

The Night Bet-a-World O'Grady Met High Stakes Eddie

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Still, we almost didn't get together at all. He spent almost three months breaking an upstart called the Lower Volta Flash in a nightly game, and then when he was ready, I found myself embroiled in a winner-take-all game for the ownership of the Willoughby system that went on for the better part of ten weeks.

Then one day I got a hand-delivered engraved invitation that read as follows:

_Bet-a-World O'Grady is cordially invited _
_to the gaming world of Monte Carlo IV as _
_the guest of High Stakes Eddie Strongbow. _
_All expenses except for gambling losses _
will be paid by his host.

"Will you be coming back with me, sir?" asked the young woman who had delivered it.

"Yeah, why not?" I said, making up my mind on the spot. "If we're going to decide once and for all who's the best, I might as well let your boss pay for my transportation and drinks."

"He was hoping you'd feel that way, sir," she replied.

"By the way, where the hell is Monte Carlo IV?" I asked.

"Out by the Lesser Magellenic Cloud," was the answer. "Mr. Strongbow won the entire Cromwell system on a single flip of a coin last year, and officially renamed it about two months ago." She paused. "May I help you pack?"

I patted the pocket that held my wallet, and the one that held my lucky dice.

"I've got everything I need," I announced.

"You might want a change of clothes," she suggested.

"I'll buy some new clothes on Monte Carlo IV and charge them to your boss."

She shrugged and took me to her ship. The crew consisted of three other women in addition to the one who'd delivered the invite, and they called themselves the Queens of Clubs, Diamonds, Hearts and Spades, though truth to tell I never could tell which was which. I think they changed names every few hours just to keep me confused.

It was a long flight to the Monte Carlo system, so I went into DeepSleep a few hours into the trip and had them wake me when we were about an hour from our destination. I'm always famished when I come out of DeepSleep, and that always surprises me, because as often as they explain it to me, I keep

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hours into the trip and had them wake me when we were about an hour from our destination. I'm always famished when I come out of DeepSleep, and that always surprises me, because as often as they explain it to me, I keep forgetting that my systems don't actually stop, but just slow down to a crawl --and when you haven't eaten in a few days, even with your metabolism working at one percent speed, you're still hungry. By the time I finished eating, we'd touched down, and I was transported to a penthouse suite atop the biggest, glitziest hotel on the planet, which befitted a high roller like myself. There were maybe half a dozen bedrooms, and three of them came equipped with their own women, and

there were eight or nine bathrooms and a bunch of fireplaces and holo screens and two well-stocked bars and a robot bartender (but not as friendly as Reggie) and even a library filled with real honest-to-goodness books rather than tapes and disks and cubes. I'd been in a few nicer suites in my time, but I had to admit that it was pretty impressive for as far outside of the Monarchy as it was.

I'd just finished looking around and introducing myself to the three women when the Queen of Hearts (or maybe it was Diamonds) showed up and told me that my host was waiting for me downstairs. I bade the ladies goodnight and followed her. There was a huge, elegant casino on the ground floor. It not

only had the usual human and alien games, but it had real cards, real dice, and real live dealers and pit bosses - none of those computerized holographs that you see on worlds like New Vegas and Little Monaco. We walked right through the place without slowing down, and then came to a studded metal door that had guards the size of Catastrophe Baker standing on each side of it.

"This is Mr. Strongbow's private gaming room," explained the Queen of Hearts as they opened the door for us. "It is reserved for himself and his personal guests." High Stakes Eddie was sitting on a leather chair at the far side of a felt-covered mahogany table, a drink in front of him, a smokeless Brandeis VII cigar

in his left hand. He was smaller than I'd expected, bald as a billiard ball, and wearing an outfit that couldn't make up its mind what it wanted to be. One moment it looked like a toga, then it changed into a military uniform, then a Bendorian tuxedo (you ever see one of those things? The sons of bitches glow in the dark!), and then back to a toga. His outfit may have been the height of fashion, but his room was an anachronism. The chairs didn't adjust to your body, they actually rested on the floor, and the lights were in the ceiling instead of floating over your right shoulder. Still, it was his place to decorate any way he wanted. "Bet-a-World O'Grady!" he said with a smile.

"You can't imagine how much I've looked forward to making your acquaintance. There were times when I truly thought we'd never meet."

"I always assumed that we'd get together sooner or later," I replied, walking forward and shaking his hand. "So when I got your kind invitation, I decided it might as well be sooner."

"Your presence honors my poor establishment," he said. "I trust you will join me in a game or two of chance."

"That's what I'm here for," I said.

"Excellent!" he said. "A number of local dignitaries have expressed interest in watching us compete. Would you have any objection to --?"

"Bring 'em in," I said. "I _like_"

crowds."

"A gentleman as well as a gambler," enthused High Stakes Eddie. "I really am delighted that you agreed to come."

He waved his hand over a small cube on the table, the door dilated, and half a dozen men and women entered the room. Eddie handled the introductions: one was a mayor, another a general, a third was the planetary governor, and I remember that one large, fat woman was the system's greatest opera diva. They took their seats, and High Stakes Eddie directed them to be silent once play began or run the certain risk of being unceremoniously thrown out.

The woman who was the Queen of

Clubs that night brought in a dozen unopened decks of cards, half a dozen pairs of brand new dice, and directed a burly young man to set up a roulette wheel at the far end of the huge table.

"What's your choice, Bet-a-World O'Grady?" asked High Stakes Eddie.

"I've always been partial to poker," I admitted.

"Then poker it is," he said. "You mind playing with real cards? I hate computers."

"Suits me," I answered.

He tossed a deck to me and waited for me to open it. I inspected the cards, and satisfied myself that it was an honest deck.

"They look good to me," I announced.

"Shall we begin?"

"Name it."

"Five-card stud."

"Stakes?" he asked.

"Whatever you want."

"How's about a million credits to ante, and you can only bet in multiples of five million," he said. "Sky's the limit."

There was a sharp collective intake of breath among our six spectators.

"I accept," I said. Then I paused. "I hope my credit's good here."

"Up to twenty billion," he replied. "After that I'll need collateral."

"Fair enough," I said. "Cut?"

He cut the cards, and I started dealing.

I won the first hand with jacks and sixes, he won the next with three kings,

and then I won four in a row with a straight, a full house, and a couple of nothings that were higher than _his_ nothings. When the dust settled, I was up almost two hundred million credits.

"You're as good as they say," said High Stakes Eddie, taking a sip of his drink. "Shall we try a little draw now?"

"It's your deal," I acquiesced.

We split the next six hands, and pretty much split the pots as well. Then I won three in a row, and I was suddenly up half a billion.

"Let's make it a little more exciting," he suggested.

"I'm open to suggestions," I replied.

"Let's cut the cards for a billion."

I nodded, ignored another audible

gasp from the guests, reached out, and cut to a nine. He smiled, flexed his fingers, reached for the remaining cards, and cut to a six.

"How about two billion this time?" he said.

"And then four billion, and then eight billion, and then sixteen billion, until you finally win one?" I said.

"That's not gambling," I said. "That's mathematical inevitability."

"All right," he said, a little heatedly. "What would you rather do?"

"Do you really want to make it more exciting?" I asked.

He looked around the room and then nodded, as I knew he would. There was no way he was going to lose face in front

of his friends.

"How much money have you got on hand here?" I asked.

"In this room?"

"In the whole casino."

He did a quick calculation in his head.

"About eighteen billion credits."

"And you own the Monte Carlo system, right?"

"All fourteen planets."

"Including mining rights?"

"Of course."

"Okay," I said. "That's your half of the bet. For my half, I'll put up all the money I've won here, plus fifteen billion I've got on deposit at the Bank of Deluros, and the deed to all nine planets in the Taniguchi system. They discovered

diamonds in the asteroid belt there last month."

"What's the bet?" he said, eyeing me warily.

"One hand of face-up draw, winner take all."

"Face-up draw?" he repeated. "I never heard of it."

"Nothing to it," I said. "We turn all the cards face-up, and instead of dealing, we each choose five cards. Then we can discard up to four cards and draw four more. It's just draw poker with everything face-up and out in the open."

"We'll tie. You'll deal yourself a royal flush and stand pat and I'll do the same."

"Tell you what," I said. "I'll stipulate that you win all ties. My cards have to

have you beat, not just tied, in order for me to win."

"Say that again."

I repeated it.

"And there's no suit preference like in bridge?" he persisted. "A three of clubs is as high as a three of spades?"

"Right," I said. "And I'll tell you what else: I'll go first, so you can have the advantage of seeing what I do before you commit yourself."

Well, he spent the better part of five minutes asking me all kinds of questions, but it was just like I told him, and finally he and I signed a document agreeing to the terms I had outlined. And that's how I broke the bank at Monte Carlo.

* * * *

"Just a minute!" said Three-Gun Max heatedly. "What kind of fools do you take us for?"

"The usual kind," answered O'Grady with a smug smile.

"There's no way you can win that bet!"

"Don't take my word for it," said O'Grady. "Who's the brightest man in the Outpost?"

"Einstein."

"Ask him."

"He's blind, deaf, and mute," said Max. "And if that ain't enough, he's never played poker in his life."

"Just a minute," said Big Red. He turned to me. "Tomahawk, can you have Reggie transmit all the rules to the little

computer Einstein always keeps in his hand?"

"No reason why not," I replied.

"It'll take him hours just to learn the rudiments of the game," protested Max.

"You don't know Einstein," said Big Red confidently.

I gave Reggie his instructions, and he started whirring and humming, and so did Einstein's machine, which then started tapping out some incomprehensible code on the palm of his left hand. After about twenty seconds Einstein smiled, the first time his facial expression had changed since he'd shown up a few months ago, and he tapped a message onto his computer's sensors.

Reggie whirled again and then spoke in his dull monotone voice. "Einstein says O'Grady can't lose."

"Well, if Einstein ain't the stupidest genius on the Frontier, I sure don't know who's running ahead of him!" exclaimed Max.

"You're absolutely certain that Einstein and I are wrong, are you?" asked O'Grady.

"Damned right."

"Are you willing to bet a hundred credits on it?"

"Real cards, just like you used on Monte Carlo?"

"Right."

"Fresh deck, same rules?"

"Fresh deck, same rules," agreed

O'Grady.

Max pulled a hundred-credit note out of his pocket and tossed it onto his table. "You're on." O'Grady sat down opposite him, and I broke open a new deck and brought it over to them.

"You go first," said Max.

"I know."

"And remember: I win all ties."

O'Grady spread the deck out, face-up, so that we could see all 52 cards. I figured he'd pull himself a royal flush, or at least four aces. Instead he started sorting through them until he had pulled out all four tens.

Then he turned to Sahara del Rio, who was staring over his shoulder. "You pick my last card, my dear."

"But I don't know the rules of the game," she protested.

"It doesn't matter," O'Grady assured her. "Just reach out and pick one." She shrugged, ran her hand over the cards, and finally picked a deuce of clubs.

"Thank you, my dear," said O'Grady. He looked across the table at Max. "Your turn." Max reached out and promptly picked up all four aces and a king.

"Very impressive," said O'Grady. "Four bullets."

"Let's see you beat _that_," said Max cockily.

"I shall endeavor to," promised O'Grady. "Time to discard and draw now, right?"

"Go ahead."

O'Grady dumped three tens and the deuce, then pulled four cards and built himself a straight flush to the ten.

"Your turn again, Max," he said.

Max stared at his hand, and then at O'Grady's, and then at his again.

—"Shit!"—he bellowed.

"You see?" said O'Grady. "My straight flush beats your four aces, and since all the tens are gone, not only can't you create a royal flush, but the highest straight flush you can build will be nine-high."

"What if I'd started with a straight flush instead of four aces?" asked Max.

"Same result. You can't create one that goes any higher than the nine."

"Just a minute," said Hellfire Van Winkle. "Suppose he'd picked four nines. You can't stand pat, because he can draw four aces or a straight flush to beat your four tens. What do you do then?"

"Discard three tens and the deuce and build a royal flush," answered O'Grady. "He can't match it, because all the tens are gone." He reached out, picked up the hundred-credit note, folded it in half, and slipped it into a pocket. "An inexpensive lesson, especially considering how often I'm sure each of you is going to use it once you leave the Outpost." Suddenly he smiled. "Just don't ever try it in the vicinity of Monte Carlo IV ... they don't have much of a

sense of humor about it out that way."

"You got any other scams you want to tell us about?" asked Max.

"Not for a lousy hundred credits," said O'Grady. He looked over and saw Willie the Bard scribbling away. "Hey, you'd better not be writing all this down!"

"That's the Bard," I said. "He writes everything down."

"He writes everything?" repeated Catastrophe Baker.

"Yeah," I said. "He's our historian. Someday he'll make you famous."

"I already got a little more fame than I can handle," protested Baker.

"And I don't want millions of people reading about what I did on

Monte Carlo," chimed in O'Grady. "I don't mind telling a handful of people out here at the edge of nowhere, but I don't want it written up in a book. I might want to use it again sometime."

"Not to worry," said the Bard. "It'll be twenty, maybe thirty years before I'm ready to publish."

"How long have you been working on this masterpiece?" asked Baker.

"Since Tomahawk opened for business."

"And how many pages have you written?"

"I lost count years ago. But after pruning it down, I've kept about four thousand."

"You halfway done yet?"

"Probably not."

Baker smiled. "Who's gonna publish this thing?"

"That's not my problem," answered the Bard with an unconcerned shrug. "My job is to write it."

"I never did understand artists."

"Hey, we make as much sense as anyone," put in Little Mike Picasso. "And maybe a little more than most."

"Hell, maybe you do," admitted Baker. "Truth to tell, I've only known one real artist."

"A painter?" asked Little Mike.

Baker shook his head. "An opera singer. Ever hear of Melody Duva?"

"Can't say that I have."

"The Diva Duva," said Nicodemus

Mayflower admiringly. "I've seen a couple of her holos. She had a gorgeous voice. Whatever happened to her?"

"She was the victim of an unhappy collision of art and science," answered Catastrophe Baker.

"Sounds like a story coming up," suggested the Reverend Billy Karma.

"Not much to tell," said Baker. "She was built like an opera singer, which is to say she weighed in at maybe 350 pounds. She loved low-gravity worlds, where she could move with the grace of a dancer. Last time she ever performed was on New Samarkand, in a revival of _Tosca_."

"I've seen the holo."

"You must have seen an earlier

version," said Baker. "This one ran only one performance, and no one ever captured it."

"What happened?"

"New Samarkand is a temperate world, and they hold most of their operas and symphonies and other shindigs at this huge outdoor amphitheatre," began Baker. "Anyway, there's a scene at the end when Tosca commits suicide by throwing herself off the top of a tall tower they call a battlement. Ordinarily they'd toss a couple of air mattresses down on the stage, out of sight of the audience, to break her fall -but Diva Duva was so, well, large, that they figured she was sure to bust something, so instead of

mattresses they put out a hydro-trampoline to break her fall."

"A trampoline?" asked Max, frowning.

Baker nodded. "She plunged down so fast you could almost hear the wind whistle around her, hit the trampoline full force, and shot straight up. And like I told you, New Samarkand is a low gravity world. She reached escape velocity and wound up crashing through the cargo hold of a mining ship out near one of the planet's moons." He sighed. "Next day they got rid of the trampoline and put in a swimming pool for her understudy." He shook his head sadly. "Nobody ever thought to ask the poor girl if she knew how to swim."

There was total silence for a moment, while everyone digested the story. Max was the first to speak. "You absolutely sure every word of that is true?" he asked dubiously. Baker's jaw jutted out pugnaciously. "Are you impugning my integrity?" he demanded.

"No," Max assured him. "Just your veracity."

"Well, that's okay, then," replied Baker, relaxing.

Just then Achmed of Alphard entered the Outpost, dressed in his glowing robes and sparkling turban. He towered at least a foot above Catastrophe Baker and Big Red, and even more above everyone else.

"Good evening, gentleman," he said,

then bowed in the general direction of Sinderella and the Earth Mother. "And ladies, of course." He looked across the room at me. "The war's getting close, Tomahawk."

"Anyone figure out who the enemy is?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Beats me."

"Then how do you know there's a war?"

"They're firing on Navy ships."

"Yeah, that sounds kind of warlike," opined Max.

"How far away are they?"

"Who knows?" replied Achmed. "A few days, a few systems. It all depends on how often and accurately the Navy fires back."

"I wouldn't worry much," said Gravedigger Gaines. "No war's ever gotten this far."

"This one won't either," added Nicodemus Mayflower, nodding his lean, angular head for emphasis.

"Well, if it does, they're going to wish they'd gone in some other direction," chimed in Catastrophe Baker.

"I've killed men for lesser crimes than disturbing me while I'm drinking and socializing."

"Are there any greater crimes?" asked Three-Gun Max.

"None that come immediately to mind," admitted Baker.

The door opened again and Sitting Horse and Crazy Bull entered. The wind

was blowing, as usual, and they were coated with the red dust that covers most of Henry II when it's not blowing through the dry, hot, thin air.

Sitting Horse and Crazy Bull were wearing their tribal buckskins and feathered war bonnets, which looked just a tad out of place on a pair of roly-poly, fur-covered, orange, three-legged aliens, but we'd all grown used to their appearance over the years.

"Hey, Tomahawk..." began Crazy Bull.

"I know, I know," I said. "The war's getting closer."

"What war?" he asked.

"Damned if I know," I answered.
"Let's start again."

"Sure," said Crazy Bull agreeably. "Hey, Tomahawk, a couple of Blue Angels for me and my partner." Reggie mixed them up and placed them on the bar.

"That looks pretty interesting," remarked Baker. "I think I'll have one too."

"You don't want it," said Sitting Horse, picking up his glass. "It's poison to humans."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Cancel my order, Reggie," he said. "By the way, what are a pair of orange, three-legged furballs doing dressed up like Injuns?"

"We come from Velitas IV," said

Sitting Horse.

"Never heard of it."

"That's because it's not Velitas IV any more," said Sitting Horse.

"We were colonized by descendants of the Great Sioux Nation," said Crazy Bull. "But instead of exploiting us, they shared their knowledge and their culture with us, and finally we all became blood brothers and took Indian names. We even renamed the planet. Now it's Little Big Horn IV." He paused.

"Sitting Horse and me, we make the Outpost our headquarters because we like anyone who calls himself Tomahawk."

"Just out of curiosity, have you guys ever see a horse or a bull?" asked

Baker.

"No, but we've seen a lot of Men who were crazy, and even more who spent all their time sitting when they should have been _doing_."

"Hey, it's no skin off my nose," said Baker. "But if was me, I'd have took Geronimo for a name."

"Not me," interjected Big Red. "I'd have been Jim Thorpe."

"Pocahontas for me," said Sinderella.

"So come to Little Big Horn and you can choose any name you want," said Sitting Horse.

"And as an added bonus, you get to put on war paint every Saturday night," said Crazy Bull.

"How many wives do Injuns get?"

asked Baker.

"How many women can you live with?" asked Sitting Horse.

"It's been my long and considered experience that the total comes to something less than one," answered Baker.

"See?" said Sitting Horse. "You're not so alien after all."

"I thought you guys were the aliens," said Baker.

"Not to us, we aren't."

They took their Blue Angels off to a table and began playing a game that seemed to involve cards, pebbles and feathers in equal quantities.

"I wonder if we should be worrying about this war," said the Reverend Billy

Karma.

"They know better than to attack the Outpost," said Max. "This is where all the living legends hang out. They don't want no part of us."

"If they're godless chlorine breathers, maybe they don't know about us," said Karma. "Or maybe they subscribe to different legends."

"If they're godless chlorine breathers, they have no more interest in Henry II than we have in their home world," said Nicodemus Mayflower. He grinned at his wit, and between his widow's peak and his thin face and aquiline nose, he looked exactly like my notion of the devil --which may well have been why he chose Nicodemus for one of his

names.

"I want it on the record that I, for one, resent the notion that all non-humans are godless," said Argyle, sparkling like a Christmas tree.

"You believe in God?" demanded Billy Karma.

"I believe in 37 separate and distinct gods," answered Argyle proudly. "That puts me 36 ahead of you."

"It makes you a pagan."

"It makes you a man of limited vision," said Argyle.

"Still, it don't matter what you believe," continued Karma. "Jesus died for your sins anyway."

"I never could figure out why you worship someone who couldn't even

save himself," said Argyle. "And you walk around wearing a representation of the cross that killed him. That's awfully close to psychic necrophilia."

"Them's fighting words!" cried Billy Karma, putting up his fists and starting to bob and weave. Argyle sprang forward, clipped Billy Karma cleanly on the chin, then stood back as the Reverend slowly collapsed.

"You can't beat a being who prays to Balaxtibo, the God of Self-Defense!" shouted Argyle triumphantly.

"He's one of the 37?" asked Baker.

"Right," said Argyle. "Though my personal favorite is Wilxyboeth."

"Which one is that?"

"The god of sexual potency."

The Reverend Billy Karma groaned and sat up on the floor, gingerly rubbing his chin. Argyle extended his hand. "No hard feelings?"

"None," said Karma. "Pull me up, will you?" When he was standing, he turned to Reggie. "Hey, Reg, mix up a couple of tall ones for me and my pal here. Come on, Argyle, you fascinating little alien bastard," he said, putting an arm around the sparkling alien's shoulders and leading him off to a table. "We got a lot to talk about."

"We do?"

Karma nodded. "Let's start with Wilxyboeth."

"I wonder how you spell Wilxyboeth?" mused Willie the Bard,

frowning and staring at his paper notebook.

"How come you don't use a recorder or a computer?" asked Catastrophe Baker, walking across the room to look over the Bard's shoulder.

"That's not art."

"What's the difference between recording what we say and writing it down?"

"I embellish."

"And you couldn't do that with a computer?"

The Bard considered it for a moment, then shook his head. "I don't like machines."

"Neither do I, come to think of it," admitted Baker. "I just figured a

computer could do things faster."

"It can fuck up my book 200,000 times faster than my pen can," agreed the Bard. "Trust me, you'll all come out looking better because of my pen."

"Gonna take off all the rough edges, huh?"

"Or add a few," said the Bard. "Whatever it takes."

"I'll make you a deal, Willie," said Little Mike Picasso. "Give me ten percent of the advance and I'll illustrate your book for you. I'll do sketches of everyone in the Outpost."

"Sounds good to me," said the Bard. "Long as you're willing to wait til I sell it."

"Sure. No problem."

The Bard stared at him for a long moment. "Okay, it's a deal," he said. "Now suppose you tell me the real reason you offered to do this?"

He gestured toward Silicon Carny. "I'll die if I can't draw her." Baker looked over and saw her for the first time. "If all you want to do is _draw_ her, you got a lot more wrong with you than you think."

Silicon Carny stood up, and everything came to a sudden stop. No one spoke, no one drank, no one dealt cards. If you made the effort, you could probably hear one molecule of air bumping into its neighbor. She had _that_ kind of effect on men.

I knew a little bit about her. Not much,

but enough to understand her name. The Silicon part was easy enough; mighty few slender women have 50-inch bustlines with nipples that point almost straight up. The Carny part was because her entire body was covered by art --not exactly tattoos, but some alien painting that was in constant flux, almost like a continuous holo --and she'd grown up in a carnival sideshow.

Finally Baker broke the silence.

"By God!" he exclaimed. "This has got to be the first time I ever saw one work of art stuck on top of an even purtier one!"

Silicon Carny smiled at him. "You like?" she purred with an accent I still hadn't placed after four or five years.

"Ma'am," he said, removing his vest and shirt, "I got some mighty artistic tattoos myself, as you can plainly see, but I freely admit they ain't nothing compared to you --and they sure as hell ain't painted on such a nice canvas."

I'd been right about the tattoos: they met in a passionate and pornographic embrace on his chest, then ran off in opposite directions until they reached his hands and headed back toward his chest again. Silicon Carny looked at him and giggled. For all I know she even blushed, but she had so many colors in perpetual motion that no one could tell. It didn't matter much, though. When she laughed, she shook -and when she shook, strong men just naturally got a little

weak in the knees.

"What a delicate, tinkling laugh you got, Ma'am," said Baker admiringly, putting his shirt back on. "I think I've only heard one other as engaging."

"Who did it belong to?" asked Max.

"Strangely enough, to the only other carny performer I ever knew," said Baker. "A woman of rare and delectable beauty, though lacking this charming lady's exceptional superstructure."

"So tell us about her," urged Max.

Baker shook his head. "It's a long and tragic story and I don't want to go into it."

"I'd like to hear it," said Silicon Carny.

Baker seemed to consider her request

for a moment, then shrugged. "All right, Ma'am," he said at last. "It brings back a lot of painful memories --but I make it my business never say No to a lady, especially one put together even remotely like yourself, Ma'am, so if that's what you want, that's what you'll get. But I warn you up front, it ain't got no happy ending."