

Bet-a-World O'Grady and the Aliens

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The casino on Mozart II was almost empty. Word of the war had gotten out.

Bet-a-World O'Grady wished there was a little more business going on. He liked the hustle and bustle of a well-run casino, and he especially liked having a few well-endowed nude girls dancing not too far away. Not that he had any interest in them (unless they had some interest in games of chance), but they provided a distraction to his opponents, and O'Grady used every angle available in his quest for victory.

Still, he mused, dancing girls probably wouldn't have much effect on the aliens he had contacted. He didn't know anything about them, except that they seemed to have a mad on against Man, but he couldn't imagine an alien would have any more visceral interest in watching a human girl take her clothes off than he himself would have in watching a bird molt to music.

O'Grady sipped his drink and began going through his warm-up exercises. He shuffled a brand-new deck, dealt out four hands, turned the cards up, and noted that he hadn't lost his touch: each hand contained a royal flush.

He shuffled again, cut to an ace, then to another, and then to a third. There was no sense cutting to the fourth; he had already palmed it.

He spent a few moments dealing seconds, then false shuffled for a few more. His fingers felt limber now, and he excused himself to go to the bathroom, where, once he was certain no one was watching, he inserted his specialized lenses that would enable him to see any markings should the aliens use their own crooked deck.

That done, he returned to the table, spent a few more minutes dealing bottoms, then concluded by practicing the Greek Deal and the Center Deal.

Just about the time he was wondering if the aliens would show up, the hatch opened and four humanoid beings stepped into the airlock. Once the hatch was secured they removed their protective suits and entered the casino.

The one who appeared to be their leader looked around at the empty tables. Then his gaze fell on O'Grady.

"Welcome," said O'Grady. "I've been waiting for you."

"We are not late," said the leader, approaching him.

"Well, you're here now, and that's all that matters. Have you got a name?"

"I have eleven of them, depending on the occasion," replied the alien.

"Which one do you want me to use?"

"They are all beyond your ability to pronounce," said the alien. "Why not choose one that you are comfortable with?"

"Fine by me," said O'Grady. "From this moment on, you are Nick the Greek."

"A human name?"

"He was probably a little less human than some, but yeah, it's a human name."

"And you, of course, are Bet-a-World O'Grady."

"Right."

"May I sit down?" asked Nick the Greek.

"Certainly." O'Grady gestured to the other three aliens. "Your men are welcome to sit, too."

"They are not men, and they will stand."

"Whatever makes you happy."

"Tell me, Bet-a-World O'Grady," said Nick the Greek, "do you really bet entire worlds on card games?"

"I've been known to do it on card games, rolls of the dice, sporting events, and just about anything else where you can determine a winner and a loser."

"Most interesting."

"But you already know that, or else you wouldn't have shown up."

"We did check you out thoroughly," admitted Nick the Greek.

"And you have the authority to match my bets?"

"Yes."

"Your generals must think you're one hell of a gambler."

"I do my best," said Nick the Greek modestly.

"Where did you learn to play human games?" asked O'Grady.

"I have traveled the Inner Frontier extensively. And I studied under one of the greatest of all human gamblers."

"Who was that?"

"An old friend of yours," said Nick the Greek. "High Stakes Eddie Strongbow."

"High Stakes Eddie?" exclaimed O'Grady. "Well, I'll be damned! How is the old bastard?"

"He is no longer among the living, I regret to inform you," said the alien.

"Sorry to hear it."

"I understand human etiquette requires some preliminary banter," said Nick the Greek. "Shall we begin to play, or is further speech required?"

"Might as well get started." O'Grady signaled to the robot bartender. "Half a dozen new decks, please."

"I will be allowed to inspect each deck, will I not?"

"To your heart's content," said O'Grady. "Always assuming you've got a heart."

"And what game shall we be playing?" asked the alien.

"I'm a poker man myself, but I'm always open to suggestions."

"Poker will be satisfactory."

The bartender dropped off the decks. O'Grady pushed one across the table to Nick the Greek. "Go ahead and examine it," he said.

The alien broke the seal on the pack, inspected the cards carefully, then nodded his approval.

"Stakes?" asked the alien.

"Let's start out at fifty thousand credits a hand," said O'Grady. "That ought to buy your side a handful of weapons if you win."

"That is acceptable."

"Cut for draw?" asked O'Grady.

Nick the Greek cut to a nine. O'Grady grinned and cut to a jack.

"Five-card stud," he announced.

O'Grady won the first two hands, lost the third so as not to discourage the alien, then won two more.

"The cards are running against you, Nick old fellow," he said at last. "Maybe this isn't your night."

"I have been ordered to accept your challenge and play poker with you," said the alien. "We need the money for fuel and weaponry."

"What you need and what you're going to get aren't necessarily the same things," said O'Grady.

He promptly lost the next three hands, and then played the alien even for almost two hours. At the end of the time he sighed and leaned back in his chair.

"Looks like no one's getting rich tonight," he said. "I'll tell you what: let's let it all ride on one hand."

"Define 'all'," said the alien.

"If I win, you give me all the money you've got with you, and all your soldiers clear off Catherine de Valois -- that's the moon you're stationed on."

"And if I win?"

"You get all the money I've got with me, any worlds I hold title to, and I'll sit out the war in one of your prison cells."

The alien seemed hesitant. "That's a lot to bet on a single hand..." he said at last.

"Then let's see if I can make it more enticing," said O'Grady. "Have you ever played Face-Up Draw?"

"What are the rules?"

"Just like draw poker, but we put all the cards face-up on the table. We each take five cards, we can discard up to four of them, and pull four more."

"We will each choose a royal flush, and hence we will always tie," said Nick the Greek.

"Maybe not."

"It is a certainty."

"All right," said O'Grady. "I'll tell you what -- I will stipulate, in writing if you wish, that you win all ties."

"Let me make sure I understand this," said Nick the Greek. "There is no value to the suits. A royal flush in spades is no higher than a royal flush in diamonds or clubs?"

"Right."

"And I win all ties?"

"Yes."

"I agree to your conditions," said the alien.

"Shake on it," said O'Grady, extending his hand.

Nick the Greek took his hand.

"And since you still look distrustful, I'll go first." O'Grady smiled at the alien. "That way you can see what I've pulled before making your own choices."

Suddenly Nick the Greek's three companions came to life, and three pistols were pointed at O'Grady's head.

"No, Bet-a-World O'Grady," said Nick the Greek. "I think I shall go first."

"But -- "

"That's the way High Stakes Eddie taught it to me, just before I killed him."

O'Grady sighed and settled back in his chair. He had a feeling that it was going to be a long time before he saw the Outpost again.