

The Prophet Who Was Never Right

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Turns out that God has a better sense of humor than most people give Him credit for (continued the Reverend Billy Karma). Because just as Isaiah the Right was never wrong, his brother couldn't win for losing. If he said it looked nice out, it'd snow five minutes later. If he thought the local murderball team was a lead-pipe cinch to win, they'd blow a 17-goal lead in the last three minutes. If he went to a restaurant and asked for steak, they'd give him salad -- and when he decided not to make an issue of it and asked for some salad dressing, they'd bring him horse radish.

After awhile he decided that there might be a way to make a living in the prophet biz anyway, so he took the name of Isaiah the Left so everybody would know he wasn't his brother, and set up shop. He needed an interpreter, of course, someone to tell the customers that when he said the only horse that couldn't possibly win was the gray gelding that what he meant was to bet the farm on the gray.

He'd go to New Vegas as an advisor, and the second he advised you to stick on 18 you'd take a hit and pull a deuce or a trey. He'd be at the craps table, and some hot four-armed Delphinian would be rolling the dice, and when Isaiah would say that there was no way the purple bastard could come up seven six times in a row, you knew where to place your money.

In fact, before long he felt compelled to change his name. Oh, it was still the opposite of Isaiah the Right, but now instead of Isaiah the Left he was Isaiah the Wrong.

He achieved some remarkable results. I remember one freehand boxing match where he had so many stipulations that in order for him to lose all of them the referee had to get a hernia and the boxers had to be miraculously transported 37 light-years away where the fight was decided by a split decision.

He just kept on making wrong prophecies and raking in the money. It couldn't last, of course. God doesn't mind playing an occasional practical joke, but He ain't so happy when someone plays it right back on Him.

One day Isaiah the Wrong prophesied that his client would be unlucky in love -- and the next night the client got lucky indeed, and ran off with Isaiah's fiancee.

He promised his next client that fame and fortune would forever elude him. Two days later the Fame and Fortune Collection Agency ran his client to ground and nailed him for almost three million credits' worth of unpaid debts.

The kicker came when, suddenly filled with self-doubts from his last two experiences, he looked at his unhappy image in the mirror and said, "I have confidence in you. Things will get better."

The words had barely left his mouth when he realized what he'd done, but God hadn't supplied him with a rulebook and he didn't know how to take it back.

In short order four women sued him for child support, his banker embezzled his money, the mortgage company repossessed his house, his office was broken into and robbed, and a stray cat bit him on the great toe.

He finally decided that he couldn't take any more, so he went to the hospital, lay down next to Isaiah the Right, and made one last prophecy: "I feel so good that I don't think I'll ever need to sleep again."

That was more than twenty years ago. He's still snoring.

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"What the hell does that have to do with your religion?" asked Max irritably.

"You asked for prophets, I gave you prophets," replied Billy Karma.

"Not the kind anyone would want to write up in a bible," said Max.

"You didn't specify Old Testament-type prophets."

"I didn't ask for any prophets at all."

"Then what the hell are you bitching about?" demanded Billy Karma. "Get uppity with me and I'll bring a rain of toads down on you."

"Ain't no such thing," said Max.

"Don't bet on it," interjected Sinderella. "Every time I go out I'm immediately surrounded by more un-kissed frogs and toads than you can shake a stick at."

"What a pair of lost opportunities," said Bet-a-World O'Grady, shaking his head sadly.

"You leave her opportunities alone!" said Max, who seemed determined to fight with some one about some thing.

"I'm talking about the Isaiah brothers," said O'Grady. "A man who knew how to use what they had to offer could own half the galaxy in a year's time."

Big Red had been translating for Einstein, who suddenly tapped something on his computer, and Big Red's screen immediately lit up with a number that seemed to cover the whole of it. He held it up in front of O'Grady.

"You know what this is?" he asked.

"A googol?" guessed O'Grady.

"The yearly tax on half the galaxy. Einstein just computed it." He grinned. "Do you really want to own it?"

"Well, if I did own it, I'd go to Deluros VIII and sit down opposite the Monarch and pull out a deck of cards and we could cut for the tax -- double or nothing."

"What if you lost?" asked Hellfire Bailey.

"With my deck?" replied O'Grady as if that was the silliest statement he'd heard all week -- which it probably was.

"Forgive me," said Bailey with a smile. "I lost my head."

"So, Catastrophe Baker," said the Reverend Billy Karma, "are you about ready to join my church?"

"I'm giving it some thought," said Baker. "A man ought to have something to do of a Sunday morning."

"You mean besides rape, carnage, plunder, murder, and sleeping late?" said a deep voice from the doorway, and we all turned to see who had wandered in. "I can't imagine what it might be."

They were an eye-catching couple. The woman was tall and shapely, with coal-black hair and eyes, and matching black lipstick. The man was as big as Catastrophe Baker, which was going some. He had wild red hair, and a bushy red beard, and was wearing an outfit made from the furs of various alien polar animals. I knew from the descriptions I'd heard that it couldn't be anyone but Hurricane Smith.

"Well, I'll be damned!" said Baker.

"Probably you will be," agreed Smith, "but pour me a drink first."

Smith and his companion walked to the bar, where he and Baker hugged and pummeled each other with enough energy to have killed anyone else in the room except maybe Gravedigger Gaines.

"It's good to see you again, Hurricane!" said Baker. "And who is this elegant lady by your side?"

"This here is Langtry Lily," answered Smith. "We're on our honeymoon!"

"Well, congratulations to both of you!" boomed Baker. "Do you mind if I kiss the bride?"

"You remember what happened the last time you kissed one of my female companions?" answered Smith with a smile. "And _that_ was a lady I'd only known for ten minutes."

I stepped over to greet them. "What can I have Reggie get for you?" I asked. "The first one is always on the house."

"I'll have some Denebian firewater," said Smith. "How about you, my dear?"

Langtry Lily whispered something in his ear.

"Have you got a gallon of coffee somewhere in the back there?" he asked.

"No problem," I said.

"Maybe a pint of cream?"

"Yeah, there's always some around."

"And a pound of sugar?"

"That's an awful lot of sugar," I said.

"She's got a sweet tooth. Can you do it?"

"A gallon of coffee, a pint of cream, and a pound of sugar," I repeated. "Yeah, we can do it."

"Good," he said, escorting Langtry Lily to a table. "Now, hold the coffee and hold the cream, and bring what's left."

I've had stranger orders, though not too many, so I shrugged and gave Reggie his instructions.

"Hey, you're that Peloponne lady that the Hurricane ran off with, aren't you?" asked Nicodemus Mayflower.

"She's my wife," snapped Smith. "That ought to be enough for you."

"No offense meant," said Mayflower hastily. "The Hurricane and I served together. I got nothing against the Peloponnes."

"So is she or isn't she?" whispered Sitting Horse.

Just then an insect flew by Smith's table. Langtry Lily opened her mouth, her tongue shot out a good twenty inches and snared it, and an instant later we could hear an unladylike crunching sound, followed by a quick gulp.

"She is," answered Crazy Bull.

"Geez!" sighed Sinderella. "Do you know how much money I could have made with a tongue even half that long?"

"A man of the cloth can't stand by while a possible parishioner expresses such feelings of inadequacy," said the Reverend Billy Karma. "Why don't you come by later and try your physical shortcomings out on me?"

"Because I don't want you trying your physical shortcomings out on me," said Sinderella.

When the laughter died down, Baker walked over and joined Hurricane Smith and Langtry Lily at their table.

"What brings you to the Outpost?" he asked.

"Truth to tell, I wasn't originally headed here," replied Smith. "But there's an awful lot of shooting going on over in the next system, and since I'd heard of this place I thought it might be a nice spot to hole up until they get their war over with."

"Either side fire on you?" asked the Bard.

"Hell, both sides fired on us," said Smith. "Who are they mad at, anyway?"

"Pretty much everybody, as near as I can tell," answered Baker.

"Hey, Hurricane," said Gravedigger Gaines, "are you going to introduce me to your missus, even if I can't kiss her?"

"That all depends," responded Smith warily. "Are you still a bounty hunter?"

"I gave that up years ago."

"Glad to hear it. I always liked you, except when you were shooting at me."

"Well, damn it all," said the Gravedigger, "I always figured you and I could be great friends if you'd just stop trying to kill me."

"Hell, ain't no time like the present," said Smith, extending his huge hand.

"Sounds good to me," said the Gravedigger, taking it in his own oversized paw.

"Honey," said Smith to his wife, "this is my -- "

Her eyes went wide and she started drooling uncontrollably on the table.

"Uh ... sorry about that," said Smith hastily. "Used the wrong word," he explained to Hurricane Smith. "Langtry, this is my friend Gravedigger Gaines, who used to be the best enemy a man could have. Gravedigger, this is Langtry Lily."

Langtry Lily glared at the Gravedigger and hissed.

"It was just _business_," explained Smith. "I never held it against him."

"Honest, ma'am," added Gaines. "There was no one on the Inner Frontier I was less eager to go up against, and no one I would have been prouder to collect the reward on. Except maybe for that ugly blonde guy over there," he added, jerking his thumb in Baker's direction.

"Anyway, we're friends now," said Smith.

"We were never enemies, just business rivals," said the Gravedigger.

"It's like athletes who play on different teams," explained Smith.

Langtry Lily looked from one of them to the other, then finally smiled at Gaines. It was the kind of smile men went out and died for -- or, in the case of the Peloponnes, deserted by the thousands for.

"Didn't there used to be an actress called Langtry Lily back when we were still Earthbound?" asked Little Mike Picasso.

"Lily Langtry," answered Smith. "My Langtry is an actress too."

"Really?" said Little Mike. "I try to keep up on the theatre. When was her most recent performance?"

"Five'll get you ten it's right this minute," said O'Grady with a chuckle.

"We don't hide what she really is," said Smith. "We just thought you'd all feel more comfortable seeing her like this. But if you'd rather -- "

"No!" hollered Baker. "I still plan on eating sometime this week. I don't want nothing to kill my appetite."

At the mention of the word "eat", Langtry Lily emptied the pound of sugar on the table in front of her. Then a kind of straw emerged from a corner of her mouth, and she began sucking up the sugar with loud slurping noises.

"And this don't bother you none?" asked Baker.

"There are ... ah ... compensations," said Smith.

"Yeah, I saw one of them when she nailed the fly," said Sinderella.

"God teaches us not to be jealous," said Billy Karma. "I really think you're ripe for some private counseling, my dear."

"I'm afraid not, Reverend," said Sinderella. "I've got better things to do with my time than listen to you croak 'Compensate me, baby! Compensate me!' in a voice like a strangulated duck."

"Funny," said Billy Karma, half to himself. "I can't think of anything better to do with _my_ time."

"Go sacrifice a virgin on the alter of love," said Sinderella.

"I'd be more than happy to accommodate you," answered Billy Karma, "but you've no idea how difficult it is to _find_ a virgin these days."

"It always was," said Max.

"Me and Hurricane knew a guy who found one once," said Baker. "Remember?"

"How could I forget?" said Smith. "That must have been, oh, ten or twelve years ago."

"So let's hear about it," said the Bard.

"If you insist," replied Baker with a weary sigh.