

CATASTROPHE BAKER AND THE COLD EQUATIONS

by Mike Resnick

If you really want to know about the cold equations, there's only one person to ask, and that's me—Catastrophe Baker, hero by trade but all too frequently fugitive by misunderstanding.

It all began one night back on Tombstone III, the second planet in the New Arizona system. (Yeah, I know it says III, but it was named before that crazy Professor McNally blew Tombstone II to bits trying to make the Perfect Vodka Martini in his lab.)

Anyway, I was just kind of unwinding in the local tavern with a bottle of Antarean brandy, and trying to figure out what to drink next after the last of it was gone, which figured to be mighty soon, when a burly bearded man walked right up to me and tried to shove his nose up against mine, which would have worked better if he hadn't been a little feller who was only three or four inches over six feet.

"Catastrophe Baker," he said kind of irritably, "I been looking for you far and wide."

"Well, friend," I replied, "maybe you should have been looking for me high and low. Mostly high."

He didn't so much as crack a smile, which convinced me right off that he didn't have no sense of humor.

"Catastrophe Baker," he said, "are you going to marry my daughter or not?"

"Who's your daughter?" I asked.

"Fatima Muldoon."

"Cute little Fatima?" I said, trying to imagine how something that round and pretty and friendly could be related to this here feller. "Did she send you here on this mission of matchmaking?"

"She did not," he said. "She's sitting in her room, crying her poor little heart out." He glared at me. "You can't leave her like that. Promises were made."

"I promised her a night of heavenly rapture," I replied, wrapping my dignity around me like a cloak, "and I delivered on it. Marriage wasn't never mentioned."

"What have you got against my daughter?" he demanded. "Why won't you marry her?"

"Marriage just don't go with the heroing trade, Friend Muldoon," I said. "I'm always on the move, and most of the innocent young damsels I rescue just can't be held back from thanking me in meaningful ways." I paused for a minute whilst he digested what I said, because it was true that being a hero could tire you out more than the general public ever imagined. "Why not have a drink and forget the whole thing?" I concluded.

"Not a chance, you foul blaggard!" he said, picking up my glass and throwing its contents in my face.

I realized he was just a distraught and loving father, so I didn't do much more than bust his ribs and break his left leg and knock out fourteen of his teeth as a gentle reproof. I'd have offered him a drink again, but

it was pretty obvious that he planned to spend the rest of his time in the tavern just lying there on the floor, moaning and twitching.

Nobody else said much of anything, but I noticed they all gave me a wide berth on their way out, and in fact the whole place was empty in less than a minute, except for me and the barkeep and Muldoon. I was just about to order myself a bottle of Cygnian cognac when three men entered the tavern, all of 'em wearing glowing police badges on their chests.

"Boy!" said the one on the left, staring at Muldoon. "You sure didn't leave much that don't need work."

"I seen guys what got caught in machine mangles and came away looking better than this poor bastard," agreed the one on the right.

"That's enough, you two," said the one in the middle. "Catastrophe Baker, I'm here to arrest you for disturbing the peace."

"Disturbing the peace?" moaned Muldoon, though it was kind of hard to understand him, what with him missing all them teeth. "He damned near killed me!"

"Don't interrupt!" said the one in the middle. "I'm the Chief of Police on Tombstone III, and I'm still sorting out what happened."

"How come you're Chief of Police?" I asked.

"You don't think I fit the job?" he said, his hand hovering over his pulse gun.

"Sure you do," I said. "But shouldn't a place called Tombstone have a town Marshall instead of a Police Chief?"

"You know, now that you mention it, it does seem a lot more fitting, doesn't it?"

"Sure," I said. "And these two guys could be called your deputies."

"I like that," said the Chief.

"Isn't anyone going to call the hospital?" wailed Muldoon.

"Don't interrupt when we're discussing police business!" snapped the Chief.

"I'm bleeding to death!" said Muldoon.

"Oh, don't be such a baby," said the Chief. "That's hardly more than a pint or two of blood on the floor." He turned back to me. "You got a good head on your shoulders, Catastrophe Baker. How'd you like to come to work for the Tombstone Marshall's office?"

"If you're the Marshall you're supposed to arrest him!" wailed Muldoon. "Or better still, shoot him!"

"One more word out of you, Jebediah Muldoon," said the Chief, "and I'm tossing you in jail for disturbing the peace."

"Get me a transfusion first and I'll be happy to go," said Muldoon.

The Chief turned to his deputies. "Get him something to drink and see if that shuts him up."

"And a straw," moaned Muldoon.

The Chief—well, I suppose I might as well start calling him the Marshall, since that's what he began calling himself—turned to me.

"So what do you think?" he said.

"I appreciate the offer," I said, "but when you're a bona fide hero like me, you can't confine yourself to one planet. There's voluptuous young damsels all over the galaxy what need rescuing, and of course there's would-be Galactic Emperors to capture and there's always a Pirate Queen or two what needs taming, and besides, no insult intended but Tombstone's got the worst-stocked bars for light-years in any direction."

"You make being a hero sound exciting as all hell," said the Marshall kind of enviously.

"Well, it is," I agreed. "Except for the parts where I get shot at or tortured."

"What were you doing on Tombstone, anyway?" he asked.

"Ruining my daughter and killing her father!" moaned Muldoon.

"If you can't lie still and stop interrupting, I'm gonna add ten days to your sentence," said the Marshall.

Suddenly we heard some screams from down the street, and I could see the glare of laser beams against the black of night.

"Looks like somebody got into a fight down at Sleepy Joe's Emporium," said one of the deputies.

"Couple of 'em are firing their burners, and another one just shot up the grocery store with his pulse gun."

"I wonder," said the Marshall, ignoring the distraction. "You think Sheriff might be a better title?"

A couple of more screams came our way.

"Chief, they're starting to shoot each other instead of inanimate buildings!" said the deputy.

"Good," said the Marshall. "Them buildings are hard to replace." He turned back to me. "So what do you think—Marshall or Sheriff?"

"Chief!" yelled the other deputy. "They're burning Sleepy Joe's down to the ground!"

"Didn't your mama teach you no manners?" demanded the Chief. "You're interrupting a vitally important business conversation." He paused to get his temper under control. "What do you say, Catastrophe Baker?"

"Well, now," I said thoughtfully, "Marshall's got eight letters and Sheriff's only got seven, so I reckon that makes Marshall more important."

"Desicated corpse got more letters than any of 'em," groaned Muldoon.

"You know," said the Marshall, "if we don't get him to a doctor pretty soon, I'm gonna finish what you started."

"Okay, I was on my way out of here anyway," I said. "I'll just heft him up on my shoulder and toss him off at the first doctor's office I come to."

"You stay away from me!" yelled Muldoon, curling himself up in a little ball.

I picked him up, tossed him maybe ten feet in the air, and while he was stretched out, pawing at empty space and screaming like a banshee, I caught him on my shoulder. All the air kind of rushed out of him, but at least I'd already broke his ribs so I don't imagine it could have done them much more harm.

"What in the world was this all about anyway?" asked the Marshall as I headed for the door.

"I had carnival knowledge with his daughter," I said.

"With sweet innocent little Fatima?" he said.

"Yeah."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," said the Marshall sternly. Suddenly he leaned forward. "How was she?"

I pulled myself up to my full height, which was just a shade under seven feet. "A gentleman never discusses such things." Which was absolutely true. Personally, I always figured it was so he wouldn't inadvertently give away no pointers.

Then I was out the door and walking down the street. I felt right good about the thought of leaving Tombstone, which added a little bounce to my step, and the way I knew it was because Muldoon gave out an agonized moan with each step I took.

I couldn't find no doctors' office open, but there was a veterinarian with a light in his window down at the end of the street, so I toted Muldoon over there.

"I'm no doctor, I'm a veterinarian," said the vet when I unloaded my burden onto his examining table.

"He keeps screaming for a doctor, and since no one wants to listen to him clear through til morning, I figger you're the next best thing. Just patch him up and then turn him over to the jail."

"I've got no problem turning him over to the jail," said the vet. "It's the patching him up that's going to be tricky."

"You sew up animals, don't you?" I said encouragingly.

"The mutated cattle out on the farms," he said. "But only after I castrate 'em."

Muldoon kind of whimpered and curled up in a little ball again.

"That seems kind of a harsh cure," I allowed. "Don't you know how to do nothing else?"

"I suppose I could nail some shoes on him and put a ring in his nose," offered the vet.

"Take me back to the bar and beat the crap out of me!" rasped Muldoon. "I was safer there!"

"I can see where the man could really get to be a nuisance to have around," said the vet. "I suppose castrating him would calm him down and kind of gentle him out."

"He's already added to Nature's game plan with a lovely little lady that won my heart, at least for an evening," I said. "I don't suppose he'd miss 'em all that much."

"He wouldn't have to miss them at all," said the vet. "I could give him a little glass jar to carry them around in. Maybe he could hang the jar around his neck on a string."

"Now that'd be a surefire attention getter next time he walked into a bar," I said.

"Or better still," said the vet, "he could hang them from the ring I'm putting in his nose."

"Man, he ain't never gonna run out of conversational ice breakers," I said enthusiastically. "I'm sure glad we ran into you, and I know that once Muldoon gets over his little fit of peak and heals from whatever agonies of the damned you're gonna put him through, he'll be everlastingly grateful."

"Speaking of the patient," said the vet, "where is he?"

I looked around and damned if the examining table wasn't empty. I couldn't find Muldoon hiding under none of the furniture, of which there wasn't an awful lot in the first place, and then I chanced to look out the door, and I saw him crawling due north down the middle of the street, paying no attention at all to any of the traffic that kept barely missing him.

"Look at him go!" said the vet admiringly. "Hell, I've got herding dogs that don't travel as fast on all fours."

"I guess he didn't need patching up as bad as he thunk he did," I said. "Too bad. You'd have turned him into one hell of a conversation piece."

"Well, we all have to learn to live with disappointment," he said, taking it all philanthropically.

Truer words was never spoke, because when I went to the spaceport to get into my ship and take off for parts known, who should be waiting for me with their weapons drawn but the Marshall and his deputies.

"Catastrophe Baker," he said, "I'm putting you under arrest."

"What for this time?" I asked.

"You double-parked your spaceship."

"You can't double-park a spaceship," I told him.

"Are you calling me a liar?" he said. "I'm the Marshall, and if I say you double-parked it, you double-parked it. The fine is seventeen gazillion credits, payable immediately."

I reached into my pocket and pulled out everything I found.

"Will you settle for twenty-seven credits, three Maria Theresa dollars, and a fish hook?" I asked.

"That'll make an acceptable down payment," he said, grabbing it from me. "We'll let you work the rest of it off."

"I ain't much on math," I said, "but even at a thousand credits a day, it's gonna take me a couple of months to work off seventeen gazillion of 'em."

"This is your lucky day, Catastrophe Baker!" he cried enthusiastically. "I just happen to know of a job that pays seventeen gazillion credits, minus twenty-seven credits and three Maria Theresa dollars, whatever the hell that comes to."

"Doing what?" I said.

"Almost nothing at all," he said.

"I like it already," I said. "What particular kind of nothing does this job entail?"

"I just want you to fly to Godwin II, about eighty light years from here, over in the Quinellus Cluster."

"No problem," I said, taking a step toward my ship. "I'll start right now."

"Not so fast," he said, and suddenly I was looking down the barrels of three laser pistols again. "First we got to load the cargo."

"It ain't a real big ship," I said. "Just a one-man job. What kind of cargo are you talking about?"

"Desperately-needed medication for the colonists on Godwin II," he said. "It ain't all that heavy. We'll stick a few boxes in your cargo hold in the next couple of minutes and you can be on your way."

"I ain't got no cargo hold," I said.

"Sure you do. Of course, you call it a closet, but we already emptied out all your clothes and trinkets, so now it's a cargo hold."

"I may need them clothes in the future," I said, starting to feel a tad riled.

"You'll buy new ones," said the Marshall.

"With what?" I demanded.

"Have you forgotten you're being paid seventeen gazillion credits?" he said. "You'll be a rich man when you land."

Well, I hadn't looked at it that way before, but it made sense when he spelled it out for me, so I agreed to take the job, and spent the next five minutes in the spaceport bar while his men loaded the medication.

"One last thing," said the Marshall as he walked me out to the ship. "This stuff ain't no good if the temperature gets down under sixty degrees Fahrenheit, even for a few seconds, so don't land anywhere near the polar caps."

I told him I wouldn't forget, and then a couple of minutes later I closed and locked the hatch, and took off. I figured the trip would take maybe two days at full speed and traversing the right wormholes, but I just turned it over to Bubbles, which is what I call the navigational computer, mostly because she's got a nice ladylike voice, and I didn't pay it no never-mind for the next couple of hours. In fact, I was watching some uplifting holographic entertainments featuring young ladies what was dressed for extremely warm weather when Bubbles suddenly turned off the show.

"What's going on?" I said.

"I wish I could shake your hand, kiss you good-bye, and tell you to be brave, but I'm only a computer," said Bubbles. "Something has gone terribly wrong with your mission."

"It ain't a mission," I explained. "It's just a trip to Godwin II."

"At our current rate of speed, you will arrive in six days and three hours."

"You got it all wrong," I said. "This here flight figures to take another day and a half."

"Not under current conditions," said Bubbles. "And in twenty-seven minutes I will be unable to maintain a cabin temperature of sixty degrees."

"If you got a leak, fix it," I said, getting mighty annoyed at this interruption, because the young ladies were about to dance to a strain of classical drum music and I didn't want to miss such a highbrow entertainment.

"I do not have a leak."

"Okay, then, if you have a fuel blockage, fix it."

"I do not have a fuel blockage," said Bubbles.

"I give up," I said. "What do you have?"

"A stowaway."

"Yeah? Where?"

"I have no cargo hold, no separate sleeping cabin, and a single closet," said Bubbles. "Even you should be able to figure that one out."

"Go back to running the ship," I said. "I'll take it from here."

I walked over and flung open the closet, and sitting on top of a bunch of boxes was the most beautiful lady I ever did see. What she was wearing didn't have hardly enough material to make a handkerchief. She had a burner and a screecher in holsters that were bonded to her legs, and I could see a dagger peeking out of the top of her boot.

She kind of oozed down off the boxes and stepped out into the room. Then she stretched, and I felt an urge to put my hand in front of my eyes so they wouldn't pop out, but I didn't do it because it would have spoiled the view.

"I am Zenobia," she said, licking her moist, red lips.

"That figgers," I said.

"It does?" she said kind of curiously.

"Ma'am," I answered, "Zenobia is a name what Pirate Queens just naturally seem to favor. Man and boy I've run across fourteen Pirate Queens, and counting you eleven of 'em was named Zenobia."

"What makes you think I'm a Pirate Queen?" she asked.

"Well, ma'am, in my long experience Pirate Queens can always be identified by their name, their lustful natures, their soul-destroying greed, and their proud arrogant bosoms."

She smiled the kind of smile that made me want to howl at the nearest twenty or thirty moons. "How clever of you to know."

"Ma'am, why is someone who wants to lay waste to the galaxy, plunder it six ways to Sunday, and enslave a trillion people, stowing away on my ship?"

"I was hiding from the Navy," she said. "They got word that I was on Tombstone, and I got word that they were coming after me in force."

"Well, Miss Zenobia, ma'am," I said, "I'll be happy to drop you off somewhere, once I unload the cargo that you was co-habiting my closet with."

"All I want to do is go anywhere the Navy isn't," she said. "What's your destination?"

"Godwin II."

"That's as good a world as any."

"I hate to interrupt this little lovefest," said Bubbles, who didn't sound like she hated interrupting us at all, "but the cabin temperature has dropped two degrees in the past five minutes."

"So heat it up," I said.

"I can't," said Bubbles. "It's taking all my power to produce enough air for both of you. Remember, I was originally programmed to carry just one person to Godwin II."

"I don't suppose we could take turns breathing," I said, but even I could see that it wasn't that all-fired practical an idea, because even though I was a good foot and a half taller than Zenobia, she had a bigger chest and figured to need more air than me.

"So it'll get chilly," she said. "Big deal."

"You don't understand," I said. "If it drops under sixty degrees, all that medication will spoil and I'll be out seventeen gazillion credits."

"What the hell's in those boxes?" she asked.

"Beats me," I said. "All I know is that it can't get below sixty."

"Make up your mind, Catastrophe Baker," said Bubbles. "You can have oxygen for two, or you can have a heated cabin, but you can't have both. Those," she concluded, intoning it like a high priestess or a politician, "are the cold equations."

"I'm sorry I got you into this, Catastrophe Baker," said Zenobia. "If I'd known, I'd have been happy to put off conquering the galaxy until next week."

"We ain't beat yet," I said. "We'll think of some way out of this."

"But what about the cold equations?" she asked.

"I'm working on it," I told her. "Bubbles, how long until we land on Godwin II?"

"Six days, two hours, and fifty-four minutes."

"The medication will be ruined long before then," said Zenobia.

And then it hit me. "Maybe not," I said.

"But the cold equations . . ."

"Forget 'em," I said, starting to slip out of my duds. "You and me'll practice the *warm* equations."

I knew she'd go for it, because Pirate Queens are always ripe for generating a little heat, if you catch my subtle meaning, and no sooner had the words left my mouth than she flung her weapons to the floor and her body against mine. About ten seconds later she hit G above high C, and a minute after that she reached Q above high H, and I figured we'd better take it easy or her screams might bust all the instruments.

But taking it easy ain't what Pirate Queens is all about. We didn't eat and we didn't sleep and we didn't talk (not in any known language, anyway), and about every five hours we'd take an hour off to rest and recuperate. But each time the cabin would get cooler and we'd go right back to work, and finally, on the fifth day I figured I just had to have a break, but Bubbles told me that if I did the medication would spoil.

I just didn't have no energy left after five days cooped up with a healthy Pirate Queen, and I figured that despite all our efforts the cold equations were going to carry the day, and then I figured, well, maybe if I jettisoned half the medication, Bubbles could keep the temperature up in the low sixties for another day. So I opened the closet, ready to pull out a box and dump it, when I finally read the label, and I realized that the warm equations were going to win after all. A couple of minutes later Zenobia was hitting Z over high J again, and we were having such a good time that we didn't even stop for another hour after the shipped touched down the next day.

Finally Zenobia stood up, and even after she got dressed and put on all her weaponry, she was still panting a bit and kind of red in the face. She stood by the hatch while it opened, extended her hand to me, shook mine as vigorously as you'd expect from a lady who was out to subjugate a few thousand races, and said, "Catastrophe Baker, it's been an experience."

Just six words, but she sure put her heart into them, which was only just and fitting, since she'd put everything else into the last six days. Then she was gone, and I decided it was time to unload the cargo and earn my seventeen gazillion credits.

"I hope we never see her again, the hussy," said Bubbles.

I figured it was best not to tell her I already had a date with Zenobia for that evening, and I began hauling out the cargo.

"Thank God you have arrived!" said the governor of the little colony. "You can't imagine how badly we've needed this! Three cheers for Catastrophe Baker!" And he led all the assembled men and women in a chorus of hip-hip-hoorays.

"You're going to be half a box short," I said when the celebration had died down.

"What happened to it?" asked the Governor. "It hasn't started spoiling, has it?"

"No," I said, and then I figured I might as well put the best face on it. "I field-tested it."

"You field-tested eight hundred erectile dysfunction pills?" he asked, his eyes so wide you could see the white all around the irises.

"It's all about the cold equations," I said. "Now, you probably ain't gonna believe this, but . . ."

And I proceeded to tell him the whole story, and sure enough he didn't believe it.

But after dinner I hunted up Zenobia the Pirate Queen, and she sure did. They tossed us out of the hotel when she shattered every window from the third through the eighth floor.

-The End-