

\*The Battle of the Big Little Horn\*

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It was twilight (said Crazy Bull), and the wind was blowing gently from the west. Sitting Horse and me, we crawled up the hill on our bellies until we could see just beyond it. Geronimo was off to our left, and Vittorio was leading his warriors on our right flank.

We saw a number of the enemy gathered around their campfires, but there was no sign of General Custard yet, and --

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"What the hell are you talking about?" demanded the Bard.

"You wanted a war story, I'm giving you a war story."

"But you're making it up! It's set on Earth, for Christ's sake!"

"Nobody in the Outpost ever made up a story for you?" asked Crazy Bull.

"Not like this!"

"Well, of course not like this. How many Injuns come out here, anyway?"

"But you're making up a story about a battle that took place more than seven thousand years ago!"

"Sure -- but it was a doozy."

"I'm not getting through to you at all," said the Bard, totally frustrated. "I want to know what happened when you left the Outpost to fight the aliens."

"We won," said Crazy Bull. "But the story of the Big Little Horn is much more exciting."

"Right," said Sitting Horse. "There's no General Custard in the story about the aliens. Take my friend's word for it: you'll like the story he's telling much better."

"You drive me crazy!" muttered the Bard.

"Maybe he doesn't like having Geronimo and Vittorio in it," suggested Sitting Horse.

"Well, I could replace them with Tonto and Shoz-Dijiji, I suppose," said Crazy Bull.

"Who the hell are they?" asked the Bard wearily.

"They're fictional, but they'll do just as well as Geronimo and Vittorio," answered Crazy Bull. "After all, me and my partner here are the stars of the story. They're just spear carriers."

"Bow-and-arrow carriers," corrected Sitting Horse.

"You guys still don't seem to understand my problem," said the Bard. "How can I write this up as a battle against alien invaders in the Plantagenet system?"

"Change the names," said Crazy Bull.

"That's dishonest!"

"Who's to know?" asked Sitting Horse. "We won't tell if you don't."

"Look," said the Bard, who seemed on the verge of tears, "all I want to know is what happened when you went out to fight the aliens."

"It's dull," said Sitting Horse.

"Not all history is wildly exciting," answered the Bard.

"You really want to know?" asked Crazy Bull.

"Yes."

"And you're sure you wouldn't rather hear about how the Sioux defeated General Custard at the Big Little Horn?"

"No!" screamed the Bard.

"Okay," said Sitting Horse with a shrug. "We found the aliens' flagship and blew it up."

"Not much of a story, was it?" said Crazy Bull.

"You expect me to believe that the two of you blew up the biggest ship in the aliens' fleet?"

"I don't know if it was the biggest," said Sitting Horse.

"But it might have been," added Crazy Bull. "It was at least a mile long."

"And you destroyed it all by yourself?"

"That's right."

"How?"

"We put a bomb behind the captain's toilet."

The Bard looked from Sitting Horse to Crazy Bull, then back again. "Just how dumb do I look?"

"Just how honest an answer are you looking for?" asked Sitting Horse.

"I'd be more likely to believe you actually fought at the Little Big Horn."

"The Big Little Horn," Crazy Bull corrected him. "And we told you you'd like that story better."

The Bard turned to me. "They're paying for their own booze from this moment on."

He stalked off to his table.

"We really did blow it up," said Crazy Bull to the room at large.

"I believe you," said the Reverend Billy Karma.

"You do?" said Crazy Bull, surprised. "Then I must be remembering it wrong."

"Why does everyone hate me the second they meet me?" demanded Billy Karma self-pityingly.

"To save time," said Silicon Carny.

Willie the Bard threw back his head and laughed.

"Don't you even think of putting that in your magnet opium," threatened Billy Karma, "or me and Jesus will both come back from the grave to haunt you!"

"I thought one of you had already come back from the grave," said Big Red.

"He did," admitted Billy Karma. "But he didn't have no staying power. With me by his side, we'll haunt this hack historian day and night."

"Well, it's good to know you're going to straighten him out," said Big Red.

"No matter what I do, he'll still scribble lies about me in his notebook."

"I meant Jesus, not the Bard."

"Jesus'll take a lot less work than the Bard," said the Reverend Billy Karma.

"That's comforting to know, since a few billion people still worship him," said Big Red.

"I don't know that they worship him so much as they hope he'll pull their coals out of the fire," said Max.

"You mean their souls," Billy Karma corrected him.

Max shrugged. "Six of one, half a dozen of the other."

"You know," said Catastrophe Baker, "we ought to take up a collection and buy a wedding present for Nicodemus Mayflower and his lady."

"Sounds good to me," I said. "Reg, pull a hundred credits out of the strong box and give it to Catastrophe."

Pretty soon everyone was ponying up, and finally Baker did a count. "Twenty-six hundred credits," he said. "We ought to be able to get them something nice for that."

"You could get something nicer for fifty-two hundred credits," suggested Bet-a-World O'Grady.

"Are you offering to match the pot?" asked Baker.

"Not exactly," said O'Grady. "Are you willing to bet it on a double-or-nothing proposition?"

"With you?" said Baker. "Not a chance!"

O'Grady shrugged. "It's your loss."

"It'd be our loss if we took you up on it," said Baker with absolute conviction.

"What kind of bet were you gonna offer?" asked Billy Karma.

"Oh, something simple and even-handed," said O'Grady. His eyes narrowed. "Have you got any money on you?"

Billy Karma emptied his pockets. "I got exactly seventy-three credits, four New Stalin rubles, and six Maria Theresa dollars."

"Precisely the sum I had in mind," said O'Grady, walking over to the bar. "Reggie, have you got a pack

of matches?"

"Forget it," I said. "He's never even seen a pack of matches."

"Okay, we'll do it the hard way. Reggie, find a piece of cardboard and cut a piece two inches long and an eighth of an inch wide."

Reggie did as he was ordered and handed the thin strip of cardboard to O'Grady a moment later.

"Now, usually matches are one color on top and one on the bottom," he said, "so I'm going to take my pen and just turn one side of our match substitute black."

"Now what?" asked Billy Karma when he was through.

"Now I toss it in the air, and you call it before it lands on the bar -- white side or black side. We'll bet a credit on the outcome."

"White," cried Billy Karma, and sure enough it came up white.

O'Grady tossed it four more times; it came up white twice and black twice.

"It occurs to me that we could spend all day tossing this stupid thing, and when we're all done one of us might be three credits ahead," said the Reverend.

"Let's make it more interesting," said O'Grady.

"How can it be more interesting?" asked Billy Karma. "All you can do is call white side or black side?"

"Not exactly," said O'Grady. "What if I say that it'll land on its edge?"

"You're crazy!" scoffed Billy Karma.

"Are you willing to bet seventy-three credits, four New Stalin rubles, and six Maria Theresa dollars to prove it?" asked O'Grady.

"Let me make sure I got this straight first," said Billy Karma. "You're going to toss the thing, just like you've been doing, and it's got to land on its edge. If it lands white side up \_or\_ black side up, I win?"

"That's right."

The Reverend Billy Karma looked around the Outpost. "You all heard him." He pulled out his money and slapped it down on the bar.

O'Grady grinned, bent the cardboard into a V-shape, and flipped it in the air. It came down on its side, of course.

"Just a minute!" bellowed Billy Karma. "That ain't in the rules."

"You all heard me," said O'Grady. "Did I ever say I wouldn't bend the thing before I flipped it?"

"Nope," said Baker.

"Not a word," said Hurricane Smith.

"Looks like the Reverend's going to need to pass the poor box," added the Gravedigger.

"You cheated!" said Billy Karma, pointing an accusing finger at O'Grady.

"You can't cheat an honest man," answered O'Grady.

"So if I admit I'm a fake and a fraud, you'll admit you cheated?"

"Maybe I will, maybe I won't -- but I won't give you back your money."

The Reverend Billy Karma raised his eyes to the heavens -- though the ceiling got in the way, and moaned, \_"Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?"\_

"You've got him speaking in tongues," noted Baker with some amusement.

"I'm surrounded by illiterates and ingrates!" muttered Billy Karma, going back to his table.

"That's okay, Reverend," said Baker. "We ain't proud. We'll let you hang around anyway."

Bet-a-World O'Grady turned to the Bard. "I give you my permission to put that one in your book. I haven't seen five packs of matches in the past twenty years."

The Gravedigger walked to the door, as he'd done a couple of times already, and looked out.

"Who're you looking for?" asked Baker.

"Argyle," replied Gaines. "I keep hoping the little bastard listened to my advice, but I guess he didn't." He sighed and returned to the bar.

"Did you see him once the fighting started?" continued Baker.

The Gravedigger shook his head. "Last I heard from him, he was planning to land on Henry IV. I tried to talk him out of it. He was a philosopher, not a fighter. By the time I got back from Henry VIII, there wasn't any sign of him."

"Was it rough on Henry VIII?" asked the Bard.

"No more than I imagine it was on any of the other Henrys."

"You want to tell us about it?"

Gaines shrugged. "Why not?"