

## HISTORY

The war was over.

They started coming back in ones and twos. I had Reggie give each of them a free drink as they entered, and the Bard waited patiently for everyone to get in a talkative mood before he started recording the true history of the war with the aliens.

When Hurricane Smith came back alone, no one asked him what had become of his beloved Langtry Lily. He just had a look about him that said such questions wouldn't be welcomed, and might well be severely dealt with.

Three-Gun Max wasn't his usual talkative self either. He took his drink -- I never knew him to turn one down -- and carried it over to a table, where he just sat and stared silently at it.

The Injuns -- that's what we call Sitting Horse and Crazy Bull -- were the next to arrive, and it was obvious they were in a good mood. So was Big Red.

Sinderella and Nicodemus Mayflower entered together, holding hands and staring and sighing at each other like a pair of teenagers who had just discovered how truly opposite the opposite sex is.

The others straggled in, some looking happy, some depressed, some tired, some triumphant. All we needed was a catalyst, someone to break the ice.

That's when Catastrophe Baker showed up.

He walked in, clomped over to the bar like he was still outdoors, and said in his big, booming voice, "Hiya, Reg! Pour me a tall one." He turned to me. "How's it going, Tomahawk?"

"Pretty good," I answered.

"I saw an alien ship out there," said Baker. "I was half-hoping they'd taken over the Outpost. Might have been fun to throw 'em out on their ears."

"They've been disposed of," said the Bard.

"Pity," said Baker. "I hate it when a war ends while my blood's still up." He stared at the Bard. "I don't suppose \_you'd\_ like to engage in a little rasslin' and eye-gouging and the like, just for the hell of it?"

"Not me," said the Bard. "My job is recording history, not making it."

"Seems kinda limiting to me," said Baker.

"We can't all be heroes," said the Bard.

"The hell we can't!" said Crazy Bull. "Me and my partner managed."

"Yeah?" asked Baker.

"Yeah," echoed Crazy Bull. "Maybe we aren't full-time heroes like some, but we were heroic when we had to be."

"Or sneaky, anyway," added Sitting Horse.

"Sometimes being sneaky is all it takes," agreed Baker.

"They weren't such bad guys," said Max, speaking up for the first time. "The aliens, I mean."

"They were monsters," said a familiar voice from the doorway.

We all turned and saw the Reverend Billy Karma. He looked different somehow. It took a minute for me to spot what had changed: he was now sporting a pair of prosthetic hands, one made of gold, the other of silver.

"If anyone kills you, they're gonna want more than both ears and the tail as trophies," said Baker admiringly. "That's mighty impressive new hardware you're sporting there, Reverend."

"Got new feet, too," said Billy Karma. "Courtesy of them godless alien heathen that Max here seems to have taken a liking to."

"I didn't say I liked 'em all," answered Max defensively. "But just like there's a bad apple in every batch of good ones, who's to say there can't be a good apple in every rotten batch?"

"It's against the fourth and seventh commandments!" yelled Billy Karma. He frowned. "Or is it the second and ninth?"

"Max has a point," said Hurricane Smith. "They weren't all bad."

"Let me guess," said Baker. "At least one of the ones that weren't all bad was a lady, right?"

Smith glared at him. "You know," he said sullenly, "I can remember when I used to like you."

"What's not to like?" said Baker. "I'm strong, handsome, agile, noble, truthful to a fault, and one hell of a hand with the ladies."

"That's six reasons right there," said Max.

"He's not irresistible to me," said the Earth Mother, entering the Outpost and heading to a nearby table.

"Or me," added the Cyborg de Milo, following close behind her.

"I am glad to see that you are well, Venus," said Reggie. "I was worried about you."

"You were?"

"We have so much in common," said Reggie. She looked at him curiously. "I am all machine, and you are at least half machine. Everyone else here is merely flesh and blood."

"There was nothing to worry about," said Max. "I told you I'd protect her, didn't I?"

"Protect me?" said Venus. "I never once saw you after I left the Outpost."

"I made sure things were safe in that ancient city before you showed up."

"Then I suppose I owe you my gratitude," said Venus with an obvious lack of sincerity.

"Happy to do it."

"Of course," she said, "you managed to miss more than six hundred armed aliens."

"Well, I got rid of the first five thousand I came to," replied Max smoothly. "I figured with all your

weaponry you could handle a measly six hundred without working up much of a sweat."

She turned to Willie the Bard, who was scribbling furiously.

"Why are you writing all this down?" she demanded.

"Someone has to," he said.

"But he's lying!"

"Today it's a lie," he pointed out. "But when my book is published, it'll be the truth."

"Aren't you interested in what really happened?" she continued.

"I'm interested in everything," said the Bard. "You guys tell me your stories and I'll sort 'em out."

"But you weren't there!" said Venus. "How can you sort out the truth from the lie?"

"I'll keep what makes the best history and throw the rest out."

"Can you do that?"

"History is written by the winners," answered the Bard. "That's why it reads so well, why it has such a noble trajectory to it."

"It don't read well next to the Good Book," put in the Reverend Billy Karma.

"What's the Good Book but God's version of history?" said the Bard.

Suddenly Billy Karma grinned. "You know, I never looked at it that way."

"Of course, that means you won't want to rewrite it after all," said Baker.

"Nonsense," said Billy Karma. "God's a busy man with a lot on His mind. I'm sure it can still use a little improvement here and there."

"I didn't know God was a man," said the Earth Mother.

"She isn't," agreed the Cyborg de Milo.

"Now just a minute!" began Billy Karma hotly, jumping to his feet.

"Sit down, Reverend," said Venus, pointing a lethal finger at him. "Or do you want to be carrying around some molten slag at the end of each arm?"

"Maybe you each have your own God," said Sitting Horse placatingly.

"Are you suggesting that there's a God for every being in the universe?" asked Baker.

"Of course not," answered Sitting Horse. "Crazy Bull and I worship the same one."

"Is it a male or female God?" asked Billy Karma.

"I don't think that's important," said Sitting Horse.

"But just in case you're curious, She's got really big tits," added Crazy Bull.

"That's blasphemy!" roared the Reverend.

"You don't think God has breasts?" asked the Cyborg de Milo.

"Hell, no!" said Billy Karma. "Matter of fact, He's hung like a horse."

"And you think that's not blasphemous?" asked the Cyborg incredulously.

"Of course not," said Billy Karma. "God made man in His own image. Hell, me and God could pass for twins!"

"I sure wouldn't put that in your book," said Baker to the Bard. "Nobody'll read the rest once they read that."

"I haven't put anything in it yet," replied the Bard. "But I suppose enough of you are here that I should start." He turned to the Cyborg de Milo. "What was all this about killing six hundred aliens?"

"I did."

"So tell me about it."

"Okay," she said. "I killed six hundred aliens."

"That's it?"

She nodded. "That's it."

"It's going to make a mighty thin chapter," said the Bard.

"I'm into killing, not bragging."

The Bard sighed. "Okay, have it your way. But nobody'll ever know you were here."

"What do I care?" she asked.

"It's your immortality," explained the Bard. "That's what history's all about. It shows you were here, that you made a mark on the pathways of Time."

"I know I was here."

"But no one else will know."

"Once I'm dead, what difference does it make?" said the Cyborg.

"It's the only way to be sure you'll never be forgotten," said the Bard, "that your memory will live in song and story."

"And how does that benefit me?" she asked.

"Right," chimed in the Reverend Billy Karma. "She's going to the Good Place or the Bad one, and either way, that's immortality enough for anyone."

"But if they don't exist, then this" -- the Bard tapped his notebook with a finger -- "is all the immortality she's got."

"Bite your tongue!" snapped Billy Karma. "God wouldn't have invented sex except to give us a hint of

what's to come if we lead the good life."

"You think heaven is non-stop sex?" asked the Earth Mother.

"What else could it be?" shot back the Reverend. "That's why we call it heaven."

"Have you ever sat down and seriously discussed this with God?" she continued. "Or maybe a good psychiatrist?"

"No need to," said Billy Karma. "It's self-evident."

"I don't know that I'm interested in either kind of immortality," said the Cyborg de Milo, taking a swig of her drink, then signaling Reggie for a refill.

"All right," said the Bard. "If you don't want to be remembered, you don't want to be remembered." He turned to Max. "You were on the same planet, right?"

"Henry V, right," said Max.

"You want to talk about it?"

"It's still kind of painful," said Max. "But what the hell, why not?"