

\*An Undefeated Spiritual Tag-Team\*

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Now, I got nothing against war (said the Reverend Billy Karma). It's one of the best ways of getting rid of godless heathen and working off a little excess sexual energy, and certainly God is in favor of war, since He's been battling with old Satan for the better part of a zillion years, give or take a century.

But on the other hand, I'm no warrior. I don't expect Catastrophe Baker to be able to quote the Good Book and I don't figure Three-Gun Max can please the ladies half as well as I can, but I can't do some of the things they can do, neither. And butchering an alien army single-handed happens to be one of them.

But just as there's more than one way to skin a cat (which is probably why we don't have a hell of a lot of cats left at this late date), there's more than one way to win a war. So I flew off to Henry VI, which is one of the worlds where God, in His haste, forgot to install running water, electricity, or breathable air, and decided to confront the aliens that were holed up there.

I landed in a pretty barren spot, but nonetheless managed to find their encampment a few hours later. We exchanged a few pleasantries: I found out that they called the planet Janblixtl, and they found out that I called them Golem, which is what they looked like.

Just as I thought we were getting on pretty well, they pulled their guns and pointed them at me and demanded to know what I was doing on Janblixtl. I figured there was no sense lying, so I explained that I had come to convert 'em all.

"We have our own God," said the leader. "Why should we worship yours?"

"Mine's bigger and stronger and smarter, and He'll show you how to get more women," I explained.

"Our God created the universe," said the leader.

"Yeah?" I said. "Well, \_my\_ God created \_your\_ God."

"Blasphemy!" he said furiously. "Our God is the lord of all creation!"

"My God is the lord of this and every other universe from the beginning to the end of time," I said. "Not only that, but He's a four handicap golfer and He ain't missed a free throw in more than fifty-seven centuries."

This didn't impress them quite as much as I had hoped it would, and before I knew it they'd marched me into one of their Bubbles, where we all took off our helmets and spacesuits.

"Now," said the leader, "what is your real reason for being here, Billy Karma?"

"Just what I told you," I said. "I'm here to bring you guys over to Jesus."

"Jesus? Who's that?"

"Well, it's a little complicated for the uneducated layman to understand, but Jesus is God's son."

"Okay," said the leader. "Bring Jesus to Janblixtl and we'll negotiate directly with him."

"That ain't possible," I said. "He's been dead for over eight thousand years."

"You worship a dead man?"

"Well, he wasn't exactly a man," I explained.

"Was he a god?"

"Not exactly."

"This is all very confusing," said the leader. "How did he die?"

"He was crucified."

"Explain please."

So I told them how crucifixion worked, and I saw them all nodding approvingly.

"See?" said the leader to a couple of his soldiers. "I told you there was much we could learn from the enemy. I trust one of you was taking notes." He turned back to me. "I hope you see the error of your ways, Reverend Billy Karma. Your God could not even protect His own son, whereas our God has helped us defeat your Navy."

"My God is busy overseeing the Monarchy and the stock market and certain select sporting events," I shot back. "You're such a minor pain in the ass that He ain't even noticed you yet. But when He does, you'll know who's the boss of the universe."

The leader stared at me for a long moment, and just when I thought he was going to agree with me and apologize for going to war, he said: "I think our Department of Propaganda would be most appreciative if you were to renounce your God and swear your eternal allegiance to ours."

"Never!" I roared.

"We can have our holo cameras here in ten minutes."

"Bring all the cameras you want," I said. "Me and God are an undefeated spiritual tag-team."

"I beg your pardon?" he said.

"You heard me!" I shot right back at him. "We'll wipe up the floor with you. We'll take you in straight falls. We'll visit you with floods and plagues and pestilence and kill every firstborn son. So you just watch what you say to me."

"You refuse to renounce your God?" he said.

"Absolutely!"

"Even if I were to dismember you for refusing?"

"Cut away everything you want," I said. "They're just corporeal objects anyway. You can't cut my immoral soul."

"Don't you mean you're immortal soul?" he asked.

"That, too!" I said.

"You probably think that I'm not going to do it, that it's just an empty threat."

"I hope it is, because I've grown kind of attached to my appendages, but it makes no difference -- nothing will ever make me turn my back on God, because I know He'll never turn His back on me."

"An interesting hypothesis," he said. "I think we shall put it to the test."

He aimed his pistol at my hand.

"Wait a minute!" I said.

"What is it?" he asked, looking disappointed. "Are you renouncing your God already, before I get to shoot you even once?"

"No," I said. "But ain't we gonna wait for the holo cameras?"

"No," he said, shaking his head. "The citizenry back home aren't interested in watching your incredibly brutal and painful dismemberment. They only want the end result -- your acceptance of our God."

He aimed the gun again.

"You're forgetting something!" I said desperately.

"What?" He checked his pistol. "Did I leave the safety mechanism on?"

"You're forgetting that I don't speak your lingo, so even if I did renounce my God, which I will never do, your people couldn't understand me anyway."

"We'll translate," he said. "And now, if there are no further delays..."

I was still trying to think of one when he blew my left hand off.

"Have you anything to say?" asked the leader.

"Yeah," I replied. "It hurts like hell!"

"That's all?"

"No, I got something more to say."

"Certainly. What is it?"

"Can somebody lend me a bandage?"

"You have courage, Billy Karma, I'll grant you that," said the leader. He aimed and blew my other hand off.

"Sonuvabitch, that smarts!" I said.

"Are you ready to swear fealty to our God yet?"

"Keep shooting, you rotten bastard!" I said.

So he did, which is how I lost both my feet.

"Lord," I said, "forgive them, for they know not what they do." Then I added: "But make 'em suffer a bit first."

"You really believe that shit, don't you?" said the leader.

"You bet your alien ass I do!"

"Any deity who can inspire that kind of loyalty must be quite admirable," he said. "Tell me about Him."

"I'll be happy to," I replied. "But could we staunch the flow of blood first, so I don't pass out before I come to the good parts?"

He agreed, and summoned some medics, and while they were working on me I started extolling God's virtues, and the Spirit must really have been with me, because before they'd finished patching me up I'd converted the leader, his soldiers, and all the doctors.

I stuck around long enough to convert all the rest of them and then, having done my part for God and the war effort, I stopped off just long enough to pick up some new hands and feet and then high-tailed it back here to the Outpost.

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"God sure is lucky to have you on His side," said Max sardonically.

"Truer words were never spoken," agreed Billy Karma.

"I don't know how He managed to get through the day before you showed up on the scene," continued Max.

"It was rough," said Billy Karma. "That's probably why He lost control of Himself and had an illicit affair with Mary."

"You mean the Virgin Mary?"

"Well, she was a virgin when He met her anyway." He paused thoughtfully. "Hell, if I wasn't around to take the pressure off Him, He'd probably be propositioning Silicon Carny this very minute."

"I doubt it," said Big Red.

"Why?" said Billy Karma. "His taste is at least as good as mine, and that's who I'd like to sneak off with."

"Thank heaven for small favors," said Sinderella with a sigh of relief.

Billy Karma looked over at her. "I'm sorry," he said apologetically. "I hate to have you suffer the pangs of rejection."

"I suppose I can learn to live with it."

"If it'll boost your ego any, we can do a little preliminary missionary work while I'm waiting for Silicon Carny to come to her senses."

"You touch her," said Nicodemus Mayflower, "and I'll cut off the one appendage the aliens seem to have overlooked."

Billy Karma crossed his legs and squeaked like a mouse. "What a thing to say!"

"You heard me."

"Call his bluff," said Max with an evil grin.

"Right," chimed in Catastrophe Baker. "If worst comes to worst, you can replace what he cuts off with an

all-diamond version. Not only will it go with your gold and silver hands, but it'll never go soft."

Pretty soon everyone in the Outpost was urging the Reverend Billy Karma to lay a friendly hand on Sinderella, just to see what happened next. For a moment it looked like he was considering it, but finally he shrugged and shook his head.

"I can't do it," he said. "It's obvious that she's attached to this homely young man, God knows why when she could have an irresistible man of the cloth like me, and I'd hate to have to maim and maybe kill him if he attacked me. No, I think I'd best leave young love to blossom." He winked at Sinderella. "But if you ever get tired of young love and start yearning for mature, highly-skilled love, you know where to go."

She grinned. "To Catastrophe Baker, right?"

Everybody laughed at that. Everybody except the Reverend Billy Karma, that is. He just sat there and frowned, as if he couldn't understand how she could be so completely misguided.

"You know, if you want to get a woman of any kind, you're going to have to work on your approach and your timing," said the Earth Mother.

"And your looks and your manners," added Silicon Carny.

"And your clothes and your language and your personal hygiene," Sinderella chimed in.

"That could take years!" protested Billy Karma.

"Then it'll take years," said Nicodemus Mayflower. "You know what they say: There ain't no such thing as a free lunch."

"The hell there ain't," said Billy Karma. "Tomahawk passes them out every day."

"Just stay your sweet loveable self," said Max, still grinning. "I wouldn't know what to do if you became all dandified like they're suggesting."

"What are you doing here anyway?" demanded Nicodemus Mayflower pugnaciously. "Don't you have a flock to shepherd?"

"My church is the galaxy," said Billy Karma with an expansive wave of his hand. "And every sentient being is my parishioner." He paused, then added: "Especially the ones with the big boobs."

"You're about as subtle as a supernova," said Max.

"I learned from an expert," Billy Karma shot back. "Or would you rather have had the Little Pop than the Big Bang?"

"Makes no difference to me," said Max. "I slept right through it."

"Philistine!" muttered Billy Karma, concentrating once again on his drink.

"The way he talks, you'd think Men had a monopoly on Philistines," said the Earth Mother.

"Don't they?" asked Baker.

"Certainly not. Do you think you're the only race where the male of the species is ill-mannered, unprincipled, rapacious, and otherwise disgusting?"

"I never gave it much thought," he admitted.

"Well, I assure you you're not."

"So who's worse?" asked Baker.

"I didn't say anyone was worse," answered the Earth Mother. "Just that you're not alone."

"Okay, then, who's giving us a run for our money?"

"Most recently?" she asked.