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## Death Chess

Light from the lamposts streaked the dark cobblestone streets. I hung my head as I passed by the empty storefronts that made a labyrinth of the city. None were open, but I was still scared someone would see me...*us*.

I padded across the stone in my Converse, black leaves that littered the ground like dead raven carcasses crunching under the soles. I winced with every step. It was a mistake to come out here.

I looked to my side to see her walking beside me. Her brown, glistening ringlets bounced with each step as she limped down the street. As we passed under the streetlamps, I could see a scar on her right cheek, shrouded by her curtain of springy hair.

Despite the fact that what we were about to do was technically illegal, she took no measures to hide her face. She forged ahead, her amber eyes squinting with a mixture of rage and determination.

I fidgeted with the yellowing bandages around my index finger, revealing a sliver of alabaster cartilage underneath. I cleared my throat, "So...Talla, are you*sure* we're doing the right thing?"

The girl (who I knew as Talla) stared undauntedly ahead, her shoes clumping heavily on the stone-paved street. "What exactly is the *wrong* thing?"

I swallowed and unwound the bandages around my finger in a coiling, yellow ribbon. Nothing but white bone gleamed in the light of the streetlamps. It hung limply out of my hand. I squeezed the muscles in my palm together, making it flex up a bit—but as soon as it stretched out, it dropped back down again, making a lightning bolt of pain run from my hand to my shoulder.

I looked her up-and-down. Peeking out of her light, athletic jacket, two mechanical fingers glinted under the light of the lamp posts as she swung her arms; and the scar running through her face looked even more jagged in the mixture of flitting light and shadow. My eyes fell to her feet. The sock on her right ankle had slipped down just enough to where I could see a small glint of metal. I assumed with a pang that the clumping sounds when she walked probably weren't just from her shoes.

"Look," Talla said, hitching her bag up her shoulder, "If you're suddenly starting to think that death chess is *immoral*, or *unethical*, or *scary* — no one is forcing you to come. Though, it's*just* a game of chess with higher stakes. I don't understand why you're freaking out. The Zavian I know wouldn't think twice about risking his life if it meant a little exhilaration." She stopped and tossed her ringlets over her shoulder. "To *him*, it would be a small price to pay."

For a moment, I just stood there, swallowing as I rewrapped my skinless finger. Then Talla turned on her heels and kept walking. Something clattered in her bag, reflecting how the inside of my stomach felt.

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Talla stopped in front of a squat, brick building with an old, porcelain neon sign that read *Markus' Auto Repair* across the front.

My stomach churned at the familiar sight. I grabbed the bag part of my satchel, feeling the bulge in the leather. Inside, I could hear pieces of clay clatter together when I scrunched my fingers.

"Talla...I'm not sure about this."

Talla faced me with a look of indifference. "Zavian, you've come this far. If you want to go back home, leave yourself. But I'm *telling you* there's nothing to worry about. We're playing a match against each other, remember? This is just *practice!*"

But that didn't ease my nerves. The match being just between us didn't lower the stakes. Even if this was "just practice", it was practice to avoid a more dangerous outcome: fatality.

Talla faced the building. She pressed her palm to an enormous, metal garage door on the front. The metal around her hand started to glow intense-white, then the garage door lifted, folding into the ceiling and revealing the most unsightly thing I have ever seen.

Inside the garage was another storefront, like a store wedged into a store. This one's walls were covered in several layers of thick paint. Muddled fingerprints left streaks and indentions in the paint, revealing layers of bright orange, blue, and yellow like sedimentary rock. The newest layer was a gloppy lavender, which was still dripping like it was freshly-painted. The door was covered in occultic trinkets: a bundle of voodoo dolls tied to the doorknob, a pentacle wreath made of birch twigs, clay masks that seemed to stare into my soul.

Beside the door, a window display stretched across the building. Neon chess pieces flickered behind the glass along with a much bigger, blinking sign that read *Aeacus' Tournament Arena*.

My flesh felt like it was burning in the neon.

My mouth went dry.

Before I could blind myself staring at chess pieces in pure horror, Talla pulled me away. "Come on!" She said as she pushed the door full of paganistic accessories open a little too enthusiastically.

We entered a cave.

Moisture clung to the walls, and the distance from the floor to the ceiling couldn't have been more than six feet. Blaring music poured from the speakers, shaking the entire cave and jostling mismatched furniture that was placed along the cavern floor. But the most startling part was the dozens of burly, chiseled-looking patrons scattered across the room, sitting in front of small, checkered tables and moving clay chess pieces with their thick fingers.

I lingered for a few minutes before Talla pulled me along, muttering, "Come on." She plopped us down in a pair of velvet chairs facing each other across a small, checkered table about the size of a laptop. She lifted her messenger bag, "Bring yours?" She arched her eyebrow, fixing me with an unsettling stare.

Before I could answer, she turned her satchel upside down and dumped the contents onto the table. Clay chess pieces covered in a plethora of jewels, beads, and feathers clattered against the checkered surface.

My stomach dropped. I had to look away. Looking at the homemade chess pieces was like looking at an autopsied corpse.

As I turned my head, I caught sight of a chalkboard hanging from the cave ceiling. The vibrating music made the chains it was hanging from shake. I squinted to read the board as it trembled.

Six chess pieces were drawn in scribbled, neon-colored chalk, like illustrations on a café sign: the king, the queen, the bishop, the knight, the rook, the pawn. Beside each illustration was an equal sign followed by the word *points*.

According to the sign, pawns were worth five points, knights ten, bishops fifteen, rooks twenty, and kings and queens were both worth one-hundred points.

Below the illustrations and point system was a paragraph written in scrawled cursive, bordered in a spiraled box like a quadrilateral cloud: *All death chess matches held within this vicinity will be played justly and to the will of the game. All players should be aware that death chess takes a piece (or pieces) of a player with each game. This includes (but is not limited to): blood, organs, and the ultimate price—their soul. This sacrifice is controlled by no other force other than the game's own power.*

*\*Proceed with caution\**

*NOTE: Death chess does NOT adhere to tradition. Checkmate is irrelevant. To win the match, you must collect 500 points. Add the value of the piece you attacked along with the value of the piece you used to your score.*

*As you play, expect dismemberment.*

I looked away. The perimeters were ingrained in my memory.

On the adjacent wall, something glinted behind one of the many bars. As an employee stepped aside, I got a glimpse of a mirror along the wall gilded in chipping, silver paint. I had to squint, but in one of the jagged slivers of unpainted surface, I saw the red, throbbing stump on the side of my head.

I brushed my fingers over the tender, craggy skin. Despite the severed ear, I still heard Talla (unfortunately) clearly when she asked, "Brushing up on the rules, huh? Ready to play?"

I turned around and my stomach dropped. Talla had lined all of the homemade chess pieces across the board.

I was right in the middle of cringing and just barely brushing my fingers over one of the pieces when a pair of liver-spotted hands slammed on the checkered table. Talla and I both flinched. "Like Hell he is!"

I looked up to see the owner of the voice and hands and was greeted by a forty-something-odd man with faded tattoos on his arms and neck, a bulldog-jaw, and a bandana wrapped around his balding head. His teeth were bared, his nostrils turning white as he flared them in-and-out.

Talla fixed him with a tranquilizing stare. "And just *who* are you?"

The man sneered, flashing gold teeth behind cracked lips. "*Who* does it *look* like I am?" The man said, gesturing up-and-down his body. "I'm Markus. Owner of the cover-up for this place." He waved his hands over the cave/pub like he owned *the entire* place. He leaned across the table until he was almost nose-to-nose with Talla. "I've seen you

two here before. You can't just form a *camaraderie* for death chess! It's supposed to be *gamble!*" He snarled, flinging spit in Talla's unflinching face, "Pick a new partner *now*, or I report you to the authorities." My stomach became a swirling abyss that my heart dropped into. I clenched the empty messenger bag in my lap tightly, my forehead beading with sweat.

Talla's expression melded into outrage. "You can't do that! *Why* would you do that?"

"You're infringing on *my* happiness. *I* have nothing to fear as long as the authorities don't see me playing. Do *you* see *me* wearing a name tag?" Markus gestured to his bare mechanic shirt. His shriveled hands clenching the edge of the small chess table. He swiveled towards me, making sure the threat was received by both parties. I shriveled, sweating cold bullets under his gaze. "You have five seconds to decide. One...two..."

I grimaced.

"He challenges you."

Markus froze mid-count. He looked over his shoulder. "*What?*"

I echoed Markus' exclamation when I peered over his shoulder to see Talla with her arms crossed, indifference etched into her face. My heart pounded.

Talla shrugged. "You said he needed a new partner. Zavian chooses you." She said, gesturing towards me, confirming that I was indeed the Zavian she was referring to.

My blood went cold. I looked down, clenching my fists, the world swirling around me and my ears ringing. Through the high-pitched screeching, I could hear Markus respond, "Hmmm," I looked up, heart pounding against my sternum, to see him stroking his cracked lips with his thumb, "A worthy match. I've seen him play. Alright...I'll take him on."

The world started revolving faster. My pulse echoed in my throat, constricted my airway. I started hyperventilating, my breath coming out in short, rigid pants. I flinched when a pair of fingers gently touched my back. I looked up, shaking, to see Talla standing over me, the earth no longer spinning. Her brow was creased with concern.

"Zavian..."

My mouth felt like sandpaper as I whispered back hoarsely, "Why would you do this?"

Talla crouched down, cuffing my hand in hers like it was an injured dove. I could feel her two cold, metal fingers pressing against my thumb. "Zavian," She said, fixing me with her dense, amber eyes, "You've been gone for so long...I figured this would give you the confidence boost you need."

In my mind I was screaming '*A near-death experience is not a confidence-boost!*'

Markus cleared his throat and cracked his knuckles, steering my attention back to the chessboard. He was sitting in the velvet-upholstered chair across from me, hands clasped behind his head. "Are you ready to play, boy? Or should I go ahead and dial the authorities?"

I swallowed, then turned around in my seat, nervously clearing my throat. Talla retracted her prosthetic fingers and took a few steps back, her head bowed in what seemed like solitude. Sweat beaded the back of my neck as I stared across the chessboard at Markus. He cracked his flora-tattooed knuckles, then waved a hand over the board. "You may have the first move."

Every muscle in my body clenched. A chill ran down my spine like cold electricity. I opened my mouth and stammered for a second before closing it and dancing my fingers over the line of glistening, black chess pieces made from clumps of clay and covered in feathers and rhinestones and shards of seashells like they had been crafted by a voodoo practitioner.

My stomach churned as my hand trembled. My heart raced, the blaring music and clattering glasses muffled and distorted, punctuated by the agonized screams of people sitting at the small chess board tables around us that either I hadn't noticed before or had subconsciously blocked out. Out of my bleary peripheral, I could see bloody fingers falling across the floor and people writhing in pain, clutching various body parts. The neon lights glowing in the dark cavern started spinning, closing in on me. I couldn't breathe. I panted, closing my eyes, then blindly lunged my hand at the chessboard.

My fingers scraped across something round and craggy. I opened my eyes, squinting, to see the top of a pawn covered in what looked like small, shattered vermin skulls pinched between my fingers. I tensed, then hesitantly moved the piece two spaces forward, directly in front of my king.

A grin crinkled across Markus' face. "*Pernicious.*"

Markus countered with a tactful move of his knight. I gulped. We went back-and-forth, mentally reciting the same rules that had become ingrained in my head over and over again. *Open with a pawn. Move bishops and knights to the center. "Castle early."* My brain became so congested with the classic tips that it wasn't until Markus had two of my knights, one of my rooks, a bishop, my king, and had my queen cornered that I realized—I was playing traditionally...in a potentially-fatal game.

"One hundred-fifty-five," Markus calculated, then glanced up at me, smirking, "Your move."

I dug my fingernails into the edges of the checkered table, sweat glistening on the backs of my hands. My breathing became shallow like fissures were splitting through my chest, like an earthquake was occurring in my body. I stared at my cornered queen. Pinned by a white pawn, surrounded by my own foolishly-placed pieces. I closed my eyes, the room beginning to spin unbearably due to my low oxygen intake and accelerating heart rate.

It was at that moment that a reassuring hand fell on my shoulder. I glanced up, panting, but the fear slowly dissipating from my body as I stared up into Talla's eyes. The corner of her lip was turned up in a tentative smirk, one that reminded me of the hundreds of matches I had played against her without dying. *Death could happen, but it is not guaranteed* I could hear her saying—not just in regards to chess.

I redirect my attention to the chessboard. There is only one move I can make in order to save my queen, one of very little value. *But it will be fine* I glide my thumb across my bandaged, skeletal index finger. I covered out of death chess for months...because I was scared...of the law, of losing more than I could afford. But so far, death chess had only taken one ear and a finger from me, and the worst "authority" that I had to face was Markus, a mechanic who allowed the illegal game to be played within his auto shop, probably in exchange for alcohol, weed, or both. And as I felt the sweat accumulating on my palms, I realized Talla was right—this *was* exhilarating. I couldn't tell if I enjoyed gambling life-and-limb again, but I struggled to hate it. I was no longer afraid.

I took a deep breath, Talla's hand clutching my shoulder, and pinched my queen, tiny skulls crunching under my fingers. With a wince, I moved it forward and grabbed Markus' ivory pawn. As soon as my fingers curled around it, a bolt of electricity drove through every vein in my hand, coursing through my entire nervous system like a network of fire.

I fell back in my chair, crashing to the hard cave floor, dropping both chess pieces like hot pokers. I heard Talla scream "Zavian!" Footsteps raced across the floor with echoes of metal clunks. Two pieces of cold metal pressed against the base of my skull. Someone shook my shoulders. Voices swam above me like ripples in the ocean. The hand on the nape of my neck slid to my limp, convulsing hand. What she once held tenderly like a dove, Talla now clutched with an iron grip.

The pain was still relentless. I felt like an observer in my own body as my chest began to jolt like something was being forcefully ripped out of it. I grit my teeth in agony. *My soul* I realized.

I opened my eyes with a plethora of searing pain. Blurs and haze overlapped and swirled in my vision. "What did you *do to him?*" Talla's warped voice wailed.

Electricity continued to pulse through my body. Above me, I could hear Markus' distorted response, "A game with death is *still* a game with death, regardless of how slowly it's played."

Something smooth like silk was extracted painfully from my ribcage. White vapor swirled above me, and I gasped, like a drowning victim succumbing to water and fate.

*I lost my gamble*, I thought.

And I closed my eyes. Talla screamed.