

A Hospital is Not a Home

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As you can tell by looking at me (began the Earth Mother), I'm not built for battle. Hell, I wasn't built for battle thirty years ago, when I looked a lot more like Sinderella.

So I decided that I'd volunteer as a nurse at the alien hospital on Henry VII's moon, Elizabeth of York. I figured that my best bet to help the war effort was to learn something about the aliens' anatomy, something I could pass on to Catastrophe and Hurricane and the rest of you.

It turns out they weren't all that different from us.

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"They sure as hell looked different," said Big Red.

"And they had more of a taste for sadism than any Men I've met," added the Reverend Billy Karma. "Except maybe for Baker and Smith and Gaines and Max and the Cyborg lady."

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You're mistaking social differences for physical differences (continued the Earth Mother). But as a matter of fact, there was one important social difference.

I saw an alien soldier who'd been all shot up pinch a nurse as she walked by. I waited until all the doctors and nurses had left the ward, and then I approached him.

"I couldn't help noticing what you did before," I said.

"Mostly, I moaned a lot and fell asleep," he responded.

"I mean, to the nurse."

"Well, it's been a long time," he said defensively. "I suppose in due course I'll be sent home, and I'll find a life mate, and that will solve my hunger."

"Why wait that long?" I asked.

"None of the nurses would be willing to become my life mate," he said bitterly. "I'm just a farmer who was drafted to fight this war."

"Who says they have to become your life mate?"

"Are you crazy?" he said. "Do you know the penalty for rape?"

"I'm not talking about rape," I answered.

He looked puzzled. "Then what are you talking about?"

"Among my race, when a male suffers unbearable sexual tension, there are women who are happy to provide an outlet for him."

"Life mates, right."

"More like evening mates," I said.

"You mean, you don't have to pair off with them for life?"

"That's precisely what I mean."

"But ... but why would they participate?"

"There's always money," I said.

"You mean...?"

"It's an old and honored profession among my people," I said.

"_Madre de dios!_" he exclaimed (or alien words to that effect.) "What a mind-boggling concept!"

"You think it would meet with your race's approval?" I asked.

"Our _enthusiastic_ approval," he replied.

"Your females, too?"

"Certainly. Most of them require a detailed financial statement from prospective suitors. They'll probably be even more avid supporters of this bold new concept than the males."

"Good," I told him. "I am not without experience in running such an enterprise. If you will introduce all your fellow soldiers in the wards to the concept, I will explain it to the nurses."

"But this is a hospital!" he said, suddenly depressed. "Where can we go to ... uh ... you know?"

"One of the things my race specializes in," I said, "are heroes. Most of them are highly idiosyncratic, much too much to be able to function within a rigid military structure. But I just left a number of them, and they're preparing to drive your people out of the solar system and back to your home world. I'd be surprised if this hospital isn't deserted within forty-eight hours -- except for those nurses as I can recruit and those soldiers who are healthy enough to help support this business. And of course, once word of what we're doing gets out, we'll move our operation to your home world and just leave a small branch here for those wayfarers who need to charge their batteries before returning home."

"You're quite sure your heroes will carry the day?" he asked. "Because I would hate to commit to this, and then find out that we'd won the war."

"I think I can guarantee it."

"But we'll outnumber them hundreds to one."

"That will just encourage them to fight harder," I said. "Trust me: I know them. They are the most contrary individuals in a race of contrarians."

"I just hope you're right," he said.

And I was. The aliens cleared off Elizabeth of York in thirty-six hours (except for nine former nurses who had decided to change professions). About half the walking wounded opted to stay, and so did a number of able-bodied soldiers who were willing to risk being court-martialed for desertion to sample the wares of Madame Elizabeth's Emporium.

In fact, the only reason I'm here at all is to transfer my funds to their home world. I leave later today to scout out locations for the next branch of Madame Elizabeth's.

Who says war is hell?

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"I've heard of camp followers before," said Max. "But I have to take my hat off to you. You're the first camp _creator_ I've ever met."

"Well," said the Earth Mother, "you do what you know."

"Precisely," said the Reverend Billy Karma with a lascivious smile.

"And do well," she added.

"Are you really going to spend the rest of your life running a whorehouse for aliens?" asked Max.

"Of course not," she said. "I'll spend about four or five months getting it operating smoothly, and then I plan to franchise it. I'll be back among humans in a year's time, and I'll be filthy rich. Hell, I might even buy this place."

"It's not for sale," I said.

"You haven't heard my offer," said the Earth Mother.

"Doesn't make any difference," I said. "This place is my life. What would I do if I sold it?"

"Consider the offer withdrawn," she said. "I envy you."

"You do?" I said, surprised. "Why?"

"Because you've found something that means more than money to you."

"So have I," chimed in Billy Karma.

"Yeah, but you find something new every time a different woman twitches past," said Max.

"I was referring to the Good Book," said Billy Karma with all the dignity he could muster.

"I'll offer you two hundred credits for it," said Max.

"Two hundred?" repeated Billy Karma. "It's a deal."

Max laughed. "I thought it meant more than money to you."

"It does," said Billy Karma. "That's why I got it committed to memory. The physical manifestation of a book don't mean no more than the physical manifestation of a man. It's what's inside that counts."

"And what about the physical manifestation of a woman?" asked Max.

"Well," hedged the Reverend, "me and God are still trying to figure that one out." He pulled a well-worn copy of the bible out of his pocket. "Now where's my two hundred credits?"

"Forget it," said Max. "I was just proving a point."

"Hey, a deal's a deal."

"Go away," said Max.

"You're not going to pay me?"

"Nope."

"Satan's got a special place in hell waiting for people who go back on their word," said Billy Karma.

"He told you that personally, did he?" asked Max.

"I ain't never met up with him personally," said the Reverend. "But he comes to me in visions and tells me what he aims to do to sinners." He paused and glared at Max. "Your name was prominently mentioned the last time we spoke."

"That's strange," said Max. "He never speaks to me. In fact, the only supernatural being who ever pays any attention to me is Wilxyboeth."

"Who the hell is that?"

"Argyle's god of sexual potency," he said, giving me and Reggie a big wink.

"Yeah?" Billy Karma tossed his bible to Max. "Here. Keep the damned thing."

"What's this for?"

"A reward for telling me how to conjure up this here Wilxyboeth."

"Tell you what," said Max. "Go a whole day and night without insulting any of the ladies here and I'll think about it."

"Twenty-four hours?" said Billy Karma. "For that kind of self-control, I want you to do more than think about it. I want you to guarantee me a face-to-face meeting with Wilxyboeth."

Max threw the bible back to him. "Forget it. We do it my way or not at all."

"All right," said the Reverend with a sigh. He tossed the bible back to Max. "We do it your way." He turned to Silicon Carny. "I'm sorry, my love. You'll just have to hold yourself in check for another day, after which I'll be happy to do the holding."

"Not bad," said Max. "You made it almost ten seconds." The bible flew back across the room.

"Just a minute!" protested Billy Karma. "It was a slip of the tongue!"

"You lose."

Billy Karma hung his head in defeat, but the mood seemed to pass in a few seconds. "Oh, well," he said, smiling at Silicon Carny. "I'll just have to find something else to do with my tongue."

She pulled out a knife. "You take one step toward me and I'll find something to do with it."

"What kind of monster are you?" he demanded.

"The kind who chooses her own bed partners."

"This ain't a good year for radical ideas," said the Reverend Billy Karma.

"Or disgusting preachers," she shot back.

Billy Karma decided to take one last shot at it. "I'm only disgusting on the surface."

"Right," chimed in Max. "Deep down he's actually nauseating."

"Thanks for your help," said Billy Karma, glaring at him. "I really appreciate it."

"Any time."

Just at that moment Little Mike Picasso entered the Outpost.

"Welcome back," I said. "Reg, get him a drink."

"Good to be back," said Little Mike. "Am I the last to show up?" He looked around the room. "I see Argyle hasn't made it back yet. Or Achmed." He turned to Hurricane Smith. "I hope Langtry Lily's just taking a nap, or maybe a trip to the necessary."

"She's dead," said Smith.

"I'm sorry to hear it," said Little Mike.

Baker walked over and threw an arm around Smith's shoulder. "Me, too, Hurricane," he said. "You should have mentioned it earlier."

Smith shrugged. "These things happen."

"Yeah," agreed Baker. "Any lady who links up with one of us has just taken fifty years off her life expectancy. And when all is said and done, Langtry was a bug -- no offense meant; she was a mighty attractive bug -- but for all we know she might only have had a lifespan of two or three years."

"It'll be rough, but in time you'll learn to live without her," said Sinderella sympathetically. "Someday, when the pain lessens, you might even find somebody else."

"I already have," replied Smith.

"But there are only three women in the whole Plantagenet system, and they're all here right now," said Sinderella.

Baker laughed. "You don't think he'd hook up with a human woman, do you?"

"Maybe it's a better year for radical ideas than I thought," murmured the Reverend Billy Karma.

"Did you meet her at Madame Elizabeth's Emporium?" asked Baker.

"Certainly not!" snapped Smith. "She's good and pure and noble and fine and decent!"

"Okay, where is this paragon of virtue and femininity?" asked Baker. "We might as well meet her."

"She's on Adelaide of Louvain."

"I never learned no English history," said Baker. "Where the hell is that?"

"The outer moon of Henry I," said the Bard.

"What's she doing there?"

"Everyone here just got done fighting a war against her race. We decided that she should stay there until

we could be sure she wouldn't receive a hostile reception."

"You should have known better," said Baker, who seemed honestly hurt. "If you vouch for her, that's all it takes."

"I know you, Catastrophe," said Smith apologetically. "But I don't know some of the others."

"How did you hook up with her?" asked Baker.

"She saved my life on Henry IV."

"Even aliens make mistakes," said Max.

"Shut up!" snapped Baker. He turned to Smith. "Is that where Langtry bought it?"

"Yes."

"You want to tell us about it?"

"I might as well," said Smith, sighing deeply. "They both deserve to be in the Bard's book. If he doesn't hear my story, then fifty or a hundred years from now it won't have happened, and that'd be a shame."

The Bard picked up his pen. "Ready when you are."