

Johnny Testosterone and the Temple Virgin

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There was this guy called Johnny Testosterone who wiped out a whole army of aliens (said Baker). For his reward, he was given the Temple Virgin.

The end.

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"Loses a little something in the retelling, don't it?" said Max dryly.

"Well, it ain't much of a story," responded Baker sullenly. "I'm hardly in it at all."

"Still, it was a better story than _that_," said Smith.

"How would you know?" Baker shot back. "I was emptying the wine cellar and you were off with a God-knows-what doing God-knows-what-else."

Langtry Lily reached out to hold Hurricane Smith's hand. Suddenly her own hand became a mandible, and she dug it into his flesh.

"He's exaggerating, my dear!" said Smith, painfully pulling his hand away and wiping the blood from it as her mandible became a feminine human hand again. "Besides, it was a long time ago!"

She leaned over and whispered something in his ear.

"All right, all right, if you insist," he said, and then turned to the rest of us. "I've been requested to tell the true story."

"The whole thing?" asked Max. "I get the feeling Catastrophe left out a couple of details here and there."

"The whole story," promised Hurricane Smith.

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First of all (began Smith), his name wasn't really Johnny Testosterone. That was just the name he took when he hit the Frontier, probably in the hope of impressing the ladies, as I never noticed him to behave any differently or score any more often than the rest of us.

His real name was Johnny Potts. It didn't make the kind of lasting impression on people that Catastrophe Baker or Gravedigger Gaines did, so he dumped it as soon as he could. Then he began dressing to match his new name. Wore his shirts unbuttoned down to the navel, tied a silk scarf around his neck, and his trousers were so tight you're swear he was auditioning for a ballet. Even tinted his skin tan. Women loved it; men thought he looked kind of silly.

Still, once push came to shove, he could handle his fists and his weapons with the best of them, and he wasn't scared of anything except maybe Catastrophe Baker when he was drunk, which is a mighty reasonable attitude to have, so we let him travel out to the Albion Cluster with us.

There's a lot more to the hero business than meets the eye. One of the biggest problems is that actions which seem properly heroic to us get our holographs on wanted posters and attract a lot of men like the Gravedigger here, despite the fact that we never did him any harm.

Anyway, the three of us -- Catastrophe, Johnny and me -- got word that there was a religious colony on Leviticus IV that needed heroes more than most. Seems that some aliens had landed and set up shop there, and it was against the colonists' religion to raise a hand in anger, even to defend themselves.

It was a very elastic religion, though, since it didn't seem to have anything against other people raising hands in anger on their behalf. Before long we heard that there was a substantial reward for anyone who freed them from the yoke of alien tyranny, and while none of us had any serious philosophic objections to aliens or tyranny, we had all kinds of objections to not collecting substantial rewards. So we passed the word that we were heading to Leviticus IV and weren't in the mood for any competition, and once people heard that Catastrophe Baker and Hurricane Smith didn't want any company, they suddenly remembered that they had urgent business elsewhere.

We landed next to a temple that could have passed for a small city. It had arches and turrets and spires, and I was willing to bet that it possessed its fair share of secret passageways and hidden chambers.

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"The aliens just let you land?" asked Max dubiously.

"There was a huge wall around the temple, like a walled city, and we landed inside the wall," answered Hurricane Smith.

"How come the aliens hadn't overrun the temple already?" demanded Max.

"I'm coming to that."

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It turns out that whoever built the temple had actually built it as a defensible fortress (continued Smith). Not that the current inhabitants had any notion of defending it themselves ... but the walls were lined with webs of energy that tended to roast the enemy, and evidently it wasn't against their religion to keep them turned on.

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"So why didn't the aliens land inside the walls like you did?" persisted Max.

"Who's telling this story, you or me?" demanded Smith irritably.

Max looked like he was going to argue the point, but just then Langtry Lily started hissing at him, and he decided that silence was the better part of valor.

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The simple truth of the matter (said Smith) is that the aliens didn't know that the colonists wouldn't put up a fight. A bunch of them had been burned to a crisp trying to climb the walls or break them down, and they knew the city had impregnable defenses, so it never occurred to them that they could land inside the walls and capture it. Instead, they surrounded the place and laid siege to it.

Anyway, a few minutes after we landed we were in a huge room that had all the trappings of a cozy little

chapel writ large. There were maybe three dozen men and women waiting for us. Their leader was the High Priest, an old guy by the name of Sandazar, who wore a flowing robe of spun gold.

"I thank the Great Galactic Spirit for answering our supplications and sending us three bonafide heroes in this our hour of need," he said.

"Let's eliminate the middle man," said Catastrophe. "Just thank us and let's get on with the negotiations."

"Negotiations?" asked Sandazar, looking kind of puzzled.

"Even heroes got to eat," said Catastrophe.

"But of course!" exclaimed Sandazar. He clapped his hands above his head. "Bring food for our saviors!"

"I don't think you follow me," said Catastrophe. "We don't work for free. There was mention made of a reward."

"Certainly!" said Sandazar. "Drive the aliens away and you may have anything we possess."

"I'll take that robe of yours," said Catastrophe.

"Consider it done," said Sandazar. "Always assuming you survive."

Just then a gorgeous girl, no more than 16 years old, and dressed in a gauzy blue gown you could just about see through, approached us, carrying a tray laden down with food.

"Take it away!" said Sandazar. "I misunderstood our guests. They are not hungry after all."

"You know," said Johnny Testosterone, watching intently as the girl walked away, "not all of us insist on being paid in coin of the realm."

"That was never our intention," said Sandazar. "In fact, the most heroic member of your team may claim the Temple Virgin for his own."

"Now you're talking my language!" said Johnny, never taking his eyes from the girl as she undulated away.

I decided that we could worry about the rewards later, but that first we ought to know a little something about the enemy, so I stepped forward and introduced myself.

"Ah, Hurricane Smith!" said Sandazar. "Your reputation precedes you."

"I'm not so much concerned with what proceeds me as with what might be sneaking up behind me," I replied. "Suppose you tell us what these aliens are like."

"They're huge amoebas," answered Sandazar. "Their bodies have almost no structural integrity; they grow and contract with every breath and step they take."

"Have you any idea what they want?"

"They want to rule the planet and make us their slaves, of course," said Sandazar, as if explaining the obvious to a small child.

"They usually do," agreed Catastrophe in bored tones.

"How did they communicate that particular desire to you?" I asked.

"Verbally, of course."

"You're telling me that these amoebas can speak?"

"Absolutely," said Sandazar. "Their diction is superior to Catastrophe Baker's."

"Have they said why they chose Leviticus IV?"

"Well, actually, they thought this was Wyandotte II, but they decided that as long as they were here they might as well take over the planet and turn us all into slaves."

"What kind of weapons do they have?" I asked.

"I don't know. They stay on one side of the wall and we stay on the other." He paused for a moment. "Is there anything else you need to know?"

"Probably," I said, "but I can't figure out what it is."

"You're quite sure?"

"Quite."

"Then I think we'll leave the carnage and bloodletting to you, and go hide in our secret subterranean chambers. Give a holler when you've slaughtered the last of them."

"No problem," Johnny assured him. "Just remind everyone that the Temple Virgin is reserved for me."

"I will certainly do that," answered Sandazar. Then he turned and left the room, followed by all the lesser priests and priestesses, and we three heroes were left alone.

"Well, how do you want to handle this?" asked Catastrophe.

"It's up to you," I said.

He frowned. "Well, it poses a serious problem. If there were two of us, I'd just tell you to take all the aliens on the right and I'd take all the ones on the left. And if there were four of us, we could each take all the aliens facing a particular wall." He sighed. "But I don't know how to divide an alien army by three."

"Howabout you two divide 'em in half, and I'll kill any that get by you?" suggested Johnny.

"I don't plan to let none get by me," said Catastrophe.

"You know," I said, "maybe we ought to talk to them first. Once they know who they're up against, they might think twice about a war of conquest here and go back to hunting for Wyandotte II."

"Especially if we give them a map," agreed Johnny.

"It's worth a try," said Catastrophe. "Hurricane, you go out and talk to them."

"You're not coming with me?" I asked.

"Let's be reasonable," said Catastrophe. "If it works, you won't need us -- but if it turns out to be as dumb an idea as I think it is, there'll still be two of us left to destroy their army."

Well, I really couldn't argue with the logic of that, so I walked outside, found the power source for the wall, deactivated it, opened the door, and walked out into the fields beyond the temple. Catastrophe and

Johnny shut the door so fast they almost took off my heel.

I found myself surrounded by a few hundred amoebas, so I raised my arm in the universal sign of peace.

"What are you pointing at, human?" demanded the closest amoeba.

"Nothing," I said. "I'm being friendly."

"So whenever you want to make friends, you point to the sky?"

"Well, yes, I guess I do," I admitted.

"You're not impressing us with your intellect," said the amoeba.

"Where did you guys learn to speak Terran?" I asked.

"We monitor your commercial holo transmissions," said the amoeba. "We especially like the ones involving Pirate Queens."

"Most people do."

"Okay, so much for small talk," said the amoeba. "Now it's time to kill you. Do you prefer strangulation, crucifixion, boiling in oil, or simply being torn asunder?"

"What if I were to show you how to get to Wyandotte II?" I said.

"I'd call that damned sporting of you," said the amoeba. "First we'll conquer Leviticus IV, kill all the humans, and raise the temple to the ground, and then we'll wage war against Wyandotte."

"You don't understand," I said. "I'm offering to trade. You leave us alone, and I'll supply you with the star charts you need."

"Yeah, that sounds good," said another amoeba.

"No," said a third. "Let's kill the humans first and then see if we can find Wyandotte on our own."

Pretty soon all the nearby amoebas were arguing, and the one I'd been speaking to sidled up to me.

"We're going to have to take a vote," it said. "This could take all day. Come with me; I've got a box lunch hidden away."

I followed it to a nearby forest. None of the other amoebas took any notice of us; they were too caught up in trying to decide whether to accept my proposal or not.

"By the way, have you got a name?" I asked when we finally sat down, protected by a pair of giant trees.

"Winoria," said the amoeba.

"That's a very feminine name for an amoeba that doesn't possess a gender," I said.

"I most certainly do," said Winoria. "I am a female."

"How can I tell the difference?"

"There are ways," said Winoria, slithering closer to me. "For example..."

It sure as shooting was some example. And just about the time I'd adjusted to that one, she showed me another. (Don't get upset, Langtry; this was long before I met you.)

Well, we spent an idyllic hour in the forest, indulging in our natural scientific curiosity. Then I heard the hum of a burner and the buzz of a screecher, and I could hear Johnny Testosterone's voice screaming things like _"Eat hellfire, you alien scum!"_ and _"Kiss your ass good-bye, you godless heathen!"_

I jumped to my feet and started running back to the temple. The gate was open, and Johnny was standing just in front of it, weapons smoking.

"What the hell's going on?" I demanded.

"I got tired of waiting," he said, "so I killed 'em all. By God, that felt even better than a hot shower on a cold morning!"

"But they were considering going away without trying to conquer the planet after all."

"I figured that when I heard them all arguing," replied Johnny. "That's why I decided to start shooting. The old priest wasn't going to give us the Temple Virgin if the enemy declared peace on us."

I looked around. "What happened to them?"

"They melted. Disintegrated. Vanished." He suddenly saw Winoria coming up behind me. "Except for this one."

He aimed his burner at her, and I slapped it out of his hand before he could squeeze the trigger.

"Why the hell did you do that?" demanded Johnny.

"Leave her alone," I said.

"_Her?_" he repeated. "How do you know?"

I felt my face turn a bright red.

"None of your business," I said.

He looked from Winoria to me and back to Winoria. "That's perverted!" he snapped, picking up his pistol and tucking it away in his holster. Then: "Was she any good?"

"Where's Catastrophe?" I asked, ignoring his question.

"He found their wine cellar," answered Johnny. "I imagine you'll have to peel him off the floor by now."

Well, he obviously didn't know Catastrophe Baker. I figure he couldn't have downed more than 8 or 10 bottles by now, and that meant he'd wouldn't be even halfway to tipsy.

"Son of a bitch!" yelled Johnny suddenly. "Baker spent the last hour drinking, and you spent it committing sins they ain't even got names for yet, so that means I wiped the aliens out all by myself -- so I got first claim on the Temple Virgin!"

Which didn't bother me at all. The girl in the gauzy dress suddenly seemed so _ordinary_, with nothing special or exotic to offer a man of the galaxy.

What _did_ bother me was that Johnny Testosterone had wiped out all of Winoria's people, and as he

went back into the temple I turned to her and expressed my regrets.

"No harm done," she said. "If you'll give me the star charts, I'll be on my way to Wyandotte II."

I handed them over. "Here they are," I replied. "But I can't help noting that you don't seem terribly distressed over the slaughter of your companions."

"Why should I be?" she replied, and suddenly she split into about half a million tiny pieces, which instantly began growing. "To the ship, my children!" she ordered them. As they rushed to obey her, she turned to me. "It was a memorable and stimulating interlude, Hurricane Smith," she said, "but I must say I find your method of procreation incredibly inefficient, no matter how much fun it is."

Then she was gone, and I turned back to the temple. Catastrophe met me as I approached the chamber where we'd met the High Priest.

"Johnny tells me you've been enjoying yourself," I said.

"He tells me the same thing about you," answered Catastrophe with a knowing grin.

"Some heroes we are," I said. "It looks like Johnny won the war all by himself."

"Not much of a war from what I could tell. Once I looked over the top of the wall and saw that an amoeba can't wear a weapon, I figured you could take care of yourself." He paused. "I never figured Johnny would fight 'em all himself."

"He wanted the reward worse than we did."

"Hell, I've already put in for my reward. I want the gold robe."

"I suppose, to be honest, I've already had my reward," I admitted, thinking wistfully of Winoria.

Suddenly we heard a shriek of abject horror, and a moment later Johnny Testosterone came racing out of the temple, high-tailing it for the mountain range that was about 200 miles past the forest, and looking neither right nor left.

"I wonder what the hell _that_ was all about?" asked Catastrophe.

A couple of minutes later a skinny young man with a neatly-trimmed beard and a couple of flowers stuck in his hair wandered out.

"Have either of you seen Johnny Testosterone?" he asked.

"Yeah," said Catastrophe. "He was headed due west like a bat out of hell."

"Damn!" said the young man, scuffing the tile with his sandaled foot.

"And who might you be?" I asked him.

"Me?" he replied. "I'm the Temple Virgin."

We never saw Johnny again.

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"I think I liked Baker's version better," said Three-Gun Max.

"Wasn't much of an adventure," replied Baker. "Didn't have much of an aftermath, either. When we got back to a civilized world and I tried to sell the robe, I found out that it was made of spun pyrite."

"Could have been worse," suggested Max. "You could have wound up with the Temple Virgin."

"Well, it just goes to show that you can't trust priests," said Nicodemus Mayflower. "I figure that it's best not to believe anyone below the level of king, or maybe emperor."

"You ever met an emperor?" asked Max.

"Not yet," answered Mayflower. "But I've got my whole life ahead of me."

"Except for the part you've already wasted," observed Baker wryly.

"That goes without saying," replied Mayflower with dignity.

"_DAMN IT!"_ roared Hurricane Smith, and suddenly we all turned to look at him. He was holding a scarf next to his cheek, and blood was seeping through it.

"I told you it happened before I met you!" he snapped at Langtry Lily.

She hissed and spit at him. He ducked, and it hit the back of his chair and started dissolving it. A second later he had his burner about an inch from her nose.

"You try that again and this'll be the shortest goddamned honeymoon on record!"

"Your first spat?" asked Little Mike Picasso curiously.

"More like our two hundredth," answered Smith. "You'd think a race that produces eggs like there's no tomorrow wouldn't be so fucking jealous!"

He kept his gun trained on her for another few seconds, then twirled it around his finger and put it back in its holster, all in one fluid motion.

Langtry Lily leaned over and whispered to him again.

"Forget it!" he snapped. "What good does it do to apologize when I know you'll be slashing me or spitting at me again in a few minutes? We've got to lay down some ground rules here or else go our separate ways."

Suddenly Langtry Lily's whole demeanor changed. She began crying -- huge, gut-wrenching sobs, and she buried her face in her hands.

"Now see what you've done," said Little Mike. "You've gone and broken her poor little insectoid heart." He paused, then added: "Always assuming she comes equipped with one, that is."

"Uh ... I don't want to seem unduly insensitive," I interjected, "but can her tears do any harm to the table?"

Smith just glared at me without answering, and a moment later he put his hands on her shoulders to comfort her, but she kept on weeping and wailing to beat the band, and finally he walked to the bar and called Reggie over to him.

"You got any honey?" he asked.

Reggie quickly gave him a bottle of it. Smith walked back to his table, opened it, and spilled a little on Langtry Lily's forearm. She lifted her head to see what was happening, fluttered her nostrils a few times, stopped crying as quick as she'd begun, and then started sucking up the honey with that straw-like thing that shot out of the corner of her mouth.

"Another crisis averted," said Smith with a grimace.

"You could avert a lot of 'em if you'd just give up this taste you've acquired for alien females and go back to human women," said Baker.

"I like what I like," said Smith, jutting out his jaw.

"Okay, it's your life," said Baker with a shrug, "and I ain't the one to say that your tastes are perverted -- but they sure could be a mite more practical."

"Let's change the subject before she starts paying attention," said Smith, watching as Langtry Lily finished cleaning the honey off her arm and inserted the straw into the bottle. "What have you been doing with yourself since the last time I saw you?"

"Oh, this and that, here and there," answered Baker. "Even made it all the way to Sol's system." He paused. "Never quite got to Earth, though."

"Why not?"

Baker opened a fresh bottle of 130-proof Belarban whiskey. "I got sidetracked in the Hall of the Neptunian Kings," he said, taking a huge swallow. "This story won't be over as quick as my last, since I'm the star of it -- and I wouldn't want to go dry in the middle of it."