

Bishops

When the three of us push our way into Rex's apartment, shaking the rain from our bodies like animals do, the first thing Rex does is light the stick of incense on the entryway table. None of the overheads are on yet, so the lighter's flame is all that illuminates his chipped black painted thumbnail holding down the ignition, and the single damp curl pasted to his forehead, and his delicate brows pulled together in careful concentration as he singes the end of the stick. It's a similar expression when he's behind the bar and the printer is spewing dockets, and Rex is pouring the liquors and syrups to the correct measurements made on the inside of the jigger, and then flicking them out into the cocktail tin, stirring or shaking without breaking a sweat. It looks like second nature for him, instinctual, but his brows betray him. You can tell he's thinking hard. He's a perfectionist.

The flame catches, releasing a plume of cinnamon and sandalwood smoke, and the flickering casts shadows on the walls that are perpetually in motion, giving the hallway the effect of a train carriage passing through a tunnel.

'Smells nice.'

He throws a grin in my general direction. 'Right?'

Aimee wrinkles her nose. 'It makes me think of a gypsy shop. You know, where they sell tarot cards and crystals? Whatever that sort of place is called.'

Rex ignores her, slotting the lit stick into the groove on the edge of the plate so it holds itself up on an acute angle, beginning its descending slow burn. The flame diminishes to a smoulder, and we're plunged into the intimacy of darkness again. Other senses perk up in the absence of one, so I can feel the warmth of Rex's body beside mine and hear Aimee's shallow breaths by the door, and that woody scent proliferates.

Rex leads us down the hallway. I feel my way along the wall, out into the living room where he turns on a salt lamp, a floor lamp, and lights three candles on the coffee table, ignoring the overheads again. He's a natural at setting the mood. And there is a mood that has been set, whether intentionally or not, something hazy and potentially erotic in the dim lights and the pleasant smells, and in our aching bodies and wet clothes, and in Rex's fuzzy maroon carpet where he deposits himself, leaning back on his elbows, legs outstretched.

'That's so cool that your apartment has an upstairs. You hardly see that anymore.' Aimee unzips the black Kathmandu puffer and throws it down on the edge of the corduroy couch. Rex had offered it to her as we were leaving work and the sky was crying buckets, so she remained mostly dry on the walk up Glen Huntly. She's wearing a white button down and slacks, the server's

uniform, hands adorned with chunky rings, while Rex and I are in the black shirts and jeans delegated to the bar staff. She looks undecided on whether to sit or stand, legs locked in perfect parallel, weight in her toes, playing with the amber jewel on her middle finger.

I feel similarly caught, standing there, waiting to be told what to do. I end up clearing my throat. ‘Were we... going to...?’ I feel silly even saying it, like I’m trying to influence the flow of the mood Rex is establishing, but he just smiles.

‘Oh, yeah. The chess board is in the cabinet behind you.’

Aimee makes a face. ‘You guys were serious about that?’

‘Deadly. Kevin’s nationally ranked.’

My cheeks warm as I rotate in search of the game. The cabinet doesn’t have any handles, so I try prying it open at the edges, but my nails are blunt — I bite them incessantly — and this makes Rex laugh. ‘Push on it, Kev.’

‘Oh.’ I push on the wood and the panel pops out. I’m relieved they can’t see how red my face has surely become.

‘That’s so funny,’ Aimee says. ‘Is there anything to drink?’

‘Are you seriously asking me that?’

‘Just because you’re the bar manager doesn’t mean you’re an alcoholic.’

‘It does, actually. It’s required for the job.’

‘Right. It’s on your resume.’

‘Under *special skills*. “Incapable of blacking out.”’

‘I black out every time I drink tequila. Or I end up flashing my tits.’

‘Well then, maybe I should make us some margaritas.’

‘Lovely, Rex. Really.’

‘Found it,’ I say, the game in my hands, facing them again, immediately noticing the subtle changes in the short time my back was turned; Rex has played with his fringe so that the single wet curl has re-integrated with the rest of his head, and Aimee has hooked her right foot around her left ankle so her hip and knee flares out from her silhouette, something more feminine in this stance, more intentional.

‘Great.’ Rex pats the carpet beside him like he’s calling to a pet.

‘What about the margaritas?’ Aimee says.

‘I’ll coach you through while we get set up.’

‘Two bartenders here and I’m the one that has to make the cocktails?’

I brush past Aimee and settle onto the spot Rex has indicated, cross-legged, my eyes downcast as I examine the contents of the box, the loose pieces rolling about, pawns, queens,

bishops. Whoever played last didn't bother putting them back in the velvet bag. I unfold the flimsy chequered board and start placing everyone on their corresponding squares. Rex cocks his head in my peripheral vision, directed at Aimee, perhaps accompanied by a smile or a wink, and this causes her to turn on her heel in the direction of the bar cart, or the fridge, or the cabinet with the glassware, I'm not sure, but then there's the heavy suction noise of a fridge door opening which answers that question.

'What are you looking for in there?' Rex sighs.

'The margarita mix.'

And then he groans. 'Don't you realise how offensive that concoction is to me?'

'Don't be such a contrarian.'

'Pretty sure you're using that word wrong.'

'I am not!' The door swings shut with a clang and a shake. 'You want to make it from scratch? Do it yourself. I'm not your call girl to order around.'

'How about a whiskey. Neat. Impossible to fuck up.'

'Does Kevin even drink whiskey?'

I raise my head meekly, taking note that I've been referred to in the third person, which makes me feel like I'm not really here, or like the adults are making decisions on my behalf. 'Sure. I'll drink anything.'

'Good lad.' Rex grasps my shoulder. Squeezes. 'White or black?'

'It should be random,' I say, cotton-mouthed.

'Right, right.' His hand slips off me as he plucks two different coloured pawns from the board and then he hides them behind his back, shuffling. 'Right or left?'

'Left.'

He presents me with a white pawn. I subdue my triumph. And then we begin.

Aimee returns with our drinks once I've set up an elegant Italian opening — the quickest way to test an opponent's skill level, early emphasis on the centre, and Rex responds with ease, mostly mirroring my moves with subtle variations to accommodate playing black, which tells me he knows what's doing.

'Who's winning?' she asks, settling onto the couch, looking down on us from above, like they do in professional tournaments.

'Statistically, this early, Kevin,' Rex says and then drinks.

'Statistically?'

'White has the advantage.'

'Wow. So, chess is racist.'

‘Ha ha.’

‘Thanks,’ I say to Aimee without breaking my gaze from the board. ‘For the whiskey.’

‘Oh, sure. I went to great lengths.’

It’s strange having her right behind me — I can only insinuate what she’s doing through sound; a creaking spring might mean shifting positions on the couch, crossing her legs or widening them, and in the absence of sounds, I imagine she’s drinking and scowling at the chess pieces, frustrated by her inability to make sense of them, or making eyes at Rex, who sits in front of me, and whose gaze darts from the board, to me, then to Aimee, in no particular order.

Twenty minutes into the game, no pieces have been taken. Rex ignores the bait I’ve laid out, and he leaves his hands in his lap until he’s certain of where he’ll go next. No hovering fingers. The centre is a pressure cooker now, despite how relaxed we’ve been behaving — neither willing to admit competitiveness just yet. I’ve established some offensive diagonals and my next play is a schoolyard taunt, for Rex to take my pawn, to kick off the carnage, of which I’ve orchestrated to end up on top. We’re on our second whiskeys now, I can feel the heat of them in my upper chest, flames licking down my throat with each sip.

Aimee has unlaced her work shoes and thrown them into the corner of the room. Her legs are up on the couch, and she’s been scrolling on her phone, short audio bites emitting from the device, Tik Toks I’d assume, never lingering on one for more than five seconds, and after a while, she says, ‘How long is this game?’

‘Depends,’ Rex says.

‘The longest recorded game went on for about twenty hours.’

She sits upright. ‘Twenty hours? We start work in twelve.’

‘This won’t take as long,’ I add.

Rex chuckles. ‘Getting confident, are we?’

‘I just mean—’

‘Could you imagine, twenty hours straight?’ Aimee is bewildered. ‘Like that British girl that let a hundred men run a train on her in a single day. It took about that long.’

‘Huh?’ It’s my turn, hard to concentrate with Aimee’s voice in my ear. Rex has just taken my pawn. The dominos are falling.

‘Oh my god, Kevin, do you even know what that means? You’re so innocent.’

‘I think he knows what *running a train* is,’ Rex says, amused, or perhaps he’s prematurely self-congratulating, unaware of how royally he’s about to be eviscerated.

‘Oh yeah? What is it then?’

I take his pawn with one of my own. Rex pushes forward. So do I.

‘Gangbangs,’ I say flatly.

‘Is that the kind of porn you watch?’

‘What kind of a question is that?’ Rex retorts. He should’ve taken me by now, but he’s too concerned with defending, and he castles, a waste of a move. I secure another pawn.

‘You guys always talk about sex behind the bar. Don’t get all weird about it suddenly just because I’m here.’

‘Fuck,’ he says to the board. Then he glances up at Aimee, tight-lipped. ‘It’s different.’

‘Convinced I’ll judge you?’

‘Convinced you’ll think I’m a pig.’

‘When have you ever cared how I perceive you? I thought you were unassailable.’

‘Big words aren’t gonna make me fuck you.’ He belatedly takes my pawn. I shift my knight. Aimee cackles. ‘Yeah, right. As if that’s ever happening.’

The game no longer feels casual and conversational. His brows are locked in another furrow, and his hand hovers uncharacteristically above his queen, who is underdeveloped and trapped on the backline, useless, but he opts to push his bishop instead, an aggressive move. Setup is over, we’ve abandoned our pretences of apathy. We both want to win.

We’re trading pieces and manoeuvring the board, hitting walls, breaking them down, building them up again. Rex has his thumb in his mouth, chewing not at the nail, but at the chipped polish, and black flakes stick to his teeth before he links them clean. He catches me watching him. There’s a curious look on his face I can’t quite pinpoint. A discovery of some kind.

‘You’ve hardly drunk your second whiskey,’ he says.

‘Right.’ I reach for it robotically. Big gulp, wincing all the way down. It gets stuck somewhere and I cough.

Aimee makes a pitying noise, leaning down to give me a good pat on the back. ‘There there.’ It’s similar to a baby having reflux, the mother cradling the infant to her shoulder, a towel draped over the spot where bile might spill out. ‘Wrong pipe?’

‘I think so.’

‘We did have a few negronis at staffies.’

‘Yeah,’ I say, and then I laugh. ‘I might be a little bit drunk.’

And it’s true, that cold focus at the start of the game has quietly slipped out, and in its stead is the warm embrace of inebriation, a throbbing sensation. It rubs — no, Aimee rubs, she hasn’t taken her hands off my back — and these rubs are gentle circular motions between my shoulder blades. Rex is still watching me, or watching us, and his thumb slips out from between his teeth, gliding down the centre of his chin, hooking himself under there, elbow up on the coffee table.

There's something suggestive burning in his eyes, fervent, and yet pinched with subtlety so it becomes a smoulder, like a flame eating away at an incense stick. It might be the gaze you settle upon someone you're keen to fuck. 'It's your turn, Kevin.'

'Right. Sorry.'

I can't tell which piece I am on the board. I can't tell whether to attack or defend or move. I take another second to think, another glance at the grid, leaning forward so I'm out of Aimee's distracting reach, and the clarity is like fresh kisses of night-time rain. Rex hasn't been looking at me with a sexual desire, not even a little bit — it's his poker face, laying a trap, hoping I haven't seen the pitfall, but I have, and I react accordingly. I shift my queen out of harm's way.

Rex stiffens. I imagine his stomach has dropped, and he rushes into his next move, trying to keep me from slipping away, but this leaves his bishop undefended, and so I take it. He tries to counter, leaving another free pawn, so I take that too.

'Who's winning now?'

Neither of us answer. Rex brings both of his elbows up on the coffee table and clasps his hands together like in prayer, breathing heavily onto his knuckles.

'Kevin has more of your pieces.'

'I'm aware of that,' he growls.

'Not looking good.'

'Aimee, why don't you just wait upstairs until we finish?'

I can hear the clink of her rings against the glass of whiskey, scraping musically like wind chimes. I assume she finishes it, because she plunks it down on the side table, and then stands. 'Okay. Boring fucking game anyway.' And then she's storming up the stairs in a blur of white and black cotton. Pauses on the last few steps and shoots me a very hurt look, which curdles my insides. Off she goes again. A door opens and closes, then silence.

I blink at Rex. 'That actually worked?'

'It always works. We've been hooking up for a while now.'

I pretend this doesn't physically hurt with a placid smile. 'Oh.'

His long fingers reach out to drag his remaining bishop back to safety. It frees up his queen, bringing her into the game, finally, though potentially too late. 'She'd rather kill herself than admit it. But I think she's okay with you knowing. I think she likes you.'

'I doubt that. She's always bullying me on shift.'

'That's how she flirts.'

We trade knights. I can see the end in sight.

'And how do you flirt, Rex? With everyone?'

He stares at me. 'Just the people I want to sleep with.' And then down at the board with his *thinking hard* face, almost as if he knows it too, that it's nearly over, and he's just delaying the inevitable, or perhaps he *wants* it to be over so he can claim the consolation prize waiting upstairs in his bedroom, but then there's movement in those brows, perking up. Perhaps he sees a way out. And then he says, 'You know... we could probably both go upstairs. Together.'

I'm cotton-mouthed again. 'What?'

'Like... I think she'd let us.'

His eyes flicker up, smouldering again, heady, the smell of the incense, our shadows on the walls, and my pulse is racing, and my groin is swelling. I feel sort of sick and exhilarated and horny, all in diagonal lines, putting pressure on each other. And then he moves me into check.

I stare at the board. I should've seen this, but I didn't. It's a simple retreat in hindsight, and I can have him in check in another two moves — but with the dwindling pieces on the board, the various directions the game might take become clearer, most of them leading to my victory, some leading to a humiliating loss. My eyes strain, trying to see through the thick fog of drunkenness to some semblance of rationality, trying to ignore his blazing gaze, trying to be brave. It's too much, the idea of making a fool of myself, and of Rex and Aimee in tangled up in knots of limbs and me somewhere threaded between them—

I place the king down on his side.

Rex shakes his head, baffled. 'Conceding? You totally had me.'

'I would've fucked it up,' I say quietly. 'I've always been terrible with end games.'

'Hm. Right.' I can hear the disappointment in his voice. His shoulders slump a bit.

'I might head home. Be fresh for tomorrow.'

'Okay, Kev. Thanks for playing.'

We both stand. I try to swallow the lump in my throat but my mouth is so dry, I'm unable to generate enough moisture, so my tongue just drags itself against the roof of my mouth, painfully. I hold out my hand. He shakes it. I'm a good sport, and a gracious loser.