

The Night Bet-a-World O'Grady Met Nick the Greek

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You'd never know it to look at me (said O'Grady), but I'm not a fighting man.

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"You're kidding, right?" guffawed Max.

"Getting in your interruptions a little early, ain't you?" said Catastrophe Baker ominously, and Max promptly shut up.

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I wasn't much of a fighting man even when I was thirty years younger and a hundred pounds lighter (said O'Grady). It's just not my style.

So when we all left the Outpost to confront the aliens, I figured I'd meet them on the battlefield where I'm at my best -- a gaming table.

I sent word to the aliens that I'd meet their best gambler at the casino on Mozart II, which I figured was far enough away from the action so that we wouldn't be disturbed by any bombs or invading armies or anything.

I got there a bit ahead of him, checked out the lay of the land (no offense, ladies), and waited for my opponent. He showed up a few hours later with a trio of bodyguards. I couldn't pronounce his name, so he let me call him anything I wanted, and I just naturally hit on Nick the Greek, since I figured this might be the most important opponent I ever faced.

Well, we sat down to play, and I tried to talk him into a little Face-Up Draw Poker, but the sneaky bastard had heard of it and insisted that he go first, so of course I lost.

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"What were the stakes?" interrupted the Bard.

"He put up all his money and promised to get his soldiers off Catherine de Valois, and I put up all my money, all my worlds -- but of course I didn't own any at the time -- and I agreed to sit out the war in one of his prison cells."

"So you spent the rest of the war in prison?"

"Not exactly."

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You see (continued O'Grady), Nick the Greek was pissed as hell when he found out I didn't have title to any worlds. He kept accusing me of lying to him, whereas I kept pointing out that I had merely misrepresented my holdings, which is a whole lot different from lying, though he never quite understood the fine dividing line.

I could see he wasn't happy, so I tried to come up with another bet, and suddenly I remembered that I owned a pair of casinos out on the Rim and another one in the Spiral Arm. I hadn't visited either of 'em in years, but the titles were in my ship's safe, so I decided to make him another bet.

"What is it this time?" he asked, and I could tell he was just waiting for me to name some scam he'd heard of.

"Here's the deal," I said. "We'll get a fresh deck and break it open. I won't touch it. You shuffle it until you're happy with it."

"Then what?"

"Then you put it down between us and we start drawing cards, one apiece. My bet is that you'll turn a court card face up before I do." I paused to let him consider it, then added: "I'll put up all three of my casinos plus my ship against all the money you're holding."

"But that's just the luck of the draw," he said, obviously disappointed that there wasn't any ruse attached to it. "Why not simply flip a coin and be done with it?"

"I might not win with a coin," I said. "I never lose at cards."

"You just lost five minutes ago," he noted.

"That's because I tried to flim-flam you," I said. "It was unethical, and I got what I deserved. But this is an honest bet."

"I don't think I'm interested," he said. "I've already won all your money. Why should I risk it in an even bet?"

"Okay," I said. "I'll give you odds."

For just a second I saw him smile before he put his poker face back on, and I knew that I had him.

"You have no more money," said Nick the Greek. "What kind of odds can you give me?"

"Tell me what you want," I said.

"All right," said Nick. "I'll bet everything I have against everything you've mentioned ... and, in addition, if I win, you must help me kill everyone in the Outpost and support my claim to its ownership in a court of law."

"Done," I said.

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"What do you mean, _Done_?" I yelled. "You were offering to kill me and the Bard and probably Einstein!"

"It was a con," replied O'Grady with a smile. "You know the old saying about how you can't con an honest man? It goes double for aliens."

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I watched Nick the Greek shuffle the cards (said O'Grady), and since I'm as handy at stacking a deck as he is, I saw that the first picture card was the jack of spades, and that it was going to come up ninth.

"Since I went first at Face-Up Draw," said Nick, "I will allow you the privilege of going first in this game."

I could tell he was just waiting for me to refuse, which is how he'd know I had spotted him rigging the

deck, and the second I made a fuss about it, he'd cancel the bet, keep my money, and stick me in a military prison. So I agreed to pull first.

Now, along with his three bodyguards, there were about two dozen Men in the casino, along with a couple of Canphorites and a Mollutei. I waited until they all crowded around to watch and explained the wager to them so they'd know what they were watching. Then I pulled a three, and placed it face-up in front of me.

Nick pulled a six and let everyone see it, then placed it face-up in front of him. I pulled another three and turned it up, Nick did the same with an eight, I pulled a deuce, he pulled a five, I pulled a ten, and he pulled a four.

Now he and I both knew the next card was a jack. I reached out, peeked at it as I began pulling it, and immediately placed it face-down in front of me.

"Hey, what's going on?" demanded Nick.

"Nothing," I said politely. "Your draw."

"What have you got there?"

"A nine," I said. "Your draw."

"I don't believe you," said Nick. He reached across the table and turned the jack face up. _"Aha!"_ he said triumphantly.

I turned to the nearest bystander. "What did he just do?" I demanded.

"He turned over the jack of spades," said the man.

"What did _you_ see?" I asked another.

"Same thing. He turned up your jack."

"And what was the bet?"

"That he'd pull a picture card before you did."

"No!" I said. "The exact bet was that he'd _turn up_ a picture card before I did -- and that's just what he did."

Nick screamed bloody murder, but there were more than twenty Men on my side, all of them carrying weapons, and his three bodyguards were no match for them. So, after spending a futile half-hour trying to find someone to support his claim that he'd been flim-flammed (which of course he had, but _legally_), he paid off his bet and stormed out.

As for me, I stuck around long enough to lose just about everything I'd won, and then came back here to find out how the war was going. You can imagine my disappointment when I learned it was over before I could make a bet on it.

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"Fascinating!" said the Bard, scribbling furiously.

"Hey," said O'Grady sternly, "I don't want that little ruse to see print before I'm dead. I damned near lost

everything because they were wise to Face-Up Draw. I plan to get rich on this one."

"The people who buy Willie's book ain't likely to sit across from you at a gaming table," said Max.

"Just the same, I want it kept quiet while I'm still alive."

"We could kill you now and solve everything," suggested Max.

"I can't help wondering just why we fought this war," said O'Grady. "It didn't make me any richer and it sure as hell didn't make you any pleasanter."

"Every now and then folks just have to burn off energy," said Catastrophe Baker.

"There's better ways of going about it," said the Reverend Billy Karma. "That's why God invented two sexes."

"You better check your biology textbooks again, Reverend," said Big Red. "There's worlds where the Good Lord created up to five sexes."

"Don't you believe it," said Billy Karma.

"I've seen it," said Big Red.

"Yeah?" said Billy Karma. "Well, I was talking about it with God just the other day, and He says He invented up to two and then stopped. Anything with more sexes than that was created by Satan just to confuse you."

"If you think it confuses me, you ought to see them," said Big Red with a chuckle.

"Might be an interesting study in group dynamics," said O'Grady. "Put 'em all together on a cold night and -- WOW!"

"Put 'em all together and wow?" repeated Big Red with a puzzled expression.

"The WOW! had nothing to do with the subject at hand," said O'Grady as Silicon Carny walked in. "Well, only peripherally, anyway."

She was dressed all in white in an outfit that fit like a second skin -- not that there was anything wrong with her first skin, mind you.

"I haven't seen you in white before," noted Max as she undulated over to an empty table and sat down. "Are we being virginal?"

"We're being a nurse," she replied. "Or at least we were until recently."

"I didn't know there were any hospitals in the Henrys," I said.

"There was an alien hospital on Elizabeth of York," said the Earth Mother. She turned to Silicon Carny. "But I didn't see you there."

Which meant she hadn't been there. Seeing Silicon Carny wasn't a sight people tended to forget, even female people.

"When we all left the Outpost," said Silicon Carny, "I figured that most of you were heroes and warriors, but that my particular talents lay elsewhere."

"I'll vouch for that!" said the Reverend Billy Karma devoutly.

"So I made my way to Trajan III," she continued, ignoring the Reverend's obvious enthusiasm, "which was the nearest planet with a military hospital, and volunteered my services as a nurse."

"How did you make out?" asked the Earth Mother.

"Okay, at least at the beginning," answered Silicon Carny. "My supervisor said I gave dying men the will to live again, just by walking past their beds."

Even Max, who jumped on almost anything anyone said, didn't seem to have a problem accepting that. He just nodded his head as if to say: _Of course they'd want to stay alive now that they could see what they were fighting for._

"So how come you're not still there?" asked O'Grady.

"I was asked to leave."

"By who?" asked Mix disbelievingly.

"By my supervisor."

"Why?"

"Evidently eight other nurses saw me and began showing signs of terminal depression."

"I can believe it," said Max.

"Well, I, for one, am thrilled to welcome you back," said O'Grady.

"I'll second that!" shouted the Reverend Billy Karma.

Pretty soon just about every man in the place was echoing that sentiment, and then the Reverend offered to buy a round of drinks for the house, and Catastrophe Baker matched him, and then even Max bought drinks for everyone, and it occurred to me that I could make a healthy profit just by paying her to hang around while all the men tried to impress her.

Once all the drinks had been passed out and things had settled down again, the Reverend Billy Karma walked over and seated himself next to Silicon Carny.

"I don't suppose you'd care to cut the cards?" he said. "First one to turn over a picture card loses."

"What are the stakes?" she asked.

"We'll think of something when the time comes," he promised her.

"Whatever odds he's offering, I'll triple 'em for the same bet," said Big Red.

"I'll quintuple them," said Max.

"Why do I think the result is a foregone conclusion?" asked Silicon Carny.

Billy Karma smiled at her. "Is this a face that would cheat an innocent semi-virgin like you?"

"That's it!" she declared, getting up and moving to another table. "No bet."

"By the way," said the Bard, "did anyone run into Faraway Jones during the fighting?"

"Why?" asked Baker.

"I'm just trying to keep tabs on everyone so I know what to put in the book."

"I never saw him."

"Me neither," said Hurricane Smith.

"Nor me," said Big Red.

"Come to think of it," added Nicodemus Mayflower, "has anyone seen Argyle, or Hellfire Van Winkle?"

"I spoke to Argyle via subspace radio just before he was due to land on Henry V," offered the Gravedigger. "I haven't heard from him since."

"Who else is missing?" asked the Earth Mother.

I looked around the room. "Sahara del Rio," I said.

"And Little Mike Picasso," said Max.

"I haven't heard from Achmed of Alphard since just before he set his ship down on Henry VIII," said the Cyborg de Milo.

"I was on Henry VIII, and I didn't see him there," said the Gravedigger. He shrugged. "Still, it's a big planet."

"I tried to warn him off," said the Cyborg. "He wasn't the survivor type."

"We can't all be heroes," I said.

"I don't know about that," replied Big Red. "That's a mighty impressive alien ship parked out there where your front lawn would be if you could grow grass on this dirtball. Somebody must have done something heroic or there'd be an alien tending bar right now."

"Yeah," chimed in Catastrophe Baker. "You're a writer, a saloonkeeper, a robot bartender, and a blind man. How did the four of you manage to hold them off?"

I turned to the Bard. "Do you want to tell them, or should I?"

"You tell them," he answered. "I'll be too busy writing it down."

"But you already know what happened," I said. "You were here. Why wait until now to record it?"

"Nothing happens until someone says it does," he replied. "You're elected."

"That's silly."

"That's objectivity," he shot back.

"Are you guys gonna argue all night, or is someone gonna tell us what happened?" demanded Baker.

"All right, all right," I said. "Keep your shirt on."