

Taking Chances

Text for an Abortive Graphic Novel Project

By Robert M.J. Morris

He comes regularly, usually late of an evening, crossing the sprawling expanse of the city to indulge my little peccadillo in payment for his own. He's a player, you see, and a good one too. And, like tonight he often wins. Tonight, though, tonight was different. Tonight he lost as well. Tonight I decided the time was ripe to terminate our little arrangement and, ultimately tonight I'm doing him a really big favour. Obviously it doesn't seem like that at the moment, but all the same I wish he'd stop screaming.

Grates the nerves doesn't it? Good job I've closed up for the night really or he'd have driven all my punters away. And I don't want that. See, this bar is my life. It's all I've got. And that, that's why I'm cleaning it up.

Not what you wanted to hear was it? But that's the way it is. I've lived in the shadows of Her Majesty's Pleasure for far too long now. I'm giving it up. I only needed the, well, shall we say "extra custom?" while I was building up. Well, the first six months of any business are really hard and I had the contacts, why not use 'em? I knew it'd take time to get the custom I really wanted, a core of real players, not just a bunch of novelty-seekers flocking to a quirkily themed bar. No, they died away fast and now, now I have my hard-core elite. The ones for whom these tables are a release from the juggling of variables, de-stressing as they give themselves over the whims of a roll of the dice.

So now the players come for the game, and the specials come for a prize. In a way, they're all addicts of sorts. But the players are addicted to the playing, to the ambience. There's an etiquette to it that we all find relaxing, the yuppies particularly. There's no cheating, double dealing or back-stabbing, and any breach of the rules and you're out on your ear. It's a release, like most addictions I suppose, the only difference being that this one doesn't kill you.

Oh yeah. It's always been a release for me too, whilst I was waiting for the real thing. Got taught it by some guy in my first week inside. Real gent he was. Quiet, thoughtful and, well, gentlemanly. Doing twenty-five for murdering his boyfriend.

He committed suicide in the end. Got a few bashings 'cause of, well, you know. He got through 'em though. Just kept himself to himself and carried on. Week before I was paroled they destroyed the gammon set he'd made. Held him down and burned it before his eyes. The next day he was hanging from the bars of his cell. They took away his only escape and I guess he couldn't cope any more.

Well, I managed to return the favour. Let's just say they didn't last long after parole. I had the contacts, why not use 'em? I owed him that at least. He gave me my life back, just like I'm doing for the screaming one right now. Let's face it if I didn't have the contacts you wouldn't be here now. But then,

think about it. Neither would he...

He won. A gammon, as it happens. And I don't suppose he realised how calm and collected he was, even with the primary withdrawal symptoms running through his body, he was just focused on winning the prize. Strange really, I don't think he knows how much he depends on the play. He's got the money to buy the drug outright, but he likes to challenge me to get it for nothing.

And when it arrived, he hesitated. Perhaps something gave it away. A look in my eyes, the sound of gentle footsteps behind him, but the look of fear in his eyes as he reached for the needle was so real, more real than any emotion he's displayed for ages. And then the hands on his shoulder and he was dragged away to his current home.

He made on vital mistake you see. He told me about his leave, and so I knew he wouldn't be missed. That's a good lesson for you: never let your guard down when the stakes are so high.

Changed your mind? Okay, so get outta here. I don't want to see you again, unless it really is for a game, cause you're not a bad player. Well, you can't wait for so long without absorbing a bit, can you? Even if it wasn't what you were after.

They say it's about eighty-percent luck, so not many people are bad players really. Perhaps that's the attraction. Even at that level, it's still better odds than life.

Drop the latch on your way out, I think I'm gonna be up with him all night.