

\*The Reverend Billy Karma and the Aliens\*

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The Reverend Billy Karma crept through the valley, wondering just what the hell he was doing here. It was one thing to call down the wrath of God upon these alien infidels, but it was quite another to be the personal bearer of that heavenly wrath.

But somehow or other his enthusiasm had momentarily gotten the better of him, and here he was, in plain sight of the aliens' encampment on Henry VI, hoping against hope that nobody had spotted him, or that (better still) Baker or the cyborg lady were launching attacks at some other point on the perimeter, attacks that would not only send these alien fiends straight to hell but (even more important) would create enough of a distraction to allow him to find a nice, safe hiding place and sit out the rest of this undeclared war.

He sat down behind a huge, blue alien tree, trying to catch his breath and bring his racing pulse back to some semblance of normalcy.

\_God, what I'd give for a smoke! Or a drink. Or that gorgeous little Sinderella!\_

He scanned the horizon. He'd seen alien vegetation before, but it had usually been green. Had to be, for photosynthesis to work. But this stuff was all blue -- the trees, the shrubs, the leaves, even the flowers.

But of course there was no photosynthesis going on here, he realized; otherwise all these trees and bushes would be producing enough oxygen for him to breathe. This must have been one of those planets God made very early on, before He got the knack of it.

Suddenly the Reverend saw some dust off to his left.

\_Damn! If You had just given this fucking world a breathable atmosphere, I wouldn't be wearing this stupid helmet, and I would have heard whatever it is that's getting so close to me.\_

Billy Karma flattened himself against the ground, hoping the shrubs surrounding him would protect him from view. He couldn't hear if the aliens who were raising the dust were approaching or walking away, and he didn't dare raise his head to look. He simply lay motionless, his eyes closed tightly, and whispered a few prayers and a couple of admonitions to the Lord.

Then a six-fingered hand clamped down on his shoulder and pulled him to his feet.

The Reverend Billy Karma found himself facing a trio of aliens, all mildly humanoid in shape, all wearing protective suits and helmets.

"Who are you, and why are you spying on us?" asked the alien, its voice coming out cold and without inflection through the translating device built into its helmet.

"Do I look like a spy?" demanded Billy Karma. "I happen to be a man of the cloth."

The three aliens stared at him. "You are composed of flesh and bone, not cloth."

"That's a human expression," explained the Reverend. "It means that I am a man of God."

"That is a contradiction in terms," said the second alien. "\_We\_ were created by God in His image. Therefore, you cannot be."

"Nonsense," shot back Billy Karma. "God created Man, and Satan created all the other races, meaning

no offense." He stared at the aliens. "Now that I come to consider it, the three of you look exactly like Golem."

"What is Golem?"

"A Golem is kind of a devil."

"Curious," said the first alien. "You look very much like a Bixel."

"What's a Bixel?"

"A devil."

"I've had enough of this blasphemy!" snapped Billy Karma. "I have a number of bibles in my ship. I'd be happy to give them to you so you can finally learn the truth of things."

"The truth is that you are a great liar," said the first alien. "Probably you are a manifestation of the Prince of Liars Himself."

"Hah!" said Billy Karma. "I repeat: Hah! My God can whip your false idol in straight falls without working up a sweat!"

"We shall see," said the first alien, producing a hand weapon. "Start walking."

"Where?"

"I will tell you when to stop."

They proceeded to the encampment, then entered a Bubble. When the hatch closed the aliens waited for almost a minute, then removed their helmets and told Billy Karma that he could do the same.

"You mean God made you oxygen-breathers?" he said, taking off his helmet and setting it on the floor. "Must have been one of His very few oversights."

The first alien indicated an odd-looking chair. "Sit."

"In that thing? It wasn't made for real people!"

The alien pushed him into the chair.

"God is really gonna take you over the coals for this!" promised Billy Karma, shifting uncomfortably as he tried in vain to find a position that was painless.

The second and third aliens secured his arms to the arms of the chair.

"What's going on?" demanded Billy Karma, a slight tremor in his voice.

"We are going to question you," said the first alien.

"How come you can speak Terran? I thought you needed a translating mechanism."

"I can speak it. My companions cannot."

"Where'd you learn it?"

"I am asking the questions," said the alien. He leaned forward. "What were you doing outside our

encampment?"

"I didn't know you had an encampment there!" said Billy Karma.

"All right. What are you doing on Janblixl?"

"What the hell is Janblixl?"

"This world."

"This world, you godless alien heathen, happens to be Henry VI," said Billy Karma.

"You have not answered my question," said the alien. He pulled a wicked-looking pointed weapon out of a pouch.

"I told you: I'm a man of God. I travel the galaxy, looking for men and aliens to convert."

"Convert into what?"

"Into God-fearing Christians -- something you wouldn't know nothing about."

"I do not believe you," said the alien. "Do you know what I think?"

"What?"

"I think you are a spy, left behind by Man's Navy when we chased them out of this system. I think your duty is to alert nearby systems to our presence, and to report to your superiors on our movements."

"The only superior I acknowledge is God," said Billy Karma. "And He don't need me to tell Him what you're planning on doing, any more than He needs the Navy to stop you. He'll wipe you out in His own good time."

"You insist on maintaining this fiction about being a spokesman of your God?"

"It ain't a fiction! I'm a man of the cloth."

"So you said."

The alien held his pointed weapon to the artificial overhead light. The Reverend Billy Karma watched it in horrified fascination.

"If you are truly God's spokesman, nothing can make you renounce Him, is that correct?" asked the alien.

"What are you getting at?"

"The truth," replied the alien. "And the truth is that nothing can make me renounce my God, because I believe in Him with every ounce of my being. If you have been telling the truth, I will not be able to make you renounce yours."

"I don't know about this," said Billy Karma, unable to look away from the weapon. "God understands that men ain't perfect."

"My race has that much in common with your God," said the alien. "We understand that you're not perfect either."

Billy Karma watched as the light glinted off the metal point of the weapon. "What are you gonna do with

that thing?"

"I am going to test the strength of your belief."

He approached Billy Karma and slowly lowered the point until it was resting on the human's thumbnail.

"The Lord is my shepherd..." intoned Billy Karma.

The alien leaned down, and the point went through Billy Karma's nail and thumb. The Reverend screamed in agony.

"What is a shepherd?" asked the alien.

"You go to hell!" grated Billy Karma as the blood gushed out of his thumb.

"This could be very time-consuming," said the alien. "You agree, do you not, that I could pierce all ten of your fingers?"

Billy Karma made no reply.

"But that would be dull and repetitious. After all, you have so many fingers." The alien paused. "But you have only two eyes."

Billy Karma pulled his head back as far as he could.

"You look uncomfortable," said the alien. "I had hoped you would have adjusted to the chair by now."

He took a step closer.

"You leave my eyes alone!" screamed Billy Karma.

"Certainly," said the alien. "Just renounce your God and admit that you are a spy left behind by your Navy."

The Reverend Billy Karma took one last look at the bloodied point of the weapon.

"God is a fiction," he said. "I have no use for Him and no belief in Him. I am a spy, left here by the Navy."

"Who is your commander?"

Billy Karma sighed deeply. "Whoever you like."

The three aliens put their heads together and whispered to each other. Then they turned back to Billy Karma.

"What are you going to do to me?" he asked apprehensively.

"We're going to amputate your hands and feet, so that you cannot sneak back here or operate any weaponry, and then, when you are no longer a real or potential threat to us, we are going to put you aboard your ship."

"What if I just promise not to spy on you or fire any weapons?"

"If you would betray your God, why would you not also betray us?" said the alien.

"What about my eyes?"

"That is between you and your God," answered the alien. "At some point you will have to look Him in the eye and explain why you renounced Him."

Six hours later they carried the Reverend Billy Karma to his ship. He was unable to walk, or to manually operate the controls, but his voice brought the ship's computer to life, and shortly thereafter he took off from Henry V.

His most immediate problem was how to feed himself until he received medical attention. Then there was the problem of adjusting to the prosthetic hands and feet he was sure he would need.

But those were trivial.

The biggest problem of all would come when he finally had to confront God and explain what he had done.