

## Good As Dead

Mike held an ace of spades and a matching jack in one hand. He spent a moment glancing at the other three cards on an old, wooden table. “Uh... what’s with the joker?”

His non-human opponent simply stared at him for several seconds, refraining from blinking. “Jokers can be considered wild cards. They allow for more... interesting combinations.”

“Never heard of that rule before...” he replied, scoffing. “But alright. Whatever.”

From there, Mike analyzed his surroundings. The air reeked of smoke and a faint smell from hard liquor filled his nostrils. Armed guards surrounded him from several sides, blocking or barring every doorway and window within the vicinity. His eyes returned to the other three cards, where he found the black joker, a ten of clubs, and a king of spades once more.

His mind immediately went to work. With the joker acting as a wild card, he only needed a queen or a ten matching the same suit to create the best possible poker hand in the game.

“I raise.” said his opponent with a hiss.

With that, a clawed hand shoved several poker chip stacks toward the table’s center.

Mike clenched his free hand into a fist. “Call.”

An armed guard pushed a matching amount of poker chips forward on Mike’s behalf. Although Mike still had plentiful poker chips remaining, his opponent retained an overall larger number.

“Are we doing a specific number of rounds or what?” he asked, staring at his serpentine opponent. “You never explained that part.”

His opponent flicked a forked tongue, simultaneously hissing and smelling the air. “Simple. We play until one of us is eliminated.”

Mike did his best not to reveal a single hint of emotion. “So we do this until someone loses all their poker chips?”

“That would be correct.” replied his opponent.

“Still sounds too good to be true...” he said, shaking his head.

The dealer proceeded to reveal another card, joining the other three face-up on the table.

A ten of hearts.

Mike’s heart skipped a beat before his opponent hissed again...

“Check.”

He blinked several times in response. “But you’ll really let my sister go if I win?”

The serpentine creature cocked his head to the side. “Emphasis on a single word. If. Alternatively, you will owe us an identical blood debt if you lose. Equivalent exchange and all that.”

Mike nodded, tapping on the table. “Gotcha. In that case, I’ll check too.”

The dealer flipped over the final card without further delay. Mike let out a satisfied sigh at the subsequent sight of a ten of spades, which lit up within his hazel eyes as a sly smile formed on his face. Combined with the joker and the two cards in his hand, he finally had a royal flush.

“All in.” he said, taking a deep breath.

An armed guard gave his opponent a look of concern but pushed every last poker chip at Mike’s disposal forward to create a truly ludicrous pot nonetheless.

His serpentine opponent remained unfazed. “How curious...” he said, causing a wry grin like a cat to spread across his snout. “Either fortune favored you or you’re very brave for bluffing. It doesn’t matter since I can and will call it anyway!”

The serpentine creature proceeded to match Mike’s big gamble, wagering a large majority of his poker chips during the process. An all or nothing move. Multiple poker chip stacks moved toward Mike’s own. With almost all the poker chips within the center of the table, the stakes couldn’t possibly be higher as the tension in the air became palpable.

Even a few armed guards from several different species took notice, watching with wide eyes.

Mike had nothing short of a shit-eating grin on his face as he revealed his cards. “Royal flush!” he said with a chuckle, leaning back in his chair. “I can’t believe my luck! Bad move, snake man. It might take me a few more rounds, but I’ll probably clear house and take whatever you have left. Just letting you know in case you wanna save us both some precious time by forfeiting for me!”

“Not so fast...” said the serpentine creature. He flipped over his own two cards, showcasing a red joker and a ten of diamonds. “Five of a kind.”

Mike blinked several times. “Wait... what?”

His serpentine opponent practically hugged the poker chip pile, dragging it all to the table’s edge with a few stray ones left behind. A few fangs at the corners of his mouth created a toothy smile. “That means I win!”

“Bullshit!” Mike replied, throwing his arms in the air. “I’ve never heard of that combo in my life. There’s also only three tens in play!”

“But two jokers.” said the dealer, motioning at his electronic tablet to show Mike all the possible card combinations. “That makes five of a kind with the three tens. Unfortunately for you, it’s the only combination that can beat a royal flush.”

Mike’s eyes rapidly scanned the tablet. “I don’t even recognize some of these hands...”

The dealer shrugged. “It’s not my fault that you don’t know all the rules.”

“You lose either way.” said his serpentine opponent, leaning against the table. “Unlike your sister, we have no use for someone like you. You’re potentially dangerous too. A liability. Since I doubt you’ll be able or willing to purchase your freedom, much less pay off your newfound debt, your life is now forfeit because you’re nothing but a loose end.”

By instinct, Mike reached for his waist to grasp an empty pistol holster. “Shit!”

An armed guard promptly pointed a firearm at the back of his head.

The serpentine creature sneered. “Don’t just shoot him in here!”

Mike froze. “Yeah, what he said...”

“Do it outside.” resumed the serpentine creature, who let out a low hiss. “You’ll make an awful mess in here otherwise. I don’t want to see blood and brain matter on the ceiling again!”

“Ugh. This had to be fucking rigged!” Mike said, slamming his hands against the table. “What are the odds?!”

At these words, the armed guards seized Mike instead. They dragged him by the arms toward the closest entrance as others stepped out of the way. He hardly reacted beyond grunting and giving them a death stare. Mike soon found himself in a more arid environment as they forced him out the door, where fresh air and a night sky with two moons remained amid the stars.

Eventually, the guards made Mike get on his knees with his hands behind his back. He briefly spotted their weapons ranging from crude knives, cartridge revolvers, or laser rifles.

Mike bared his teeth. “If it ain’t me, it’ll be-”

A sudden flash and a bang marked the moment a gunshot filled the air. Afterward, Mike’s limp body created a thud as it hit the ground, then a pool of blood began forming around his head.