

## THE PRICE OF AN EARTH CHIT

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Nel was ready even before he heard the guard's footsteps. He smoothed down his uniform, slicked back his hair, and stood up straight.

"Nobody wins," Teddy said from his cell across the hall.

Nel stared past the steel bars and white corridor, straight through Teddy's pale-eyed glare, as if he could already see the casino on the other side of the wall and the shining blue oceans of Earth beyond. He had counted every day for the last five years waiting for this moment, and he wasn't about to let Teddy ruin his good mood.

"You're just jealous because you're stuck on the moon for the rest of your life," Nel said. He was glad the sick ones like Teddy weren't allowed to play. Teddy had killed twelve women before he was caught. If he gambled his way to freedom, he'd probably do the same again.

Teddy lay back against his bunk. "At least I'll be alive," he said.

Nel opened his mouth to reply, then closed it again. Teddy wanted to goad Nel into causing a scene, ruin his opportunity in the casino. Nel shook his head. He wasn't going to fall for it.

Boots scuffed against the floor at the end of the corridor. He saw the dark blue of the guard's uniform, the Vegas-on-the-Moon logo a bright red patch on his chest.

His cell door slid open smoothly, and Nel couldn't help but grin as the guard waved him forward.

"Dead man," he heard Teddy say quietly.

Nel kept his eyes straight ahead.

The door at the end of the corridor opened onto a branched hallway. He heard the tantalizing sounds of the casino from one end of the hallway: laughter and voices and the clinking of chits.

The guard turned the other direction. Nel forced himself to follow down the off-white

corridor, away from the muffled laughter of the casino. He'd already waited five years. Another hour wouldn't kill him.

The doctor met them at the door to his office. He was tall and thin, like he'd been born to live in the light gravity of the moon. He indicated the examination table, and Nel caught his reflection in the polished surface as he sat. The years on the moon hadn't been unkind. He still had a full head of hair and a well-muscled build. They had made him shave his bushy mustache when he came in, but that only made it easier to see the black stubble on his cheeks. He straightened his shoulders. He'd still be able to charm the ladies, especially when he flew back to Earth with all his winnings.

The doctor uncoiled a long cable and snapped one end into the plug at Nel's wrist, the other into a hand-held. As Nel watched, seven red bars illuminated on his forearm, one for every year left to serve. He ran his finger along the skin above the red bars. How many years would he have to bet with? He studied the back of the hand-held, wishing he could see its screen.

"So how many years have I got, Doc?" Nel said.

The doctor glanced up and shook his head, tight-lipped.

He tried again. "Can't you give me a rough estimate? Closer to ten, or closer to fifty?"

The doctor pulled the cable from Nel's wrist and began looping it into a small coil. "We're all done today, Mr. Barton."

"How can you tell, anyway?" Nel tried a different tact. "How do I know it's accurate?"

The doctor finally stopped and looked at Nel. "The technology has been around quite a while, and has been borne out in numerous cases. The percentage of dead cells in all the vital organs, telomerase length, and many other factors all extrapolate to give a number good to within a year."

Nel didn't care about the medical mumbo-jumbo, but he knew about hedging his bets. "So do I get that extra year or what?" He tried to smile winningly at the doctor.

"We always add a year to the number. Even if you wouldn't have lived that long, you still get the extra line to bet with."

The doctor handed a roll of green plastic chits to Nel.

"Courtesy of the house," he said.

Why did the man sound so bitter, Nel wondered. It wasn't his life they were talking about.

"Mr. Barton." The doctor's voice stopped Nel as he was leaving the office. "I'll give you the same advice I give all the prisoners. Don't bet more than ten years above your current age."

Nel smiled. "Don't worry, Doc. I don't intend to get that far into debt before I win myself a trip off this rock."

The sounds of the casino grew louder as the guard walked Nel from the office.

They stopped in front of the casino door.

"Feeling lucky?" the guard said. He unlocked the door and shoved Nel through.

Nel covered his ears against the sudden onslaught of noise: the laughter and shouts and curses, the clanking of glasses, the jangling and whistling of the slots.

He took a deep breath, steadied himself against the door, now locked behind him, and studied the room.

Large circular tables crowded the center of the room, surrounded by men in the yellow of the prisoner uniforms, while red and white holographic letters tumbled through the space above their heads: Win Your Freedom, Lucky Nights at Vegas-On-The-Moon, Earth is Only a Chit Away.

Slots lined the walls, and the mirrors between and above them gave the illusion of an infinite space. Not so different from the casinos on Earth, after all. But then he raised his eyes to one of the high windows to see his blue and white planet hanging serenely in the black sky. His throat tightened.

"What are you drinking tonight, my man?"

Nel turned to see a woman with a tray of drinks. He let his gaze travel the length of her long legs up to her short glittery skirt and wrap-around top before his eyes fell on her name tag. The letters sparkled and hovered above her chest.

"Hi, Della," he said, letting the name roll on his tongue as if he were tasting it. It had been awhile since he'd seen a real woman. He straightened the collar of his uniform.

She didn't react to his long stare. Didn't even blink. "Drinks are on the house," she said. "The

bar is fully stocked."

He shook his head. "I'm not drinking tonight. Have to keep my head clear."

As she walked away he called after her with a certainty he felt reverberate through his body, "I'm going to win tonight, Della!"

She looked over her shoulder and smiled.

Nel removed the green chits from his pocket and inspected them, smiling to himself. He cupped his hands and rattled the chits. They moved lightly in the low gravity, rolling and jostling against one another and producing a delicate tinkling sound. A light, free sound, he thought, like that of a wind chime. He was going to win his freedom tonight. He could feel it in his bones.

He ignored the slots as he ambled through the smoky casino. The slots offered no chance of the big reward, the Earth chit; they were just for fun, for those who didn't know how to play the real games.

Nel stopped at the one-chit-minimum craps table.

The table was full, with six men already sitting at all the available stations, their left arms fitted into the armslots. Two men had large stacks of green chits piled before them, while another had worked himself into the red, the row of glowing bars lined neatly on his forearm from wrist to elbow. With a start, Nel realized it was Johnson. He had done latrine duty enough times with the man to recognize the scarred hands. He looked up to call a greeting, but Johnson's face was pulled tight in concentration. He stared anxiously at the red bars, running his free hand back and forth across his forehead.

"I'll make a place bet," Johnson told the dealer. "Three reds on the ten."

The shooter rolled the dice. A seven. Three new red bars lit up on Johnson's forearm.

Nel shook his head. Making a place bet on ten was stupid, he thought, the odds weren't good enough. But it wasn't his place to tell a man how to play. Another round and Johnson was down three more reds. Someone at the end of the table had made nine greens. He whooped loudly, calling for a drink.

Nel smiled, watching the dice roll and the green chits flow across the black velvet. Johnson had more red lines now, and he stared at them, his lips moving visibly as he counted. Nel didn't look at the man's arm. That was rude, like asking a person how long they expected to

live. And besides, he didn't care.

He moved to find another table, but a shout made him turn back.

Johnson clutched his arm, trying to pull it free of the armslot. "Fifty-three years--that's not right!" he said, his voice loud in the sudden quiet at the table. He shook his fist at the dealer. "My father lived longer than that, and he had surgery at forty!"

The dealer's face was expressionless as two Vegas-On-The-Moon guards unslotted Johnson's arm and tried to lead him away. He started to scream, but one of the guards was faster, pulling a sedative spray from his belt and releasing it into Johnson's face, cutting the scream short. Nel nodded sympathetically at the guards. An ugly scene here in the casino could ruin the games for everyone.

The noise around the table resumed as Nel took Johnson's place, slipping his arm into the slot palm up so the red lines were visible through the glass coverplate. He waited while the table computer hooked into his wrist plug and read his numbers. Two padded, semicircular grips emerged from the slot and linked snugly together around his arm above the elbow. Nel pulled the chair closer with his foot and squirmed until he was settled comfortably at the table. He spread his chits out on the velvet before him.

The dice passed to the man at Nel's right, and the men placed their bets. The dealer looked at Nel and said, "What's your bet, sir?"

It had been years since he had been called 'sir'. He sat up straighter and pushed two green chits into the pass-line area.

"Two on the pass-line."

The shooter threw the dice. A natural. Nel smiled as the dealer passed him four green chits. Ten greens could be traded for one red bar. He could trade in ten green right now and reduce his sentence from seven years to six, then go back to his cell. That's what Teddy had said he should do. But Teddy didn't understand that gambling was Nel's specialty. Nel was going to be a free man tonight.

The dice were on his side, and Nel found himself up to thirty greens. He pressed twenty toward the dealer with a trembling hand and said, "Take two reds, my good man."

The dealer took the chits and touched the keypad beneath the table. While he watched, two red lines disappeared from Nel's forearm. Two years gone. Two years on this rocky cage traded in within minutes of entering the game, he thought, with ten chits to spare. He was

ahead. He suppressed a smile and forced his attention back to the game.

He lost four greens in one round, then gained them all back in the next. He placed only safe bets, didn't risk more than five chits at a time the way other players did, betting piles of green in the wild hope of one lucky throw. He was down to two red lines when the dice started to turn against him. He steadied himself, collected his greens, and asked the dealer to free his arm from the slot.

Nel walked from the table, rubbing his arm where the grips had held him. Two years to go on this lunar prison was almost bearable, but he was close to winning big. He felt it in the way his stomach clenched tight at the sight of the Earth, heard it in the lucky jangling of chits in his pocket.

He found another table and slotted his arm. Smoke curled around the players and ice rattled in glasses as Nel placed his bets. Steadily and surely, he won the greens. Finally he had enough to clear the reds on his arm.

"I'm a free man!" Nel shouted to the table, laughing out loud and punching the air with his free hand. The other players eyed him with a mixture of jealousy and respect.

"Have a drink to celebrate?" Della was back, holding her tray of glasses.

Nel winked at her. "I'm a free man, Della. Will you marry me?"

Della smiled, collecting the empty glasses from the table. "Let's see your Earth chit first."

Nel grinned like a fool as he watched her walk away. Now he could leave the casino, leave the prison this very moment if he wanted, but he'd still be stuck on the moon. Would have to find a job and earn enough money to catch the shuttle back to Earth. It would be years before he worked his way off the rock. Or he could just win it tonight instead.

Now that he was red-free, fifty greens could be traded for an Earth chit. Nel looked again at the window that framed Earth. A hologram sparkled in the air near it: a man in a prisoner's uniform holding up an Earth chit in victory, caught frozen in the middle of a wide-eyed, exuberant shout.

Nel arranged his chits in front of him carefully. He felt the familiar tightening in his gut, like those nights at World Casino when he had played all night, just a step away from winning big, the lights and the music dazzling his senses and the adrenaline pumping through his veins. He would have made it big, too, if Nance hadn't squealed. He tried to tell them he had only borrowed the company money to play. He would have given the money back with interest

after he won. But they pressed charges and here he was, like some sort of common criminal.

Wouldn't they all be surprised when he walked back into World Casino with Della on his arm. He was a gambling man, he'd tried to tell them before. Now they'd have to believe him. He'd even be friendly with Nance and the others, just to show he was a big-hearted man.

"Betting or leaving, sir?" the dealer asked, politely impassive.

He could do it. His luck was holding. Nel pushed two chits out onto the table. "Two on craps," he said, smiling confidently at the dealer.

Up to thirty-two, then down to twelve and up again to forty-one. Nine more chits and he could trade them in for an Earth chit. Nel looked around, realizing a small group had collected around him, watching expectantly. The dealer held the dice in one hand, letting them roll lazily against one another, waiting for Nel's call.

The point number was four, and Nel had three chits on the pass-line. Nel pushed three more chits toward the dealer. "On the point," he said. He realized his fingers were trembling. If the shooter rolled a four he would get six chits for the point number and three for the pass-line and then he'd have enough for the Earth chit. The shooter rolled, and the dice bounced slowly across the black velvet surface, tumbling to a halt. A seven. The dealer collected Nel's six chits.

Nel pushed three more chits onto the pass-line.

He was down eight and then up three, down ten again, and then suddenly he was out of chits.

"I'll take a red," Nel told the dealer. "Put it on the pass-line." The dealer nodded and typed into his keypad. A blinking red line illuminated on Nel's arm. The dice flew. A two. Nel didn't watch as the blinking red line became a solid red line on his arm.

"Another red on the pass-line," Nel said. Better lose that red quickly, he thought. Another blinking line appeared on Nel's arm, next to the solid one. If he won, the blinking line would disappear, taking with it the solid one. If he lost, the blinking line would become solid, and he'd have two full years to serve. The shooter rolled again--a twelve. The blinking line became solid. Nel cursed under his breath. He'd been red-free just a moment ago. He resolved to win his freedom back. He concentrated and bet another red.

He was down four, five then seven reds. He began to perspire. He waved as Della passed the table. "I changed my mind on that drink, Della!"

She handed him a glass. "How's your luck?" She glanced at his forearm.

"I almost had it. I'll win it back, don't you worry." He shrugged casually and tried to grin at her.

The dice had turned against him, and Nel swore, watching the red bars appear on his arm. Ten down now. He knew he couldn't take ten years in the hole, couldn't bear the thought of even one more year, especially after being so close to the Earth chit. He'd win it back, it was just a matter of time. He couldn't leave the table now with no greens and ten reds. He called for another drink.

He hardly noticed as Della took his empty glass and replaced it with a full one without comment. He took the dice and kissed them, then rolled. A three. "Damn, another craps." He slapped the table with his free hand. The dealer collected the chits indifferently and typed numbers into his keypad. Nel noticed the crowd at the table had dispersed.

"Another two reds," he told the dealer.

Don't bet ten years above your current age, the doctor had advised. Nel was thirty-four; now there were ten bars on his arm, which meant he was in until he was forty-four. How long had his life been calculated out to? He didn't know how many he had to go, but he was in good shape, had always taken care of himself; certainly he had to at least fifty.

The dice flew and the chits slid across the table. He lost five red bars, then suddenly gained ten. His head throbbed with the smoke and the drinks and the ceaseless clatter of the chits.

Della was back. "I'm not supposed to say this to the players," she said in a low voice as she leaned over him to take his empty glass, "but I've seen it happen enough times here. The men don't stop when they're ahead--"

"Don't worry about me, Della!" Nel cut her off in a loud voice. He took a drink from her tray and waved her away, trying to concentrate on the game.

Twenty-nine lines and Nel began to find it difficult to breathe. But he might have thirty left, he reassured himself. Hell, his grandfather had lived to ninety-five. He rubbed his tense shoulders and bet another two reds.

He lost again. Nel watched apprehensively as the lines appeared. Thirty-one now and no alarms had sounded. He let out his breath and continued to play.

Forty-one was when the alarm chimed.

"No!" Nel shouted, trying to pull his arm from the slot. "I have more years than that!"

The dealer watched him, expressionless, as the guards came to Nel. They held him firmly and unslotted his arm.

He felt dizzy as he stood. The lights seemed suddenly brighter, the noise in the casino louder. He blinked hard to clear his vision.

"Don't put me under," he steadied his voice as the guard reached for the sedative spray.

The guard shrugged and put the spray back into his belt.

"I just think there must be something wrong with the evaluation," he tried to explain as they led him away from the table. With an effort he kept his voice level. "The doctor will have to recheck my evaluation." Obviously there had been a mistake. He had been so close to winning.

Nel saw Della watching as the guards pulled him from the casino. Maybe the guards would listen to her. She could tell them that he was about to win, that all he needed was a few more years to bet with. But as he started to call out to her, she turned away. And suddenly they were in the bright corridor outside the room. The sounds of the casino faded as the guards pulled Nel along, one on either side.

Nel felt his hands and feet go cold as they approached the doctor's office, but he held his tongue. He couldn't risk being put under. He had to speak to the doctor.

He started talking as soon as the door opened. "There's been a mistake, Doc. I have more than forty years left in me. You have to do the evaluation again."

The guards sat Nel on the examination table as the doctor connected the plug to Nel's wrist and downloaded the red lines into the hand-held.

"You tell them, Doc," Nel implored. Why wasn't the doctor looking at him? Nel's voice rose. "Tell them to let me go."

The doctor spoke into the hand-held, "Mr. Nel Barton, thirty-four years of age. Extrapolation of life expectancy calculated to seventy-four years, giving forty remaining years of life. Prisoner gambled forty years onto his sentence, and so would have died in prison. Prisoner thereby forfeits life to Vegas-On-The-Moon." His voice sounded strained. "Seven years left on actual sentence, so state owes payment for balance of seven years. Payable yearly, the

usual protocol."

"No!" Nel pulled against the guards. This wasn't right. He had to explain to the doctor.

The doctor prepared the injection. "I'm sorry, Mr. Barton." He looked at Nel, finally. A long, sad look, like he wanted to say more.

Nel tried to speak but one of the guards clamped his hand over his mouth. He struggled furiously, but they were holding him down against the table now, and he couldn't raise his head or his limbs. He had almost won an Earth chit, he tried to say. He had been so close. Only a few more rounds and he would have won big.

The doctor tapped the syringe, then pressed the lethal liquid into Nel's arm without meeting his eyes again.