

THE Little Gambler



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Eric's gums screamed in fury as his bending teeth tore away from his jaw, leaving cavitous holes cascading blood into his mouth and staining it with a metallic taste.

“Come back when you got the bank to play!” The security guard shouted down from atop the stone step of the entrance stairs. Eric let out a low groan of twisting agony as he curled up on the cold pavement, his groan softened into a shrill whimper as he sputtered out blood and teeth. He lay there motionless, allowing his flaming mouth to grow numb until the pain was bearable. Turning himself over, he reached out to the casino steps and used the leverage to lift himself from the ground. He slowly staggered forward, utilizing the casino's walls to balance himself as he made his way down the road. In the distance, he saw a crowd of people gathering at the entrance of a large hotel. He approached the group squeezing forward between the men until he reached the velvet rope that quarantined the stairway. He gazed into the opening carpet-way and saw her. She strode across the path in with a slight bounce, pausing every two beats to flirt with the cameras as her blue dress sparkled in the camera flash. Her blond hair radiated like the sun, matching her skin's reflective glow. Eric turned to the cameraman beside him and asked who she was, spattering blood all over him in the process. The cameraman, horrified by Eric's visage, flailed wildly in panic, knocking into the people surrounding them. The chaos grew as the photographers moshed violently until Eric was suddenly thrown into the pathway.

Eric groaned as his already bruised body hit the floor. Placing a hand on the ground, he pushed himself up to see her staring at him. They locked eyes, unable to break away from each other's gaze; they froze in place. Eric knew then that he was in love.

He felt a large hand grip his shoulder as a deep voice said.

“You're going to have to leave.” Eric stared at her longingly as the security guard dragged him away from the venue. Eric's mind danced as the guards set him down outside the press lines. He knew that he must speak with the woman and resolved himself to enter the hotel by any means. He looked up at the windows, trying to find a way to climb into the building but was startled by a voice behind him.

“Pst! Hey!” Eric turned to see the empty street. He was sure that he had heard a woman's voice, but could not find its source. “Hey! Over here! In the alley!” Eric stumbled forward groggily to find an alley between the two buildings that he was quite sure wasn't there before. In the alleyway, sat a grimy woman sitting back against a dumpster. Her pale skeletal face was covered in spots and sores; her hair was knotted into an uncontrolled net. “They're not going to let you in.” She said, smirking at Eric. Eric tried to retort

but his toothless mouth still could not properly form the words. "Save it. I can tell where this is going without getting bloody spittle all over me. Let's skip to the part where I help you meet her." Eric paused for a moment staring at the woman with a deadpan expression. "Okay, I can't help you, but I know someone who can. Take the 13 bus down to the beach, look for a place called Methist's Tunnelmoor."

"Ah, hab, no mornny." Eric spat back. The woman reached into her jacket and tossed a small coin to Eric.

"Give that to the bus driver. He'll take you where you need to go." Eric looked down at the coin. It was made of a black metal embossed with a silver skull in the centre surrounded by five engraved red symbols.

"Ah, dunt rink-" Eric protested as he looked up to see a wall where the alley had been. He looked back down at the coin before heading to the empty bus stop. The bus came by, shortly after his arrival, opening its doors to reveal an old fat man with a thick white beard. Eric shuffled into the bus holding the coin in his outstretched hand. The bus driver looked at him confusedly before taking the coin and looking at it.

"Ah, you're going to see Methist." Eric nodded in response. "Just put it in the coin slot and grab a seat." He passed the coin back to Eric, who promptly slid the coin in and sat down on the empty bus. Eric watched the buildings pass by as the urban cityscape gave way to an expansive ocean shimmering in the dawn light. The bus slowly came to a halt. "Here you are, Methist's is down the beach a ways. There'll be signs along the way to guide you." Eric nodded to the bus driver as he walked off the bus. "Oh, and one more thing," The bus driver interjected as Eric stepped off the bus. "I don't know what your deal is but, fair warning, none of Methist's customers have ever left satisfied." With that, the bus' doors closed and it was off down the road. As Eric strolled down the beach, he didn't see any storefronts or any housing along the beach. It was then that he noticed a poster taped to the side of a telephone pole. It was a simple red poster with black lettering which read, 'Methist's Tunnelmoor' with an arrow pointing down the beach. A few posters later, he reached a series of concrete tunnels. He stopped and looked around, but saw no other path. Pulling a lighter from his pocket, he lit a flame; Its pale light unable to penetrate the darkness. Taking a deep breath, Eric ventured forward along the concrete path until a dead end blocked his path. Squinting in the darkness, he could make out several plastic crates tied together covered in shower curtains and blankets. Shining the light on the grey walls of the interior, he eventually came to a stop on some large red lettering which read 'Methist's Tunnelmoor,' below it a large arrow pointed to a gap between the wall and the tunnel. Eric slid himself through the gap, extinguishing the light of the tunnel's mouth and continued a few steps forward before he felt something drop from the ceiling onto his face. He jumped, slapping at his face and twisting violently as he crashed through a

wooden structure. Relighting his lighter, he looked around to see that he had crashed into a ramshackle house made of plywood and aluminum foil. Inside, in its now dilapidated frame, he saw a canister of some sort with its flammable and explosive warnings proudly displayed. He grabbed the canister and pointed it at the ceiling letting forth a burst of flames. The ceiling began to pop like a rapid electric crackle as hundreds of spiders raced away from the inferno. Eric shrunk back; he could feel phantom spiders crawling on his skin. He looked toward the exit and got ready to run, but he stopped himself. He closed his eyes and remembered seeing her for the first time with her radiant smile and beautiful features. Picking himself up, he raced through the remainder of the tunnel, passing by more makeshift homes and their inhabitants. They were skeletal husks of the people they used to be, positive and hopeful in their damnation. Eventually, Eric came to a large circular intersection, in which a man sat on a folding chair elevated on a platform of stacked crates. The man was pale and feeble, the skin of his torso pulled against his bones. His stiff hair surrounded his sagging face like a mane. His dull translucent eyes fixated on Eric.

“Mr. Methist?” Eric stuttered to the man. The man smiled, displaying his five chipped yellow teeth against the black void of his gaping maw.

“Methist is fine. It’s a nickname. It’d be silly to formalize it.” Eric nodded in response. “So,” Methist began peering deep into Eric, “you’re here about a woman, right?” Eric stepped back, his eyes growing wide. “I can see in your starry eyes the hopelessness of your desires, though, I suppose we’ve all been there. So who is this lady, a childhood friend, a co-worker, a royalty of some sort?”

“An heiress.”

“Ah, I know just the one. I also happen to know where you can meet her. She’ll be attending a private poker game at the casino next to her hotel. It’s a fifty thousand dollar buy-in.”

“I don’t have any money.”

“Well, then, I recommend that you find some quick. The match is set to begin in just a few hours. If you miss this opportunity, you could lose her forever.”

“I don’t suppose you have fifty thousand dollars lying around, do you?”

“To just give away? No, unfortunately, Eric, life isn’t that easy, but with a bit of skill, I might be able to offer you a solution that will get you the girl and a hefty profit, depending on how good of a gambler you are.”

“You want to make a wager.”

“No, no. I’m rooting for your success. I’m just a humble bookmaker looking to make a market cashing in on faulty straight bets made on romantic

engagements. Nothing that should have you concerned in any way. I will lend you the fifty thousand no strings attached. You can use it however you like in the allotted time, however at midnight I will come to collect my money back.”

“If I'm in a poker game, I'll have to bet it.”

“And you may keep every cent you make.”

“What if I lose?”

“That depends, what do you have as collateral.”

“Nothing.”

“Then, I'll take everything.” Methist could not suppress his wicked smile as he uttered the words. He quickly repressed the smile and continued. “That's, of course, only if you lose. Think about where you could be, the girl of your dreams and enough money from the game and marriage to retire. You would never be kicked out of a casino again. You just got to believe. Feel deep inside yourself, you know you can do it, will you let your life waste away in meaninglessness, or do we have a deal?”

“Deal.” As soon as the words left Eric's mouth, Methist's eyes lit up with a brightness his euphoric grin had long since lost. He suppressed his snickering to let forth an echoing clap, summoning one of the tunnel's inhabitants to them. With him, he carried a large metal briefcase similar in design to the coin Eric had been given. The tunnel dweller opened the case to reveal several stacks of cash.

“As always, we live to serve the dreams of the destitute, we thank you for your patronage, and we hope to see you tomorrow.” With that, Eric was ushered through the tunnel by the dweller, reaching the salt-soaked air of the beach.

As Eric's eyes adjusted to the brightness, he heard a shout from above.

“Hey, Eric!” Eric turned to see a man leaning over the railing above the tunnel. “Hurry up; your future is waiting; you don't want to be late.” Eric whistled a tune skipping up the steps to the car the man had waiting for him. “There's a change of clothes in the back. Don't worry, the ride's on the house.” Eric opened the door and fell onto the comfy seat of the car. He quickly changed into his new clothes as they drove back to the casino. Eric thanked the driver and swaggered up the stairs to the casino, where he was spotted by a security guard who intercepted him.

“Whoa, there pal, you got the funds to play?” Eric hoisted the briefcase and began to open it, but was stopped by the security guard. “I recognize the symbols. Welcome back, Eric, head on in.” As Eric entered the casino, he heard the guard behind him say. “Please, try to enjoy your stay.” As he entered, Eric was met with a barrage of neon lights and chiming sounds. He could not help but smirk as he moseyed through the maze of slot

machines and dreams until he reached the back of the room. There he met a young staff member who politely informed him the private game would take place in an hour and that he could come back then. Eric resolved to wait patiently, but his eye was caught by a Texas Hold'em table near him.

In particular, one of the players, a rich kid throwing away money on bad hands. Eric walked closer and watched as the kid bet on a two pair and folded on a six-eight diamonds. He watched annoyed by the kid's ineptitude until his focus was broken by the dealer who offered Eric a seat at the table. Eric was about to refuse, but then he considered the offer. The table was a low stakes table. While losing money here was not ideal, losing in the big game would be worse. It seemed to him much easier to win a game against the kid, then whatever high rollers he'd have to face against in the big stakes game. It might be better, he thought, to win a substantial portion of money here, so that he could afford to throw away some chips in the main game. After all, he reasoned, if he had a bad hand here, he could regain such a comparatively small amount rather quickly. So, he sat down to play. The dealer dealt everyone's cards, and Eric slid his two to himself to see the double aces he'd drawn as the dawn to his winning streak. For the next hour, Eric could not lose, each round his opponent had bad hands, or would fold, by the time a staffer had come to collect him for the game, he had doubled his money. Eric finished playing out his hand and got up to leave with the staffer. As he collected his chips, he heard a voice from his left.

"How about double or nothing?" Eric looked over to see the kid giving him a smirk.

"Sorry, kid, I got bigger fish to fry."

"No, you don't understand, I mean double or nothing." The kid grabbed a few stacks of chips and slid a hundred thousand into the pot.

"You haven't even looked at your hand."

"I got a good feeling about this one." The dealer slid two cards to Eric. He took a look, ace pair. Eric paused for a moment and slid his chips into the centre.

"Alright, one more round."

"Anyone else?" The kid gestured around the table as the other players threw in their cards. "Very well, let's begin." The dealer flipped the first three cards: ace of diamonds, two of hearts and the ace of spades. Eric relaxed comfortably in his chair. The kid leaned over to him.

"I must admit, you've got some guts."

"Nah, I just know not to bet against a winning streak." The dealers flipped the ten of diamonds.

"I wholeheartedly agree with your assessment."

"Regretting your bet now?"

“Not particularly, in terms of winning streaks, I’ve never seen Methist lose.” The dealer flipped the final card, the queen of diamonds. “Enjoy the tunnels.” the kid smirked as he revealed his jack and king of spades. A horrifying shriek left his lips as Eric hurled insults and accusations at everyone surrounding him. He jumped on the table, stuffing handfuls of chips into his coat pocket. Security pulled him from the table and tore the chips from his pockets. He squirmed desperately beneath their grip, but couldn’t stop them from dragging him across the casino floor.

“Please! Just a little more. Someone lend me a hundred, no, fifty dollars. I can win it all back.” The kid laughed.

“Your game is already about to start. You can’t make enough in time.” Eric looked to the back to see her entering the room with several guests.

“Please, my love!” Eric called out to her. “Help me!” She looked over to him. “Please, I need a few thousand, fifty thousand! Please my love! We can be together forever for just fifty thousand dollars.” She locked eyes with him as security ushered her into the private room and closed the door behind them. Eric flailed wildly trying to break free of the security as they dragged him from the building and threw him down the stairs. He could hear one of the guards yelling down at him.

“You can come back when you got the bank to play!” Eric muttered something unintelligible and rolled onto his back. To his left, he heard a bus stop along the curb. The doors slowly opened, and Eric could see the white beard and rotund body of the bus driver.

“I tried to warn you,” the bus driver said with a disappointed sigh. Eric responded with a dispassionate exhale.

“I know. What happens now?”

“Get in; I’ll take you to see Methist.”

“I don’t have any money,” Eric replied.

“I know.” The bus driver replied, sliding a black coin into the slot. “This one’s on the house.”