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A Game of Vlet

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IN OURDH, near the sea, on a summer's night so hot and still that the marble blocks of the Governor's mansion sweated as if the earth itself were respiring through the stone—which is exactly what certain wise men maintain to be the case—the Governor's palace guard caught an assassin trying to enter the Governor's palace through a secret passage too many unfortunates have thought they alone knew. This one, his arm caught and twisted by the Captain, beads of sweat starting out on his pale, black-bearded face, was a thin young man in aristocratic robes, followed by the oddest company one could possibly meet—even in Ourdh—a cook, a servant girl, a couple of waterfront beggars, a battered hulk of a man who looked like a professional bodyguard fallen on evil days, and five peasants. These persons remained timidly silent while the Captain tightened his grip on the young man's arm; the young man made an inarticulate sound between his teeth but did not cry out; the Captain shook him, causing him to fall to his knees; then the Captain said, "Who are you, scum!" and the young man answered, "I am Rav." His followers all nodded in concert, like mechanical mice.

"He is," said one of the guards, "he's a magician. I seen him at the banquet a year ago," and the Captain let go, allowing the young man to get to his feet. Perhaps they were a little afraid of magicians, or perhaps they felt a rudimentary shame at harming someone known to the Governor—though the magician had been out of favor for the last eleven zodiacal signs of the year—but this seems unlikely. Humanity, of course, they did not have. The Captain motioned his men back and stepped back himself, silent in the main hall of the Governor's villa, waiting to hear what the young nobleman had to say. What he said was most surprising. He said (with difficulty):

"I am a champion player of Vlet."

It was then that the Lady appeared. She appeared quite silently, unseen by anybody, between two of the Governor's imported marble pillars, which were tapered toward the base and set in wreaths of carved and tinted anemones and lilies. She

stood a little behind one of the nearby torches, which had been set into a bracket decorated with a group of stylized young women known to aristocratic Ourdh as The Female Virtues: Modesty, Chastity, Fecundity and Tolerance, a common motif in art, and from this vantage point she watched the scene before her. She heard Rav declare his intention of having come only to play a game of Vlet with the Governor, which was not believed, to say the least; she saw the servant girl blurt out a flurry of deaf-and-dumb signs; she heard the guards laugh until they cried, hush each other for fear of waking the Governor, laugh themselves sick again, and finally decide to begin by flaying the peasants to relieve the tedium of the night watch.

It was then that she stepped forward.

“You woke up Sweetie,” she said.

That she was not a Lady in truth and in verity might have been seen from certain small signs in a better light—the heaviness of her sandals, for instance, or the less-than-perfect fit of her elaborate, jeweled coiffure, or the streaking and blurring of the gold paint on her face (as if she had applied cosmetics in haste or desperation)—but she wore the semitransparent, elaborately gold-embroidered black robe Ourdh calls “the gown of the night” (which is to be sharply distinguished from “the gown of the evening”), and as she came forward, this fell open, revealing that she wore nothing at all underneath. Her sandals were not noticed. She closed the robe again. The Captain, who had hesitated between anticipations of a bribe and a dressing down from the Governor, hesitated no longer. He put out his hand for money. Several guards might have wondered why the Governor had chosen such an ordinary-looking young woman, but just at that moment—as she came into the light, which was (after all) pretty bad—the Lady yawned daintily like a cat, stretched from top to bottom, smiled a little to herself and gave each of the five guards in turn a glance of such deep understanding, such utter promise, and such extraordinary good humor, that one actually blushed. Skill pays for all.

“Poor Sweetie,” she said.

“Madam—” began the Captain, a little unnerved.

“I said to Sweetie,” went on the Lady, unperturbed, “that his little villa was just the quietest place in the city and so cutey darling that I could stay here forever. And then *you* came in.”

“Madam—” said the Captain.

“Sweetie doesn’t like noise,” said the Lady, and she sat down on the Governor’s gilded audience bench, crossing her knees so that her robe fell away, leaving one leg bare to the thigh. She began to swing this bare leg in and out of the shadows so confusingly that none could have sworn later whether it were beautiful or merely passable; moreover, something sparkled regularly at her knee with such hypnotic precision that a junior guard’s head began to bob a little, like a pendulum, and he had to be elbowed in the ribs by a comrade. She gave the man a sharp, somehow disappointed look. Then she appeared to notice Rav.

“Who’s that?” she said carelessly.

“An assassin,” said the Captain.

“No, no,” said the Lady, drawling impatiently, “the cute one, the one with the little beard. Who’s *he*?”

“I said—” began the Captain with asperity.

“Rav, Madam,” interrupted the young man, holding his sore arm carefully and wincing a little (for he had bowed to her automatically), “an unhappy wretch formerly patronized by the Governor, his ‘magician,’ as he was pleased to call me, but no Mage, Madam, no Grandmaster, only a player with trifles, a composer of little tricks; however, I have found out something, if only that, and I came here tonight to offer it to His Excellency. I am, my Lady, as you may be yourself, an addict of that wonderful game called Vlet, and I came here tonight to offer to the Governor the most extraordinary board and pieces for the game that have ever been made. That is all; but these gentlemen misinterpreted me and declare that I have come to assassinate His Excellency, the which” (he took a shuddering breath) “is the farthest from my thoughts. I abhor the shedding of blood, as any of my intimates can tell you. I came only to play a game of Vlet.”

“Ooooooh!” said the Lady. “Vlet! I adore Vlet!”

“I have been away,” continued Rav, “for nearly a year, making this most uncommon board and pieces, as I know the Governor’s passion for the game. This is no ordinary set, Madam, but a virgin board and virgin pieces which no human hands have ever touched. You may have heard—as all of us have, my Lady—of the virgin speculum or mirror made by certain

powerful Mages, and which can be used once—but only once—to look anywhere in the world. Such a mirror must be made of previously unworked ore, fitted in the dark so that no ray of light ever falls upon it, polished in the dark by blind polishers so that no human sight ever contaminates it, and under these conditions, and these conditions only, can the first person who looks into the mirror look anywhere and see anything he wishes. A Vlet board and pieces, similarly made from unworked stone, and without the touch of human hands, is similarly magical, and the first game played on such a board, with such pieces, can control anything in the world, just as the user of the virgin speculum can look anywhere in the world. This gentleman with me” (he indicated the ex-bodyguard) “is a virtuoso contortionist, taught the art under the urgings of the lash. He has performed all the carvings of the pieces with his feet so that we may truly say no human hands have touched them. That gentleman over there” (he motioned toward the cook) “lost a hand in an accident in the Governor’s kitchens, and these” (he waved at the peasants) “have had their right hands removed for evading the taxes. The beggars have been similarly deformed by their parents for the practice of their abominable and degrading trade, and the young lady is totally deaf from repeated boxings on the ears given her by her mistress. It is she who crushed the ore for us so that no human ears might hear the sounds of the working. This Vlet board has never been touched by human hands and neither have the pieces. They are entirely virgin. You may notice, as I take them from my sleeve, that they are wrapped in oiled silk, to prevent my touch from contaminating them. I wished only to present this board and pieces to the Governor, in the hope that the gift might restore me to his favor. I have been out of it, as you know. I am an indifferent player of Vlet but a powerful and sound student, and I have worked out a classical game in the last year in which the Governor could—without the least risk to himself—defeat all his enemies and become emperor of the world. He will play (as one player must) in his own person; I declare that I am his enemies *in toto*, and then we play the game, in which, of course, he defeats me. It is that simple.”

“Assassin!” growled the Captain of the Guard. “Liar!” But the Lady, who had been gliding slowly towards the magician

as he talked, with a perfectly practical and unnoticeable magic of her own, here slipped the board and pieces right out of his hands and said, with a toss of her head:

“You will play against *me*.”

The young man turned pale.

“Oh, I know you, I know you,” said the Lady, slowly unwrapping the oiled silk from the set of Vlet. “You’re the one who kept pestering poor Sweetie about justice and taxes and cutting off people’s heads and all sorts of things that were none of your business. Don’t interrupt. You’re a liar, and you undoubtedly came here to kill Sweetie, but you’re terribly inept and very cute, and so” (here she caught her breath and smiled at him) “sit down and play with me.” And she touched the first piece.

Now it is often said that in Vlet experienced players lose sight of everything but the game itself, and so passionate is their absorption in this intellectual haze that they forget to eat or drink, and sometimes even to breathe in the intensity of their concentration (this is why Grandmasters are always provided with chamber pots during an especially arduous game), but never before had such a thing actually happened to the Lady. As she touched the first piece—it was a black one—all the sounds in the hall died away, and everyone there, the guards, the pitiful band this misguided magician had brought with him and the great hall itself, the pillars, the fitted blocks of the floor, the frescoes, the torches, everything faded and dissolved into mist. Only she herself existed, she and the board of Vlet, the pieces of Vlet, which stood before her in unnatural distinctness, as if she were looking down from a mountain at the camps of two opposing armies. One army was red and one was black, and on the other side of the great, smoky plain sat the magician, himself the size of a mountain or a god, his lean, pale face working and his black beard standing out like ink. He held in one hand a piece of Red. He looked over the board as if he looked into an abyss, and he smiled pitifully at her, not with fear, but with some intense, fearful hope that was very close to it.

“You are playing for your life,” she said, “for I declare myself to be the Government of Ourdh.”

“I play,” said he, “for the Revolution. As I planned.”

And he moved his first piece.

Outside, in the night, five hundred farmers moved against the city gates.

She moved all her Common Persons at once, which was a popular way to open the game. They move one square at a time.

So did he.

In back of her Common Persons she put her Strongbox, which is a very strong offensive piece but weak on the defense; she moved her Archpriest—the sliding piece—in front of her Governor, who is the ultimate object of the game, and brought her Elephant to the side, keeping it in reserve. She went to move a set of Common Persons and discovered with a shock that she seemed to have no Common Persons at all and her opponent nothing else; then she saw that all her black Common Persons had fled to the other side of the board and that they had all turned red. In those days it was possible—depending on the direction from which your piece came—either to take an enemy’s piece out of the game—“kill it,” they said—or convert it to your own use. One signaled this by standing the piece on its head. The Lady had occasionally lost a game to her own converted Vlet pieces, but never in her life before had she seen ones that literally changed color, or ones that slipped away by themselves when you were not looking, or pieces that made noise, for something across the board was making the oddest noise she had ever heard, a shrill, keening sound, a sort of tinny whistling like insects buzzing or all the little Common Persons singing together. Then the Lady gasped and gripped the edge of the Vlet board until her knuckles turned white, for that was exactly what was happening; across the board her enemy’s little red pieces of Vlet, Common Persons all, were moving their miniature knees up and down and singing heartily, and what they were singing was:

The pee-pul!
The pee-pul!

“An ancient verse,” said Rav, mountainous across the board. “Make your move,” and she saw her own hand, huge as a

giant's, move down into that valley, where transparent buildings and streets seemed to spring up all over the board. She moved her Strongbox closer to the Governor, playing for time.

Lights on late in the Councilors' House; much talk; someone has gone for the Assassins . . .

He moved another set of Common Persons.

A baker looked out at his house door in Bread Street. In the Street of Conspicuous Display torches flicker and are gone around the buildings. "Is it tonight?" "Tonight!" Someone is scared; someone wants to go home; "Look here, my wife—"

Her Tax-Collector was caught and

stabbed in the back in an alley while the rising simmer of the city, crowds spilling, not quite so aimlessly, into the main boulevards

Rav horrified

"We've got to play a clean game! Out in the open! No—"

While she moved the Archpriest

Governor's barricades going up around the Treasury, men called out, they say the priests are behind

And in horror watched him shake his fist at her and stand sullenly grimacing in the square where she had put him; then, before she could stop him, he had hopped two more squares, knocked flat a couple of commoners whose blood and intestines flowed tinily out on to the board, jeered at her, hopped two more and killed a third man before she could get her fingers on him.

"He killed a man! With his own hands!"

"Who?"

"The Archpriest!"

"Get him!"

So she picked up the squirming, congested Archpriest, younger son of a younger son, stupid, spiteful, ambitious (she knew him personally) and thrust him across the board, deep into enemy territory.

Trying to flee the city by water, looks up from under a bale of hides, miserably stinking—

Where the Commons could pothook him to their hearts' content

Sees those faces, bearded and unwashed, a flash of pride among the awful fear, cowers—

“We don’t do things that way,” said Rav, his voice rolling godlike across the valley, across the towers and terraces, across the parties held on whitewashed roofs where ladies ate cherries and pelted gentlemen with flowers, where aristocratic persons played at darts, embroidered, smoked hemp and behaved as nobles should. One couple was even playing—so tiny as to be almost invisible—a miniature game of Vlet.

“We play a clean game,” said Rav.

Which is so difficult (she thought) that only a Grandmaster of Grandmasters attempts it more than once a year. Pieces must be converted but not killed.

The crowd on Market Street is turned back by the troops.

Her Elephant, which she immobilized

Men killed, children crushed, a dreadful silence, in which someone screams, while the troops, not knowing why

and set her Nobles to killing one another, which an inept player can actually do in Vlet

stand immobilized, the Captains gone; some secret fear or failure of will breathes through the city, and again the crowds surge forward, but cannot bring themselves to

She threw away piece after piece

not even to touch, perhaps thinking: these are our natural masters? or: where are we going? What are we doing?

Gave him the opportunity for a Fool’s Kill, which he did not take

The Viceroy to the Governor walks untouched through superstitious awe, through the silent crowd; he mounts the steps of the Temple—

Exposed every piece

begins to address the crowd

While Rav smiled pitifully, and far away, out in the city suburbs, in the hovels of peasant freeholds that surrounded the real city, out in the real night she could hear a rumble, a rising voice, thunder; she finds herself surrounding

Arrest that man

the Red Governor, who wasn’t a Governor but a Leader, a little piece with Rav’s features and with the same pitiful, nervous, gallant smile.

“Check” said the Lady, “and Mate.” She did not want to do it. A guard in the room laughed. Out in the city all was

quiet. Then, quite beside herself, the strange Lady in the black *gown of the night*, seeing a Red Assassin with her own features scream furiously from the other side of the board and dart violently across it, took the board in both hands and threw the game high into the air. Around her everything whirled: board, pieces, the magician, who was one moment huge, the next moment tiny, the onlookers, the guards, the very stone blocks of the hall seemed to spin. The torches blazed hugely. The pieces, released from the board, were fighting in midair. Then the Lady fell to her knees, rearranging the game, surrounding the last remnant of Black, snatching the Red Leader out of his trap, muttering desperately to herself as Rav cried, "What are you doing? What are you doing?" and around them the palace shook, the walls fell, the very earth shuddered on its foundations.

"Check," said the Lady, "and Mate." A rock came sailing lazily past them, shattering the glass of the Governor's foreign window, brought at enormous expense over sea and marsh in a chest full of sawdust, the only piece of transparent glass in the city. "Trust a mob to find a window!" said the Lady, laughing. Outside could be heard a huge tramping of feet, the concerted breathing of hundreds, thousands, a mob, a storm, a heaving sea of Common Persons, and all were singing:

"Come on, children of the national unity!

The glorious diurnal period has arrived.

Let us move immediately against tyranny;

The bloody flag is hauled up!"

"My God!" cried Rav, "you don't understand!" as the Lady—with un-Ladylike precision—whipped off her coiffure and slammed it across the face of the nearest guard. Her real hair was a good deal shorter. "Wonderful things—fifteen pounds' weight—" she shouted, and ripping off the robe of night, tripped the next guard, grabbed his sword and put herself back to back with the ex-bodyguard who had another guard's neck between his hands and was slowly and methodically throttling the man to death. The servant girl was beating someone's head against the wall. The Lady wrapped a soldier's cloak around herself and belted it; then she threw the jeweled wig at one of the peasants, who caught it, knocked over the two remaining guards, who were still struggling feebly, not against anyone in

the room but against something in the air, like flies in treacle. None had offered the slightest resistance. She took the magician by the arm, laughing hugely with relief.

“Let me introduce myself,” she said. “I—”

“Look out!” said Rav.

“Come on!” she shouted, and as the mob poured through the Governor’s famous decorated archway, made entirely—piece by piece—of precious stones collected at exorbitant cost from tax defaulters and convicted blackmailers, she cut off the head of an already dead guard and held it high, shouting, “The Pee-pul! The Pee-pul!” and shoved Rav into position beside her. He looked sick but he smiled. The People roared past them. He had, in his hands, the pieces and board of their game of Vlet, and to judge from his expression, they were causing him considerable discomfort. He winced as tiny lances, knives, pothooks, plough blades and swords bristled through his fingers like porcupine quills. They seemed to be jabbing at each other and getting his palms instead.

“Can’t you stop them!” she whispered. The last of the mob was disappearing through the inverted pillars.

“No!” he said. “The game’s not over. You cheated—” and with a yell he dropped the whole thing convulsively, board and all. The pieces hit the floor and rolled in all directions, punching, jabbing, chasing each other, screaming in tiny voices, crawling under the board, buzzing and dying like a horde of wasps. The Lady and the magician dropped to their knees—they were alone in the room by now—and tried to sweep the pieces together, but they continued to fight, and some ran under the dead guards or under the curtains.

“We must—we *must* play the game through,” said Rav in a hoarse voice. “Otherwise anyone—anyone who gets hold of them can—”

He did not finish the sentence.

“Then we’ll play it through, O Rav,” she said. “But this time, dammit, you make the moves *I* tell you to make!”

“I told you,” he began fiercely, “that I abhor bloodshed. That is true. I will not be a party to it, not even for—”

“Listen,” she said, holding up her hand, and there on the floor they crouched while the sounds of riot and looting echoed distantly from all parts of the city. The south windows of the

hall began to glow. The poor quarter was on fire. Someone nearby shouted; something struck the ground; and closer and closer came the heavy sound of surf, a hoarse, confused babble.

He began to gather up the pieces.

A little while later the board was only a board, and the pieces had degenerated into the sixty-four pieces of the popular game of Vlet. They were not, she noticed, particularly artistically carved. She walked out with Rav into the Governor's garden, among the roses, and there—with the sound of the horrors in the city growing ever fainter as the dawn increased—they sat down, she with her head on her knees, he leaning his back against a peach tree.

"I'd better go," she said finally.

"Not back to the Governor," said Rav, shuddering. "Not now!" She giggled.

"Hardly," she said, "after tying him and his mistress up with the sheets and stealing her clothes. I fancy he's rather upset. You surprised me at my work, magician."

"One of *us*!" said the magician, amazed. "You're a—"

"One of them," said she, "because I live off them. I'm a parasite. I didn't *quite* end that last game with a win, as I said I did. It didn't seem fair somehow. Your future state would have no place for me, and I do have myself to look after, after all. Besides, none of your damned peasants can play Vlet, and I enjoy the game." She yawned involuntarily.

"I ended that last game," she said, "with a stalemate.

"Ah, don't worry, my dear," she added, patting the stricken man's cheek and turning up to him her soot-stained, blood-stained, paint-stained little face. "You can always make another virgin Vlet board, and I'll play you another game. I'll even trick the Governor if you can find a place for me on the board. Some day. A clean game. Perhaps. Perhaps it's possible, eh?"

But that's another story.