

The Gril With the Hungry Eyes

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It was maybe ten, eleven years ago, out by the Sambakki Cluster. There was a terraformed moon there called Carnival, and I stopped by to see exactly what it had to offer.

If Bet-a-World O'Grady had visited the place, he would have thought he'd died and gone to heaven. I saw more human and alien gambling dens than I'd ever seen in one place before, and they had some pretty high rollers. It started raining while I was there, and I saw a couple of guys bet 50,000 credits on which raindrop would roll down the window fastest.

Then there was a row of theaters, ranging from ornate opera houses to small tents, and the entertainments ran the gamut from Figaro and Shakespeare to strip shows and music hall comics. The streets were filled with jugglers, acrobats, magicians, musicians, even half a dozen puppeteers. In the distance I could see fireworks from a dozen theme parks, some for aliens, some for kids, some for very adventurous adults.

I figured I'd take a room at one of the hotels and then, after I'd had a good night's sleep, start exploring Carnival in earnest, but as I approached a likely hostelry a stunning woman happened to pass by. I got a whiff of her perfume and a look at the way she walked away, kind of like jelly on springs, and I just automatically fell into step behind her.

Finally, when she came to the end of the block, she stopped before crossing the street, and I caught up with her.

"You've been following me," she said in lilting tones. She didn't sound upset, just like she was stating a fact, which in fact she was.

"I don't mean to annoy you or insult you," I began, "but you've got the most exciting perfume I've ever encountered."

She laughed. "I don't wear perfume."

"But -- "

"Those are pheromones," she replied. "My pheromones. Perfume manufacturers have been trying to reproduce the effect for thousands of years."

"Then I'm at a loss to understand why you don't have a couple of hundred men following you," I said.

"Because I released them in your vicinity."

"I beg your pardon?" I said.

"You're Hurricane Smith, aren't you?" she said.

"Yes."

"Your reputation precedes you. It's well known that you have a taste for, shall we say, the exotic?"

"I'm not much into whipping and such," I said.

"I meant that you prefer alien women."

"Are you telling me you're not human?"

"I am a Gril," she responded. "We are an ancient race who dwell beyond the Greater Magellenic Cloud."

"You sure look like a real woman," I said.

"Oh, I'm real, all right," she said. "Come up to my room with me and I'll prove it."

"I don't even know your name," I pointed out.

"Vethusia," she said.

She took me by the arm and headed off to The Womb, which was the name of her hotel.

"How do you differ from women, other than in being able to aim your pheromones?" I asked her.

"Oh, there are some minor differences," she said. "You'll find out about them later. But," she added, kind of rubbing up against me, "I'm just like a human woman in all the ways that count."

Which was good enough for me, and which she proceeded to prove during the next couple of hours.

It was when I woke up in the morning that I began to realize just how alien Vethusia was.

She was still in bed, with a sleep mask over her eyes, breathing regularly, and I tip-toed around the room to where I'd left my clothes so that I wouldn't wake her. When I got to her side of the bed, I saw something shining on the nightstand, so I walked over to see what it was.

And what it turned out to be was her fingernails.

Now, I know some women wear false fingernails, but these were too long for that. I mean, they were the whole things, right down to the cuticles.

Then, while I was puzzling over this discovery, I saw her ears. Not on her head. On the nightstand, between her fingernails and her nose.

I reached out to touch the nose, to see what it was made of, since it had sure appeared real the night before -- and damned if it didn't skitter away from me, coming to a halt at the far side of the nightstand. I tried to pick it up, and it ducked and darted away again.

Next I tried to touch her ears -- and three of her fingernails dug into my hand.

I figured I needed some answers, so I gently prodded her and said, "Hey, Vethusia -- wake up."

She sat up, the mask still covering her eyes.

"What is it, my love?" she asked.

(Goddammit, Langtry -- stop looking at me like that! This all happened before you were even hatched!)

Where was I? Oh, yeah -- she asked, "What is it?"

And I said, "There seems to be a little less of you than there was last night. Or at least it's spread out a little more."

"I told you I was a Gril," she said.

"But you didn't tell me what a Gril _was_," I pointed out. "In fact, I still don't know."

"Are you unhappy?" she asked. "Did I fail to satisfy your bestial needs?"

"I didn't say I was unhappy, just surprised," I answered. "And I prefer to think of my needs as romantic."

"Then romance me and stop complaining," she commanded.

And suddenly the room was filled with that irresistible odor, and we had an instant replay of the previous night, and I had to admit that her not having a nose or ears or fingernails didn't make a bit of difference at all.

When it was over and we were laying side by side, I gently stroked her hair, half expecting it to come off in my hand, and then reached to remove her mask.

"What are you doing?" she asked suspiciously.

"I want to look into your eyes," I said. "They're so deep and blue."

"Don't."

"But -- "

"Just leave well enough alone," she said.

And then I figured it out -- she didn't have any eyes either. I must have said it aloud, because she replied that of course she had eyes.

"Then let me see them," I said.

"They're not here right now."

"I don't think I follow you," I said.

"They're out hunting."

I suddenly decided to continue the conversation from the far side of the room, while getting dressed as quickly as possible.

"Okay," I said. "Let me make sure I've got this straight. Your eyes haven't fallen out or been misplaced or stolen or anything like that. They're just out hunting."

"That's right."

"I hate to seem ignorant, but what do eyes hunt?"

"Breakfast, of course."

The more she answered me in that conversational tone, the more alien she seemed.

"Where do they hunt it?"

"Wherever they can find it," she said.

I decided I didn't really want to see her with her mask off after all, and now that I came to think about it, she looked a lot better with her nose and ears back on too. I conveyed this thought to her, and after she

felt blindly around the nightstand for a minute she put them back where they belonged. When that was done she pressed her fingertips against the nightstand and all her nails jumped into place.

Then, suddenly, I heard a strange sound. When I looked around, I saw a pair of eyeballs rolling across the floor. They reached the side of the bed and began bouncing up and down until they wound up on top of the covers, where they rolled over to her hand. The second she felt them she picked one up, turned her back to me, pulled off her sleep mask, and put it into her eye socket, then did the same with the other. When she was done she turned to me and smiled.

"Better?" she asked.

"Much," I said.

Her left eye burped.

I edged toward the door. "It's been very nice knowing you, Vethusia."

"You're not leaving already?" she said.

"Well, it's late and I've got things to do," I said.

"It's early and you've got nothing to do."

"Then I'll think of something to do," I said fervently.

"You didn't seem to mind my company all that much when we were making love."

"I didn't know how many detachable parts you had when we were making love," I shot back. I stared at her for a minute, and then asked, "What else comes loose?"

"You don't want to know."

"Why?" I said. "How many more nightmares can you give me?"

"All right," she said with a sigh. "I don't want to set up housekeeping with a bigot who hates Grils."

"I don't hate Grils," I said. "I just don't understand them a lot more than I don't understand most other things in the universe."

"We'll have one last fling for the road," she said, "and then we'll go our separate ways."

"Not a chance," I said.

But before I could open the door she hit me with that natural perfume again, and sure enough, we had one last fling for the road.

"Good-bye, Hurricane Smith," she said when I'd finished getting dressed. "Let me give you something to remember me by."

"Lady, I ain't ever going to forget you!" I said adamantly.

"You're sure I can't give you a remembrance?"

"I'm going to have to see a shrink to get rid of some of the remembrances you already gave me," I said.

"I could make you stay, you know," said Vethusia.

"I know."

"And you'd love every minute of it."

"Until I came down with a cold and a stuffed nose," I replied.

She found that amusing, and started shaking with laughter, and I snuck out the door before any unexpected parts could come off, and a minute later I was out in the street, wondering which way the spaceport was. I chanced to look up for just an instant, and there she was, a vision of loveliness, staring at me from the window. She looked so little and lonely and vulnerable, I felt like a cad for leaving her.

Then she winked one of those big wandering blue eyes at me, and I decided that even cads have their good points. Twenty minutes later I took off from Carnival, trying not to think of all the good times I could have had with the Gril I left behind.

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"I don't want to dwell on a painful subject," said Baker, "but you could avoid a shitload of trouble if you'd just stick with human women."

"Like you did with the Neptunian concubine?" asked Smith irritably.

"That was an accident."

"So was this," said Smith. "I don't seek out alien ladies, you know."

Langtry Lily hissed softly.

"Except for you, my dear," he added quickly.

Suddenly Little Mike Picasso jumped to his feet and stared out one of the windows.

"What's the matter?" I asked him.

"There was a huge explosion," he said. "Either the sun just went nova or the shooting's getting awful close."

"Fifty-to-one that it's the war," said Bet-a-World O'Grady.

There weren't any takers.

"Wonder just what kind of aliens they are?" mused Baker.

"Whatever they are, I got an unhappy premonition that they ain't gonna be as sexually motivated as the ones you and the Hurricane keep running into," said Max.

Nicodemus Mayflower turned to Catastrophe Baker. "What's the most dangerous race you ever came across?" he asked.

"Women," said Baker.

"I mean an alien race," said Mayflower.

"So do I," answered Baker, sticking by his guns.

"How about you, Gravedigger?"

"I don't know who was the most dangerous," answered Gaines. "The Domarians were the most exhausting."

"How so?" asked Mayflower.

"There was a warrant out on a couple of 'em, so I flew to Domar to see if I could pick up the reward." He paused and took a swallow of his drink. "Interesting world, Domar. No cars, no busses, no trains, no airplanes, no boats, no golf carts, no roads. Just Domarians. They're about forty feet tall, and most of that is leg. They hate the night and spend their whole lives walking around and around their world, following the sun over the horizon -- except for when they're killing each other, that is."

"Did you find the ones you were looking for?"

"Yeah, but I must have lost thirty pounds catching up with them," said Gaines.

"What about you, Hurricane?" asked Mayflower.

"I get along pretty well with most aliens," he answered as Langtry Lily glared at him.

"So we've heard," said Max dryly.

"Big Red?" asked Mayflower.

"You've got to understand that I look at it from a different perspective," said Big Red. "I'm an athlete, not a hero or a bounty hunter or even a soldier. I'd say that the toughest aliens, physically, were the Torquals. They stand about twelve feet tall, all of it muscle, and the last time a human team challenged them to a game of murderball the Torquals won sixteen, five, eight, and three."

"I've never seen murderball," said Sahara del Rio. "What does that score mean?"

"The Torquals scored sixteen goals, the Men scored five, the Torquals killed eight men, and the Men killed three Torquals." Big Red smiled. "It's a vigorous game, ma'am."

"So they were the toughest," said Sahara.

"Physically."

"What other ways are there?" she asked.

"Well, there's mentally," answered Big Red. "No Grumarite has ever lost a chess match except to another Grumarite. And then there are the Quintalias, who invented five-dimensional checkers."

"How do you play that?" asked O'Grady.

"Beats me," said Big Red. "You'd have to ask a Quintalia, and they're so busy peeking into other dimensions that they don't always answer."

"So you'd say that the toughest are the Torquals and the smartest are the Grumarites and the Quintalias?" asked Mayflower.

"The toughest I've seen in competition," Big Red corrected him. "Personally, I'd put Einstein up against any of them."

"You mean any Grumarite or Quintalia."

"I mean any of them."

"Come on," said Mayflower. "How do you expect a blind man to defeat a Torqual?"

"He's Einstein," said Big Red. "He'd find a way."

"My money would be on the Torqual," said O'Grady.

"You'd lose."

"Oh, yeah?" said O'Grady. "Ask him how he'd win."

Big Red tapped a message, waited for Einstein to reply, and then read the holographic screen.

"He says it would be easy."

"Did he say how?" insisted O'Grady.

"Yeah. He says E equals MC squared."

"So what? Everyone knows that."

"True -- but only he knows how to apply it."

"Poppycock."

Big Red's screen came to life again.

"He says if you'll put up five hundred credits to his ten, he'll prove it right now."

Suddenly a look of uncertainty crossed O'Grady's face. "Tell him I don't want to take his money."

The computers exchanged messages again.

"He says not to worry -- you won't."

"Some other time."

"He says he's been analyzing things, and if the war gets much closer you may never have another chance."

"I'll learn to live with the disappointment," said O'Grady.

"Too bad," said the Reverend Billy Karma. "I love watching Good and Evil going at it hammer and tongs."

"Which of them would be Good?" asked Max.

"Whichever one won, of course," said Billy Karma. "God don't let Evil get a leg up in these matters."

"It must be nice to be that certain of things," said Max.

"It is comforting," agreed the Reverend.

"How about you, Max?" said Nicodemus Mayflower.

"I give up," said Max. "How about me?"

"I mean, who were the most dangerous aliens you ever faced?"

"You mean other than overly aggressive redheads named Thelma?" said Max. "Well, actually Hurricane Smith's story about the hungry eyes reminded me of them a little bit."

"Of redheads named Thelma?"

"No. Of dangerous aliens."

"Yours had hungry eyes too?" asked Smith, suddenly interested.

Max shook his head. "Nope. But they were a formidable bunch just the same. Hell, if it wasn't for me, they might have overrun the whole galaxy."

"Thank heaven for small favors," muttered Little Mike Picasso sarcastically.

"Thank someone else," said the Reverend Billy Karma. "I happen to hold the copyright to heaven."

"So who were these aliens anyway?" asked Big Red.