

LEGEND

Facts are the enemy of Truth. Everyone knows that. What follows is the true story of the Outpost.

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I knew the moment he walked into the Outpost that he was a Hero -- he just had that look about him. He was a lot closer to seven feet tall than six, he had unblinking no-color eyes, golden hair that cascaded down to his shoulders, and the kind of body that you just knew chairs would bounce off of.

His huge arms were too heavily-muscled to be confined, so he'd cut the sleeves off his shirt. He wore a leather vest, matching leather trousers, a metal belt with a buckle made out of an alien skull, and fur-covered boots. And a bunch of alien necklaces and bracelets: you could hear him jingling from a couple of hundred yards away.

He had a scar that began just above his ear and ended in the middle of his chin. His right arm had a tattoo of one of the more spectacularly-endowed naked ladies I can remember seeing, and she constantly raced up to his shoulder and onto his chest beneath his shirt; his left arm had a tattoo of himself, scar and all, and it ran up to his left shoulder and (I assume) met the naked lady on his chest every few seconds in a pornographic embrace.

The middle finger of his right hand boasted a diamond ring that must have been six, maybe seven carats, and his ring finger held a diamond that could eat the middle finger's diamond for breakfast. He wore a brace of pearl-handled burners, and the Spy Eye behind the bar told me he had another burner, two screechers, and a pair of knives hidden on his person.

He ignored the men and women who were gathered at the tables and walked directly up to the bar.

"Heard a lot about the Outpost," he said in his deep, booming voice. "Hard place to find."

"You managed," I noted.

"I usually find what I'm looking for," he answered. "Give me a Witch's Wart."

I had Reggie -- that's what I call the bartending machine; it kind of personalizes him -- mix it up. "First one's on the house."

"I approve," he said, picking the glass up and downing it in a single swallow, oblivious to the flames and the vapor that rose from it. "Name's Baker," he continued, putting the empty back on the bar. He paused, as if about to deliver a punch line. "Catastrophe Baker."

"I've heard of you." Of course, I've heard of almost everyone who finds his way to the Outpost.

"I guess a lot of people have."

"Not too many make it out here, though," I noted.

"Maybe more than you'd like," said Baker. "You could be getting a little unwelcome company before long."

"Oh?"

He nodded his shaggy head. "War's getting close."

News is always slow reaching us. After all, we're as far from what's happening as you can get. "Who are

we at war with this time?"

He shrugged. "I get the feeling they're more a bunch of whats than whos."

"Then they won't want to stop at the Outpost for a drink, will they?" I said, which was my only concern. Wars come and go; the Outpost stays.

Before I go any farther, I suppose I ought to tell you a little bit about the place, maybe starting with where it is.

Easy enough. We're on Henry II, one of the Eight Henrys. We were named by Willie the Bard, who spent half a lifetime looking for just this configuration, and finally found it as deep into the Inner Frontier as anyone has ever gotten. We've got this binary system, and he named the two stars Plantagenet and Tudor. There are eight planets -- the Eight Henrys. Henry I has two moons, Edith of Scotland and Adelaide of Louvain. The next six Henrys have one moon apiece: Eleanor of Aquitaine, Eleanor of Provence, Mary de Bohun, Catherine de Valois, Margaret of Anjou, and Elizabeth of York. For a while he was stymied, because Henry VIII doesn't have any moons at all -- but it does have six rings, and those became the Wedding Rings: Katherine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn, Jane Seymour, Anne of Cleves, Catherine Howard, and Katherine Parr. A few of the Henrys actually have breathable atmospheres.

Willie is the only one who knows his Earth history, so he names just about everything in the system. For example, no one knows why he calls the huge volcano that's always causing havoc in the other hemisphere Beckett, but that also means no one can contradict him, so Beckett it is. We've got two sets of native humanoids out in the hinterlands; he calls them Normans and Saxons, but no one is quite sure which is which. One race is kind of blue and ugly, and the other is kind of green and even uglier.

Willie wasn't the first man to discover the Henrys, though. I was. I left civilization when I had a serious disagreement with the authorities over some of the finer points of the law, and I didn't slow down until I came to the Henrys, which felt like the end of the universe, or maybe the beginning. There was no place left to go, so I decided to land my ship and settle down here. I knew sooner or later somebody would show up, and I decided we needed a gathering place -- you know, a bar, some sleeping rooms, maybe a little restaurant that served human food -- so I built the Outpost. Made it feel homey: holos of all the great athletes of the past couple of millennia, and a huge nude of Sally Six-Eyes over the bar (she posed for it right here on the premises, a few weeks after we opened for business). I added the mounted heads of some alien animals overlooking the tables, a couple of mind-bending games in the back, comfortable chairs, and a long bar that thirty or forty men and women could sidle up to. Then I figured we needed a post office, since we're halfway across the galaxy from the Monarchy (I know, I know, they call it the Commonwealth -- but out here we know what it is). The mail ship only comes twice a year, but that's better than nothing. Over the years I added a cartographic chart shop for those travelers who don't trust their navigational computers. Then I opened a weapon shop. It's been a loser from the start; the men and woman who find the Outpost are about as well-armed as people get to be.

We're never very crowded, because we're the farthest you can get from anywhere, and only the boldest of the bold are willing to come this close to the Galactic Core and the enormous black hole that lives there, gobbling up stars and planets like they were so many sandwiches. It takes a lot of man -- or woman (or alien, for that matter) -- to turn his back on everything he's known and head out this way. The last thing I started was a pawn shop, because even heroes can run short of money from time to time.

What else can I tell you? Well, my name, I suppose. It's Thomas Aloysius Hawke, and I think I was in business less than ten minutes before my first customer dubbed me Tomahawk, and that's who I've been ever since.

I love my work. If you're not three times as big as life and twice as wide, you don't come looking for the Outpost ... and if you find it, then you've got a lifetime of adventures and exploits worth bragging about. Reggie and I will fill you up with whatever you thirst for, and Willie the Bard will write down your story, adding only a few poetic flourishes, as part of this epic he's writing. He tells me that he's up over 4,000 pages, and he says when he finally publishes it he's going to call it The Outpost.

Anyway, Baker ordered a second Witch's Wart, and suddenly Three-Gun Max looked up from his drink.

"Catastrophe Baker," he said, staring at the huge man's back. "I heard of you."

Baker turned and looked at Max, who was holding his drink in one hand, his bottle in another, and was tugging at his ear with a third.

"You're a mutant, ain't you?" said Baker.

Max grinned. "What makes you think so?"

"Just a shot in the dark."

"Three-Gun Max is the name. Always glad to meet another living legend."

"Where'd you hear about me?"

"Damned near every place I been," said Max.

"Yeah?" said Baker, suddenly interested. "And where do you hail from?"

"Most recently?" said Max. "Port Raven, out in the Quinellus Cluster."

"I've spent a few days there," acknowledged Baker.

"I know. They had to build a whole new graveyard."

"Well, some of the locals needed better manners," said Baker with a shrug.

"Sure as hell did," agreed Max. "The day I landed I was robbed twice and shot at once on my way from the spaceport to my hotel."

"Yeah, I seem to recall that they don't cotton much to strangers -- and with all due respect, you look a little stranger than most."

"I made out okay," answered Max. Suddenly he grinned. "When they tell you to reach for the sky, they never remember to count how many hands you still got left."

Baker threw back his head and laughed. "Let me buy you a drink." He looked around the place. "Hell, let me buy you all a drink."

Suddenly the place turned from a still-life into a sprint in about a tenth of a second. Big Red and Nicodemus Mayflower and Bet-a-World O'Grady were about a nose ahead of Sinderella and Little Mike Picasso, and most of the others weren't far behind.

"That's mighty generous of you, friend," said O'Grady.

"I feel right at home," answered Baker in his booming voice. "I recognize two or three of you from your

wanted posters, and I've seen books and videos and suchlike about a bunch of you." He downed another drink. "Hell, I've even had to flee for my life from a couple of you. That creates a bond, you know what I mean?"

"Of course we know," said O'Grady. "That's why we're all here. This place is a magnet to our kind -- whatever 'our kind' happens to be."

"Well, whatever it is," said Baker, staring at the assembled crowd, "it ain't necessarily human."

"Does that cause you a problem?" hissed Sahara del Rio from her end of the bar.

"Hell, no," said Baker. "I got five or six wives kicking around the galaxy, and half of them ain't human." He paused. "Can't say that the half that is ever treated me any better than the half that ain't."

"Maybe we ought to introduce ourselves to our latest benefactor here," said O'Grady.

"I know who you are," said Baker. "You're Bet-a-World O'Grady."

"My reputation precedes me," said O'Grady, looking real pleased with himself. "Too bad all my worlds recede from me even faster."

"I was there the night you lost Beta Campanis III," said Baker.

"Really? I don't recall seeing you."

"Well, my situation wasn't such that I wanted to make a memorable entrance."

"So you were the one they were looking for!" exclaimed O'Grady. "What the hell did you do to get two whole military regiments after you?"

"Three," Baker corrected him. "The third was backing up the first two, just in case I got angry. Still, I almost stepped forward when you raised that Canphorite. He had you beat on the table."

"I felt lucky."

"You must have. The odds were about three million to one against you."

"I play by my feelings, not by the odds. That's how I won the entire Binder System." O'Grady grimaced. "Of course, I lost it to a pair of fives a couple of months later, but what the hell -- easy come, easy go."

"So what do you own these days?" asked Baker.

"The shirt on my back, the boots on my feet, the deck of cards in my pocket..."

"And a tab for 483 credits," I added.

"You're talking to a man who was once worth billions," he said heatedly. "Hell, maybe even trillions."

"Achilles was once a pretty good freehand fighter," I shot back, "but I haven't noticed him beating anybody lately."

"Are you threatening me?" demanded O'Grady.

"Of course not," I said. "I'm reminding you."

"Well, that's all right, then," he said, holding out his glass. "Fill it up again. Holler when my tab hits 500."

"I been hollering since it hit 250," I said.

As he walked over to Reggie for a refill, Sahara undulated over, the light playing off her shiny green scales.

"So you're Catastrophe Baker," she whispered in her sibilant hissing voice, looking him up and down.

"That's right," he said. "I think I missed your name, though."

"Sahara del Rio."

"Mighty earthy name for a Lodinite -- or are you an Atrian?"

"Neither," she said with a reptilian smile. "I'm a Borovite."

"They got a Sahara Desert on Borovia?" asked a surprised Baker.

"I grew up on Earth," she said. "I lived in a desert, and I lived where a city named Rio used to be." Her gaze passed briefly over the other patrons. "That's more than anyone else here can say. Not a single human in this place has ever set foot on your mother world."

"Not so," said Billy Karma. "I went there to take the walk up to Golgotha." He turned to Baker and extended his hand. "The Reverend Billy Karma, sir."

"Should you be drinking?" asked Baker.

"Where does the Good Book say that one of God's servants can't lift a few when he's of a mind to?" demanded Karma.

"Can't say I've ever read it," admitted Baker.

"Well, you ought to," said Karma. "As a matter of fact, I have about eight thousand copies of the Red Letter Billy Karma Edition out in my ship. Be happy to sell you one." A self-satisfied little smile crossed his face. "Best damned Bible you ever saw. I threw out a bunch of the dull parts, added some of my own sermons and observations, and printed it up. Cover's got a tight molecular bonding. Couldn't destroy it if you threw it in a bonfire, or even an atomic furnace. Trust me -- I've tried both."

"Now, why would you want to burn your own Bible?" asked Baker.

The Reverend Billy Karma shrugged. "I fall off the spiritual wagon every few months, and usually wake up with a hangover in some whorehouse. Then I get saved again. Both of 'em do me a powerful lot of good -- getting lost and getting saved. And I know that the first thing I always do when I get lost is try to burn the Good Book so I won't be confronting it every morning when I get up after a night of sin and sleaze and other good things."

"Good things?"

"Well, they must feel good or I wouldn't do 'em, would I?" shot back Billy Karma. "People like you do 'em all the time, don't you?"

"Not every waking minute," said Baker. "But on the other hand, I ain't no reverend, either."

"Well, when I fall off the wagon, I ain't much of a reverend myself." Karma frowned. "Last time I killed the whole Giriambi Gang on Roosevelt III after they got back from robbing a navy convoy ship. At least, that's what they told me when they dragged me out the smoking ruins and hung this here medal on me."

He pulled out a gold medal that was suspended on a silver chain beneath his black shirt and shook his head sadly. "What a tragic way to lose 38 potential parishioners! If I'd been sober, I'd have settled for converting 'em."

One by one Baker started getting introduced to the others. When he was about halfway through, he stopped and pointed to Einstein, who was sitting alone in a corner.

"What's the matter with him?" he asked. "The man hasn't moved a muscle since I got here."

"Oh, that's just Einstein," I said.

"Someone ought to teach him some manners."

"He could teach you a little something," said Three-Gun Max. "He doesn't look like much, but he teaches things to the best brains in the Monarchy. Or at least he used to."

"That little twerp?" scoffed Baker. "Hell, if he ain't comatose, you sure can't prove it by me."

"He's not," Max assured him.

"Sure he is," said Baker. He turned to Einstein and yelled, "Hey, you!"

"He can't hear you," said Max. "He's deaf."

"Yeah?"

"And blind and mute as well. He's been that way since he was born."

"Then what makes him so special?" asked Baker.

"The thing you can't see," said Max. "His brain."

"Explain."

"Because he didn't learn to communicate until he was in his twenties, he never learned to think the way everyone else does when they're growing up. He's probably the most brilliant man in the galaxy -- because he's the most unique thinker. He creates entirely new sciences in his head because he ain't hampered by any knowledge of the old ones. Been doing it for close to thirty years now. When the government decided to protect him from exploitation, he decided he needed protection from his protectors, and he wound up here."

"He's really that good?"

"He's the reason we'll reach Andromeda in the next few years. And he's the only man who ever came up with a defense against a molecular imploder. And if you've come across one of those little gimmicks that lets you see through stone walls, that's his." Max chuckled in amusement. "The military wanted to keep the patent on it, but even though Einstein's never seen a naked lady, he thought it would be tragic if it weren't made available to lonely, oversexed, and thoroughly unprincipled men ... men very much like me, in fact."

Catastrophe Baker stared at Einstein for a long moment. "Well, I'll be damned!" he said at last. "A blind little guy did all that?"

"We all have some talent or other," said Argyle, who'd been hanging back until then.

"Yours is a little more obvious than most," said Baker, staring at the alien as he constantly changed colors.

"This isn't a talent," said Argyle, as it changed from bright red to brilliant yellow to pale blue in less time than it takes me to tell you about it. "It's a defense mechanism."

"Seems more likely to attract predators than convince them you're a tree or a rock or dead or whatever."

"That all depends on the predator," said Argyle. "On my home world, they're carrion eaters. Once I die, I stop changing colors; as long as I keep flashing them, the predators know that I'm alive, and not a rotting corpse. They like their meat very rank."

"So what's your talent?" asked Baker.

"I juggle things."

"Balls?"

"Numbers," said Argyle. "I used to be an accountant for one of the biggest banks in the Albion Cluster."

"And?"

"And now I'm not," said Argyle noncommittally.

"This joint's got an interesting clientele," remarked Baker.

"We have our moments," agreed Gravedigger Gaines, who was dressed all in black as usual. "Remember me?"

"How could I forget?" asked Catastrophe Baker. "You damned near killed me back on Silverblue, out on the Rim."

"I was a bounty hunter. It was my job."

"You still got those damned dogs?"

"They weren't dogs," said the Gravedigger. "They were Nightswarmers. Native to Bodine V."

"Whatever they were, they were fast as hell and three times as vicious. I was lucky to escape with my skin intact." Suddenly Baker tensed and laid a hand on his pearl-handled burner. "You still a bounty hunter?"

The Gravedigger shook his head. "My Nightswarmers died, and I didn't feel like spending ten years training another team."

"Who says you needed 'em?"

"Whatever the reward, it wasn't enough to go up against the likes of men like you or Hurricane Smith without them. I earned 40 bounties before I hung it up; that's not bad for a 12-year career."

"Well, you seem to have come out of it in one piece," noted Baker. "You could have done a lot worse, even with those damned dogs."

"One piece?" laughed the Gravedigger. He held up his right arm. "This came from Deluros VIII. The left leg's from Pollux IV. The right eye and 19 teeth are from Greenveldt. Can't even remember where I got

the left foot. And I'm using someone else's kidney and spleen, thanks to Jenny the Blade. It was time to retire before there wasn't any of the original me left."

"Sounds like you've got some interesting tales to tell," said Baker. "Sounds like you all do."

"We've been known to tell 'em," acknowledged the Gravedigger. "But we've heard 'em all before. Seems to me someone as famous as Catastrophe Baker's got a few tales of his own to share."

"Could be," agreed Baker. He turned to me. "But first, I want to order a bottle apiece for everyone in the Outpost. Give 'em anything they choose. When a man's running in luck, he likes to share it."

"That could amount to some serious money, friend," I said.

"I ain't got no money," he replied -- and then, before I could pull my screecher out from under the bar, he reached into a pocket and pulled out the biggest ruby I'd ever seen. "But this ought to hold you for awhile." I'm not a small man, but when I placed it in the palm of my hand, I couldn't close my fingers around it.

"Where'd you ever get something like that?" asked Three-Gun Max.

"Well, now, that's a pretty interesting story, if I do say so myself," replied Baker, "and it's my experience that telling stories can be pretty thirsty work, so I'm going to need a little something to keep the old vocal chords fresh and strong. Tomahawk, have Reggie hunt me up a bottle of Cygnian cognac. And if ain't older than I am, take it back and get another."

Willie the Bard took out his notebook -- he refuses to use a recorder or computer -- while Reggie brought out a two-century-old vintage (well, it was actually 13-year-old cognac in a 212-year-old bottle, but what the hell), and Baker bit off the cork and took a long swallow, bellowed an "Ah!" of approval, and began talking.