

The Sacrifice of Langtry Lily

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Langtry Lily and I had hit upon our strategy long before we landed on Henry VII (began Hurricane Smith). Since she could emulate any life form and could breathe the junk that passes for air there, we decided that she would disguise herself as one of the aliens, and I would pretend to be her prisoner. Then she'd take me to their leader, and when we got the chance I'd kill him and she'd impersonate him. And since the aliens knew nothing about her abilities, they'd have no reason to question her identity. Once they accepted her as their leader, she'd either tell them they had orders to return to their home planet, or she and I would find some way to kill them all.

It started out all right. We landed, she held a gun on me, and I walked ahead of her. A bunch of soldiers met us and escorted us to their headquarters. Their commander began questioning me, and as he did so they manhandled me a bit, which was something I hadn't foreseen.

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"You're the bravest man in the galaxy, except for me," interrupted Baker. "You can't make me believe that a little manhandling, or even some serious torture, would put you off your feed."

"It didn't."

"Well, then?"

"I wasn't alone -- remember?"

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Each time they hit me or shoved me (continued Smith) I could see Langtry exercising all of her self-control not to come to my aid. Then, finally, they hit me once too often, and she got so furious that she lost control of the image she was projecting, and suddenly everyone could see her for what she was.

I took advantage of the surprise to ram my elbow into the nearest alien's face and grab his gun as he collapsed. I shot two others before anyone realized what had happened.

Then the commander yelled "Kill him!" -- and a second later he amended it to: "Kill them both!"

I burned his head to a crisp a second later, and Langtry began spitting that acid she spits, and pretty soon we were standing there amid a pile of dead aliens.

"Well, it's not quite the way we planned it," I said, "but we seem to be doing okay."

Then I saw a bunch more aliens coming out of their makeshift barracks, all of them armed and dangerous. I told Langtry to find someplace to hide, that they were too far away for her to spit on them, and that I couldn't concentrate on killing them and protecting her all at once.

Well, things got pretty hairy then. I must have killed about twenty of them, but then one of the ones I'd thought I'd killed right at the start reached out and grabbed my legs. I lost my balance and fell down next to him, and somehow or other my laser pistol flew a good ten feet away. I tried to crawl over to it, but the dying alien wouldn't let go of my legs.

I looked up and saw another alien running at me, a knife in his hand. I knew the alien was never born that I couldn't beat in a freehand fight, but I was still being held down, and I realized that if his knife pierced

my spacesuit that would be the end of me.

He was twenty feet away, then fifteen, then ten, and I still couldn't free my legs -- and then, from out of nowhere, Langtry was standing in front of me. She spit full in his face, but even though he only had a couple of seconds of life left to him, his momentum carried him forward and she took the knife thrust that was meant for me.

I finally broke free, just in time to catch her in my arms. With her dying breath she whispered that she loved me and was happy to sacrifice her life for mine.

I didn't have time to mourn, because there were a bunch of aliens taking aim at me, and I was still unarmed. Then one of them screamed, clutched at his chest and keeled over. Another's head split open. A third flew backward like he'd been kicked by a horse.

Then an arm reached out and lifted me to my feet. It was attached to an alien female.

"Follow me if you want to live!" she said, heading off toward one of the barracks.

She'd obviously shot some of my foes, so I paused just long enough to pick up a couple of guns from alien corpses that wouldn't be needing them any longer and then fell into step behind her.

"Who are you?" I asked her. "And why have you come to my aid?"

"I have heard stories of the great Hurricane Smith," she said. "And now that I have seen you fearlessly facing overwhelming odds, I have decided that you are too noble to die."

"Even though it means turning traitor to your own race?" I asked.

"I look past the appearance of things," she replied. "I am more like you than like any of them."

I'd have asked her more questions then, but the aliens started firing, and we were preoccupied with staying alive for the next few minutes.

I noticed that she was a good shot, almost as good as myself, and that she was utterly without fear. When a laser beam scraped her shoulder a couple of minutes later, she cursed like a spacehand.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"I'll worry about it later," she said, aiming her pistol with her other hand.

"Get behind me and tend to your wound," I said. "I'll hold them off."

"_We'll_ hold them off together," she said, bringing down another alien. Then: "I'm sorry about your friend."

"My wife," I corrected her.

"Then I am doubly sorry," she said. "We have much in common, you and I. If she was your wife, it shows me that you also look past the appearance of things." She paused long enough to aim and fire at another foe, who dropped like a rock. "Did you love her very much?"

"Yes."

A momentary silence. Then: "Do you think you can ever love again?"

"Perhaps," I said.

"It would be very sad if you could not."

"Let's shoot the enemy and worry about it later," I said, and that's what we did for the next half hour, until we were the only two living beings left.

"Thanks once again for your help," I said.

"I am only sorry we could not save your wife. I know what it means to lose someone you love."

"What's your name?" I asked.

She pronounced it two or three times, but it was beyond me. Finally she said, "What name would you like to call me? I will trust to your wisdom."

I figured if I had all that much wisdom, I must rival Solomon, and since she and I were now partners, so to speak, I decided to call her Sheba.

"Sheba," she repeated. "It seems a very melodic name. Who was she?"

"An ancient queen," I said.

"Then I am honored."

I decided not to tell her how many wives Solomon had. We spent the next few days getting to know each other better -- and if the Reverend makes one of his typical comments, I just may burn his balls off -- and then I decided to leave her on Adelaide of Louvain until I found out what kind of reception she would get at the Outpost.

Anyway, that's the story of how Langtry Lily sacrificed herself for love -- or for me, since to her they were both the same thing.

And it's also the story of how I met Sheba, who could see beyond the mere shape of things and somehow realized that we were not only meant to be comrades-at-arms but soulmates as well.

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"You know, I had me an alien ladyfriend once," said the Reverend Billy Karma.

"It figures," said Max.

"Yeah?"

Max nodded. "No human woman would ever say Yes to you."

"Right!" chimed in Silicon Carny and Sinderella.

"Wait a minute," said the Bard. "There might be a story here. I don't know anyone besides Hurricane Smith who's ever had a relationship with an alien woman." He turned to Billy Karma. "You want to tell us about it?"

"Ain't much to tell," said Billy Karma.

"That figures," said Silicon Carny.

"Come on now," urged the Bard. "Don't be so modest."

"It's not all that happy a story," said Billy Karma. "We had a tragic failure to communicate."

"How tragic could it be if she's not with you anymore?" asked Sinderella.

"If all you're gonna do is make jokes, I'm not gonna talk about it."

"They're through making jokes," said Baker, with a look that said they'd better be through. "I want to hear this."

"Well, it was a Vandei woman," began the Reverend. "I hooked up with her while I was out spreading the Word on the Rim. We just hit it right off, and when I left Vanda she came along with me."

"A Vandei woman?" asked Baker.

"That's right," said Billy Karma.

"I hear they're trained from birth to do nothing but please their mates."

"So they tell me."

"And with a whole planet of Vandei men to choose from, she fell for you?"

"Well, kind of," said Billy Karma uncomfortably. "Actually, I won her in a craps game."

Suddenly Bet-a-World O'Grady sat up and looked interested.

"Anyway, I figured I owed myself a vacation, so I headed to Seascap -- that's Alpha Ribot III -- and rented a villa for the next week. Once we were settled in I figured it was time for my Vandei woman and me to get to know each other a little better." He paused long enough to take a swig of his drink. "First thing she did was come up to me and ask what kind of sex I preferred. She made it sound like there were seven hundred or more different kinds, but I could only think of a few off the top of my head, so I told her that as far as I knew, there wasn't a man alive who didn't prefer oral sex if he was being honest about it."

"What kind of stakes did you have to put up against her in the craps game?" asked O'Grady with professional interest.

"Shut up!" snapped Baker. "Go ahead, Reverend."

"Well," said Billy Karma, "the next thing I knew she was sitting next to the bed reading Fanny Hill aloud to me. I didn't say anything, because I figured this was just her notion of foreplay -- you know, a way to get me all hot and bothered and ready for action." He frowned. "Except that she read and she read and she kept on reading, and finally I fell asleep."

Silicon Carny threw back her head and laughed.

"It ain't funny!" snapped Billy Karma.

"It is to me!"

"Get back to the story," said Baker.

"The next night, as we were getting ready for bed, she opened up a copy of The Story of O and read

it to me, and the night after that it was The Autobiography of a Flea, and finally, when she opened up Tropic of Cancer on the fourth night, I sat up and asked her what the hell was going on.

"Am I not pleasing you, my love?" she said.

"Look," I said, "I like dirty books as well as the next man, but when do we get to the sex?"

"But we are doing the sex," she protested.

"What are you talking about?" I demanded. "Here I am, all set for some oral sex, and all you do is read at me."

"But that's what you asked for," she said.

"The hell it is!" I shouted.

"I will prove it," she said, and before I could say anything else she activated the cabin's computer and ordered up a definition, and out popped the words on a holographic screen -- 'Aural: of or pertaining to the ear or the sense of hearing.' She smiled at me. "I naturally assume this means reading classics of human pornography aloud to you."

"Now I see what went haywire," I said. "You got the wrong idea about things." I pulled off my pants. "Put yourself in my expert hands and I'll lead you through it step by step."

"She took one look at me, and her eyes widened, and she said, 'You're not going to stick that in my ear!"

"Then she was out the door, screaming and running her way down the beach." The Reverend Billy Karma sighed. "For all I know, she's still screaming and running."

"Somehow it ain't quite as touching as some of Hurricane's romances," said Baker.

"I think our Catastrophe is a master of understatement," agreed the Bard. "I also think, in the interest of dignity, I'll leave that little adventure out of the book."

"That's okay," said Sinderella happily. "By the time Silicon Carny and I are through spreading it around, everyone in the galaxy will have heard it."

Baker turned to Hurricane Smith. "You ever get any head from an alien lady?"

"Once," answered Smith.

"Yeah? What happened?"

"Not much. She was a Nexarian, so she still had five heads left."

"That's disgusting!" said the Earth Mother.

"You think that's disgusting, you should have seen the head she gave me. It must have giggled for an hour before it realized it was decapitated."

"You know," said Baker thoughtfully, "I think it's entirely possible we're talking at cross purposes."

"Could be."

"Don't you ever find yourself attracted to a human woman?" asked Baker.

"I try," said Smith. "I really do. But they're all so ... so _same_."

"Well, I like that!" said Silicon Carny.

Smith looked at her. "I got to admit that you're a little less same than most."

"I think someone here might disagree with your assessment of human ladies," suggested Max.

"Who?"

Max jerked a thumb in the direction of Nicodemus Mayflower. "He's been sitting there, staring at Sinderella and sighing like a schoolboy, ever since he got back. I actually saw the two of 'em holding hands."

"At least _he's_ got the right number of hands!" snapped Sinderella.

Max grinned. "See what I mean? It's got to be love. What other reason would she have to insult me?"

"I didn't know she needed any," said the Cyborg de Milo, who seemed to have taken a serious dislike to Three-Gun Max during the war.

"You two went off in separate ships and different directions," said Crazy Bull. "What happened out there?"

"Yeah," said Sitting Horse. "How is it that you left in two ships and came back in one?"

Nicodemus Mayflower looked at Sinderella. "Should we tell them?" he asked.

She shrugged, which was still an attention-getter. "Why not?" she replied.