couldn't kick it in.

I considered melting it with my burner, but I wasn't exactly sure what the atmospheric make-up of Neptune was, and I figured that if it happened to have a high concentration of oxygen, like maybe 80% or so, I could set the whole planet on fire just by pulling the trigger.

So I kept climbing, and after another hour I reached the roof, which was about three hundred feet above the ground, and started walking along it, looking for vents or chimneys I could slide down. Sure enough, I found one smack-dab in the middle of the roof. Problem was, it went straight down, and I figured the fall could kill or cripple me, so I looked further, and finally found a hatch leading to the interior of the building. I decided it had been used by the guys who built the place, or maybe the one who had to keep the roof clean -- but whoever used it were as big as the guys who walked through the doorways, because each step was maybe fifteen feet down from the last one.

I hung down from the top step by one arm, then let go and dropped maybe six feet to the next one, and climbed down the whole staircase like that. When I got to the bottom, I found myself in a pitch-black chamber. I turned on my helmet's spotlight, found a door, and pushed against it -- and this one gave way.

I stepped out into a huge room, filled with two dozen ornate chairs, each capable of holding a being that was maybe seventy feet high.

Then I heard a voice in my ear: "You can breathe the air in here now."

I spun around and whipped out my pistol.

"Who said that?" I demanded.

"Me," came the answer. "Your suit. I have analyzed the air, and it is breathable."

"Thanks."

"It's just damned lucky you didn't break that window," said the suit.

I figured I could spend the rest of the day standing there arguing with it, or I could climb out of it and start exploring, so I did the latter.

Then I started at one end of the hall, and began walking past all the chairs, and I decided that each of them was a throne, and had probably been retired when the king who sat on it had died or lit out for greener pastures.

Now, truth to tell, I didn't have no serious interest in Neptunian Kings, but I didn't have nothing against maybe finding some palace jewels, so I set out to see if there were any around for the taking.

The hall was mostly empty except for the chairs and some weird-looking tapestries hanging on the walls, but then I stumbled onto an anteroom just behind Throne Number Nine -- and what should I find but an absolutely gorgeous naked lady standing there staring at me.

"Good morning, ma'am," I said. "I'm Catastrophe Baker, at your service."

She didn't say a word or move a muscle, and I figured I'd kind of startled her into immobility.

"Dressed in kind of a hurry this morning, didn't you?" I said, trying to break the ice with a little friendly conversation.

She still didn't answer, so I walked a little closer to see if maybe she was a statue.

I couldn't see her breathing, and her eyes seemed fixed on some spot in the Hall of the Neptunian Kings, but she sure looked like a flesh-and-blood lady to me, rather than an imitation.

Then I realized that I had to be mistaken, because she was maybe a foot smaller than me, whereas anyone who lived in this place seemed like they couldn't go much less than fifty feet at the shoulder or the withers, whichever came first.

It was a shame, because in a long lifetime of looking at beautiful naked ladies, I hadn't never seen one more beautiful than this one.

I was going to leave and go back to looking for jewels and other marketable trinkets, but first I walked over to more closely admire the artist's handiwork. Even from two feet away you couldn't tell that she wasn't a real flesh-and-blood woman. Her skin was as smooth as could be, and I reached out to touch it, just to see if it was marble or stone or some artificial fabric -- and damned if it didn't feel just like a real woman's skin.

I wondered just how realistic all the details were, so I kind of got to feeling her here and there and the next place -- and when I laid my hand on the next place, she gave out a shriek that would have woke the dead and slapped my face.

"I thought you were a statue!" I said, startled.

"I was," she answered in the most melodic voice. "I apologize for hitting you. It was an instinctive reaction."

"You got some mighty powerful instincts there, ma'am," I said.

"Actually, I owe you my gratitude. I've been frozen in that position for the past fifteen millennia." She shuddered, which produced an eye-popping effect. "I could have been there forever if it hadn't been for you."

"Suppose you tell me what's going on, ma'am," I said, trying to grasp it all.

"I was King Thoraster's favored concubine, and when he thought I might have lost my heart to one of the palace guards, he had his technicians put me in stasis. There was only one way to release me in case he should change his mind at a later date, but he never thought any casual observer would be so gross and uncouth as to touch me there."

"How did he manage to freeze you for fifteen thousand years?" I asked.

She began explaining it to me, but as far as I'm concerned any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from doubletalk, so I just kind of tuned her out after a couple of minutes and settled for admiring what old King Thoraster had been wasteful enough to freeze.

"And that's how he did it," she concluded.

"Just how big was he?" I asked.

"The same size as all the others," she replied, looking puzzled by my question.

"Then, pardon an indelicate inquiry, but how -- ?"

"Ah! I see!" she said. "Let's go into the Hall of the Kings, where the ceiling is a little higher."

I followed her, until we were standing right in the middle of the hall.

"Now I want you to do me one last favor," she said.

"If it's within my power to do, ma'am," I said, "you've but to ask."

Suddenly she turned the prettiest shade of red. "It's very embarrassing," she said. "I think I'd prefer to whisper it to you."

"I'm all ears," I said.

She leaned over and began whispering.

"You want me to do \_what\_?" I asked aloud.

She turned an even brighter red and repeated it.

"Are you sure, ma'am?" I said. "I don't believe there can be five planets in the galaxy where doing that won't get us both thrown into the hoosegow." I paused. "Still, it sounds pretty interesting now that I come to think about it."

"Please!" she said.

So I did it -- and then, right in the middle, when things were getting both interesting and complicated, she pushed me back.

"Get away!" she whispered.

"What's the matter?" I asked. "Did I do it wrong?"

"You were doing it perfectly!" she said, blushing furiously. "Now get back!"

So I got back, and none too soon, because suddenly she started growing right before my eyes, and a minute later she was mighty close to sixty feet tall, give or take a couple of inches.

"Thank you, Catastrophe Baker!" she said. "Thoraster's scientists made that the only way I could ever regain my true size. They never dreamed that I'd find anyone twisted enough to help me!" She smiled down on me. "I shall never forget you!"

"But we ain't finished!" I protested.

"It's no longer possible," she said. "I must find if any of my race still survives, and you must don your suit and return to your ship."

"I ain't in no hurry," I said.

"Yes you are," she corrected me. "The mechanism that controls the Hall of the Kings sensed your metabolic needs and created a breathable atmosphere for you, but now that I am alive again, it will soon revert to the atmosphere that exists outside the building."

"This is a hell of a way to leave someone who did you such an enormous favor," I said unhappily.

She looked at me thoughtfully for a moment. "Yes, I suppose it is," she said, and scooped me up in one of her giant hands.

Decorum forbids me from telling you what she did next. Besides, there's worlds where I could get twenty years to life just for describing it.

When we were done, I put on my spacesuit and went back to the ship and took off. It was only after I'd left Sol far behind me that I remembered I hadn't finished looking for the jewels. I considered turning around and going back for them, but then I figured that I'd experienced the most precious jewel of all, so I just kept going, and never returned to the Hall of the Neptunian Kings.

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I looked around the Outpost, and I'd have to say that as eager as the men were to find out exactly what that giant Neptunian lady had done to or with Catastrophe Baker, they didn't look half as fascinated as the women.

"I don't suppose you'd like to whisper the dirty parts to me?" suggested Sinderella.

"I wouldn't want to embarrass you, ma'am," said Baker.

"Just start whispering and we'll see who blushes first," she said confidently.

"I'm always looking to extend my knowledge," said Silicon Carny. "Perhaps you and I could finish what you and the Neptunian woman started."

"You tell me what she did once she was sixty feet tall," promised the Earth Mother, "and I'll tell you one that could get you thirty years just for listening to me."

"If we do what I'm thinking of," added Sinderella, giving him a sultry look, "I'll bet I wind up sixty feet tall too."

"And what if you lose?" asked Bet-a-World O'Grady, whose interest was suddenly piqued.

"I'll have had more fun than you have when you lose at cards," she replied with a smile.

"Hard to argue with that," agreed O'Grady.

Suddenly Big Red's computer came to life, and he looked at the holographic screen.

"Einstein wants to know how she got off the planet," he said.

"Beats me," answered Baker. "I don't rightly know for a fact that she did."

"He says she would have needed one hell of a ship, and he doesn't figure that it was fueled up and waiting for fifteen thousand years."

"I tell a story about a naked woman who's been kept in stasis for a hundred and fifty centuries, and suddenly grows sixty feet tall, and that's all he's concerned with?" demanded Baker.

"He says he's figured out all the other stuff, and it all makes scientific sense. The only thing that bothers him is the ship."

"He's figured out what they did?" said Silicon Carny.

"Yeah. He says that was the easy part."

"Tell him I want to talk to him later."

"He already knows," said Big Red.

"He does?" she said, surprised.

"He's Einstein, isn't he?" said Big Red, as if that was all the explanation anyone required.

"Sixty feet tall!" mused Nicodemus Mayflower. "Hell, she was even too big for Magic Abdul-Jordan!"

"She sounds more like Hurricane's kind of woman than Baker's," observed Max.

"What do you mean?" asked Baker.

"Well, whatever else she was, she sure as hell wasn't human," said Max.

"She was human enough," replied Baker with a fond smile of recollection.

"You didn't exactly describe her, except to say she was beautiful," said Little Mike Picasso. "What did she look like? Maybe I can draw a sketch of her."

"Long auburn hair, down almost to her waist," said Baker, looking off into space as he pictured his Neptunian lady. "Full moist red lips. High cheekbones. Tiny little nose. And her eyes were something else." He paused. "Hungry."

"You're hungry?" I asked.

"No," he answered. "She had hungry eyes."

"That's not really much help," said Little Mike.

"That's what she looked like," said Baker.

"No one has hungry eyes."

"\_She\_ did."

"Look," said Little Mike in his best professional manner, "eyes can be lots of things. They can be blue or brown or gray or green or black. They can be narrow or round or slanted. They can be crossed or cocked. They can even be flashing. But they can't be hungry."

"Sure they can," said Hurricane Smith.

"Another quarter heard from," said Little Mike. He turned to Smith. "Have you ever met a girl with hungry eyes?"

"Almost," answered Smith.

"You almost met one?"

"She was almost a girl," said Smith.

"Somehow I sense another story in the offing," said Max.