

*Creation, it rests upon the hand of my forefather's killer, but one gem of a set of exquisite jewelry. Its color is blood red, its angles sharp and exacting. In the crystal's body, the color is murky, undefined; within the set confines of its body, the obscure essence retains an unrecognizable form. But it, even in its lack of clarity and establishment, has been captured well. Excavated from the ground, done under extensive labor, breaking the backs of millions passed, it had been curated in such a manner to preserve its inherent earthly glimmer. Such desire I felt for its possession, this unwavering need has drawn heavily upon my heaving breast. Nothing but angst and direct pain has seeped into my troubled mind ever since its reception, but I still desire it; I prize its worth over my own lives, or even my children's. When the wearer, who had sat so regally, perishes, I should claim it and declare my inheritance. No one would remain then to stop me from doing so; there was no obligation outside of the present ownership. But I, as I lay here, still, long after my separation, gazing at his bejeweled fingers, I find myself losing patience; the need has become oh so wanting.*

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"If I have won severance over you, in this here game, you will give me your ring."

"What have you to offer in exchange? This piece of mine is no small trifle. Men far greater and higher than you have sought my life for it. Thinking it something to simply be won through condition would be foolish. I had held you to a higher ideal than that; you disappoint me."

"I offer all I have."

"It is not enough; your worth pales in comparison to what rests softly on my skin. Else, why would you seek it if not for its station in a hierarchy above you? Not even I, old and wise as I may be, am worth a fraction of its value; in my converse with you on this subject, I prove my insolence."

"Then give your life, if that should be found more reasonable value. I shall pluck it off your dead fingers then, and it will be all the same to you."

"Your reason is fair. I accept your terms."

"Shall I meet your offer and pledge my life, or do you find it unworthy in equivalence to yours? I can offer the first five of my sons, my wife, and all of my estates alongside it if that pleases you."

"There is no need to render yourself to dramatics. We sit here as men of a higher mind, do not disservice yourself so. It is pitiful to watch. If I am to win, I should wish for two of your daughters' hands. My own kin are without suitors; yours should be of good enough quality."

"You insult me. Whatever may be your game, you misplay it horribly. I have nothing to lose. Let us begin, you fool; I hope for your sake that you win; else your family may feel shame for generations to come, knowing their father to be an idiot and a con."

And in such, the two men began. Upon the table was a set of tokens, a game of chess. Both were acclaimed in the game; they had settled many things with this method. Equal in record, the two of them knew each other's plays; they, upon the slightest error, were capable of finding swift success. Packed away in both of their waters were poisons, planted by each other, and further nestled away in each other's false teeth were antidotes. It was a game within a game, one in which blades had been set about everywhere, waiting for a slip, for the slight prick that would end the matter. Neither of the men expected to live; victory, like their status, implied much more than the terms they had set. The younger, he who desired the ring, sought to defile his elder's name, and in such, asked for his life. In a more

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political maneuver, for he was more experienced in the diplomacy of the matter, the elder asked for the most negligible price he could present without being assailed, which would therefore end the game before it began. There was still a strong chance that, upon seeing himself beat, the younger yellow would make an attempt to claim his life; this was an inescapable reality of the game they played. Still, it was unsportsmanlike to precede without the account of these perilous elements, and in such, beyond the small parlor tricks he had prepared, he was all but unprotected. This was matched by the younger man, who understood the implications of arriving with preconceived violence on his tail.

In their world, everyone had eyes; all could see. A remarkable monument to the modernity that dictated life, they, of the highest order, were being watched by many untold accounts. The slightest word, coined or poised incorrectly, had the possibility of washing away the lives of millions; these two men, not alone in their station, were the spectators' gods. Occupying flesh of human descent, they presented no such fallacy to their people; they assured the subservient of their equality, of their similarities with them. Still, these attempts, done for the sake of establishing the proper notions of humbleness, were largely ignored.

The game began, a piece was moved, and then matched. Upon the spotted chessboard, they moved about their pieces, and after half a day had passed, they drew and reset the board. Like this, they continued for days. Drawing time and time again, the people's eyes never wavered. This was the event of the century, of the age; from the outcome of the two men's clash, all would be changed. Silence fell between the two like a blanket, warming their limbs. Again and again, they played, drawing every time. The days turned to weeks, the two composite figures, never breaking to eat or otherwise attend to their bodies. Synthetic beings, they stood above the average human, hiding behind fabricated skin; they had lived for indefinable lengths, and yet they were still human, playing a human game. This reality gave them a sense of sadness, for they could never escape it, and in such, where words were absent, tears would at time form. Flowing more freely from the elder than the younger, they gave little mind to them, so entirely focused on the board that they were unable to feel anything but the hum of their opponent's heart, the clack of the wooden pieces being placed upon the board.

Forty days they spent sitting there, drawing. Forty days. Upon seeing the elder's defeat, the people declared this to be a holy sign and spent, or rather, those who had been aligned and benefitted by the victor, forty days in turn celebrating. In honor of his opponent, and according to his deal, the younger man took what he had wished from his cold hands before turning over the body. Two years later, the late man's first son visited his estate, carrying upon his back a barrel. The boy's hands were bleeding; he had not yet ascended to the syndicate's head and still held his mortal flesh. Without any assistance, as was tradition, he had carried the gift to the victor's residence by foot, unassisted. Over the last two years, he had seen the destitution of the land, and for it, his eyes were very heavy. His skin, being subject to the hellscape of the modern climate, had wrinkled and dried out; where the rope had been tied to his chest, there were traces of blood drawing from his cracked skin.

Upon his reception, he collapsed, nearly dead. Impressed by his family's dedication, the younger man, the victor, took him in and attended to his wounds. Later that day, as the beaten boy was resting, he gathered his family in their commons and removed the top of the barrel. Peering into it, his first son gave a loud jeer. He proceeded for an hour to speak in testimony to his father's greatness, to his wit, to his unwavering tactical ability that had allowed them to ascend to the highest of all families. All was done well, with a trained and rehearsed elegance, so the party was merry. After being received with

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thundering applause, his children numbered to such a degree that he had set up a dozen long tables for them, he took his finest chalice and dipped it into the barrel. Pulling it from it, his hand soaked in a rustic red, his children broke out in applause once more.

“Look, my wonderful children, upon what it means to be my kin! Look upon my hand, which has been casted in the blood of our greatest competition, and see what lays upon my finger. Such are the spoils of war; such is the nature of life. Let us all drink tonight and learn much from he who has lost. Let us see what success appears to be, and in turn, live well and fully, filling the land about us with our victorious cheers!”

Upon finishing, in the commotion of overwhelming pathos, the sobbing of his daughters, and the tremendous and curdling shouts of his sons, he dropped the ring he had sought from the elder man into the barrel. Its removal brought a great wave of exhaustion upon him, and in such, he fell back to his throne. Sitting there, he watched as his first son called forth his brethren and filled their chalices. Within minutes, every cup had been filled, and his hundreds of children look to him for permission to drink.

“Let...” he began, his chest heavy, his eyes swelling. “Let you be remembered forever; let us establish our place among the greats of history,” he continued, stopping to cough. “Let us celebrate. Drink, my beautiful children.”

And in accordance to his words, they drank. Without breaking to breath, under the influence of the fevered atmosphere, they all downed their cups with ease. Trickleing down the sides of their mouths, the liquid permeated throughout their minds, flowing into their hearts. Without consideration, without care, it pervaded their closest and most secretive memories; it dined upon them with ease. Guilt, honor, pride, hatred, all was consumed by the liquid; nothing was left untouched. Feeling the madness of their drink, many of his children began to tear at themselves, ripping apart their clothes, scratching madly at their skins. Many of the men, who having thought themselves to be receiving fine stake that night, disemboweled themselves with their carving knives, their sisters following suit with a terrifying eagerness. Others were silent, their eyes sullen and empty; they watched as the external world fell apart; feeling that their minds were being unraveled, they figured there was little to do about it, and in this realization, waited patiently for their death. In the corner of the room, another group congregated, they who had, upon being made aware of their departure, feeling their minds consumed by some intangible amoeba, turned to lust in the face of fear and began ravishing one another in the corner, draining their loins and wrists with a terrible incestual euphoric purpose. Some took to the walls, painting reverently what they felt, using their fallen brothers’ and sisters’ blood as acrylics, opening their vessels in the severity of their need for more substance. It continued on like this for hours, the first of the lot, having sought their own end, perishing quickly. The artists lived a little longer, in finding the walls covered, unable to present their imagery any further, they had turned to the fallen’s bodies, and then, once those had been rendered unfit, their own. One by one, the mutes were used up by the lusting and the conniving. They of the primitive pursuit eventually met their own ends, having expended all their essence. They too perished; having completed the exertion of their madness, they could retire and pass in tranquility.

In the end, only the younger man, he had won over the elder, the father of the slaughtered, remained. His body was ailed, but his mind was still his own. The transaction had been completed; he, now composed only of machinery, his own loins long since withered and discarded, was the last of his kind. Limping, for his body had yet to fully recover from the ailment he had witnessed, he made his way

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over the barrel. Treading through the thick pool of blood that had spilled out all over the floors, stepping over his deceased children, he lifted the barrel, bring it back to his throne. It was as clean as it had been when he had received it; it alone had escaped the madness of the massacre before him. Within the emptied container was the ring, completely dry, unstained by the tankard of blood he had dropped it in. Reaching into the barrel, he removed it and held it up to the synthetic candle beside his throne.

When he had received it from the elder man's body, it had been rendered transparent, the persuasive and addictive red color that had drawn him in, that which exhibited the last objective of those who pursued treasure; the final crowing jewel of they who sought servitude from life, they who looked to conquer nature as a whole, had lost its hue. Many nights, in preparation for his opponent's son's arrival, the younger man had looked into it, questioning its empty nature, hating the lack of appreciation he had felt within his chest. Researching desperately for answers, he had tried all remedies. He failed time and time again, unable to change it back, to encapsulate that which had bewitched him. That was until, months before the son's arrival, he received a message from the late elder, who had prerecorded a message for whoever possessed it after him, detailing what he was to do to restore it. At first, he had refused them, scoffing at their absurdity, thinking the elder man very cruel and very crude for trying such a thing. But as the days rolled by, and he found less and less on methods to repair it, as he fell into the deep confines of the occult, blooding his hands in the attempt, he grew more and more desperate. Eventually, days before the boy arrived, he made his mind up and began to prepare. From the corners of the conquered earth, he called in his children, every last one of them. Graciously, most accepted his order, and those who had rejected it were captured and drugged, forced to attend. All that had been planned had been enacted; the only resounding conclusion to the matter was the prevalent need, the need for the ring's retrieval, the need for its restoration.

Looking down upon it, the younger man smiled, and his heart was set at ease. There, returned to the ring's gem, was the very same murky crimson he had seen two years before. It, appeased by the sacrifice offered, had returned to him in its entirety; the catalyst was filled; his every desire had been achieved. Sighing heavily, the younger man collapsed back on his throne, his boots still soaked with his children's blood.

Hours later, the elder man's son would awake, and going down to greet his hosts, found the scene. He was very distraught; in its reception, he vomited and heaved for some time before reentering the hall once more. Making his way to the throne, taking in the king, who was sleeping, the only living entity in the room, except, of course, the rats that had begun making merry, he saw upon his hand the crimson jewel. Stumbling away, he rushed out of the house, running away from the horror he had come across. Later that night, as he lay down at a local inn, he found himself thinking of the ring, and, deep within his chest, a desire was planted.