

# COLD DICE

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A king is typically gilded; Orphemeral is something else entirely. There isn't much of the man that isn't covered in some form of gemstone, crystal, or shining metal. He sits motionless on a plush throne. Olione watches from her place in line; she's counted the exact number of times he's moved in the past hour. Eighteen. Every time he moves even a wrist, the light refraction changes, bouncing from him to the many walls and fixtures adorning his reception area. Nineteen. The king spins the band on his right ring finger and a man a few places up from her shuffles in his spot — moving the reflected gold light from his eyes. The king is very hard to look at for long.

Olione does not avert her eyes. Not once. She can't afford to. The man speaking to King Orphemeral gasps at something Orphemeral says. Orphemeral allows his eye to wander from the man to his waitstaff, his prosthetic remaining fixed in place, relentlessly boring into the devastated man. His right eye — a terribly cruel-looking icy blue chalcedony stone — is lined with iridescent white gems. Selenite, diamond, obsidian: his eye is beautiful, a force of nature to be under. The goldsmithing is incandescent. Olione wishes she could study the artist behind it.

The closest servant — shoes clicking evenly along the pearlescent floors — beckons the man only once before tugging at his sleeve. The peasant allows himself to be led from the floor, waterline heavy with something unwon.

A woman, shaking in a stained dress, takes her cue to advance. She bows quickly and lightly, feet moving with practiced ease. Olione can only barely see her feet beneath the low and ragged hemline but they cross quickly. Bouncing lightly, her body settles at the nearby table like skimmed cream. Olione doesn't think the woman's said one word before tucking herself into the seat.

Finally, finally, the king moves. He moves like a mountain, each clothing plane pushing against and out. There's enough weight to each fabric face that Olione should be half-convinced they'll split at the seams like tectonic plate proper, but they don't, and she feels a swell of pride through the base of her heels. The king rumbles with laughter, loud and confident like a hardly-realized sorcerer; he rumbles like the rolling thunder barely contained.

The king moves, and the sun moves with him, light coiling every which way. He settles at the table a few paces from his throne. At least a degree, he shifts slightly from King Orphemeral to Appolyon. Olione can tell who will and won't be heard today by the few that step forward to see a better look and those that step back. The waiting, tilted on their axis, should just go home; they haven't any business with his brilliance. There is an ease induced by the still-unsettled light, a comfort that relaxes like dust against a painting.

"She's chosen seven suits, classic off-white."

"It's not such a bad choice; they say it's got the highest odds," a pair of figures whisper just ahead of Olione. She's not quite sure what they're here for, but it's plain to see they haven't considered the gamble. Pity — dry pleaders almost never succeed. "I've heard if you know your maths, it's got the only real shot of beating the crown."

"See that white dress? She knows math."

They are stupid. Olione doesn't shake her head in any discernable way, but her jaw sets against itself instead. The woman is from the upper-class all right: her neckline is too low for her collarbones to be bare as they are, and her earlobes sag with unfilled stretched holes. Olione notes that they're pulling to about fourteen millimeters; she was decently well off. That is a woman who carries herself as if she should be adorned. She probably was at one point, though the skirt line makes it clear she's forsaken her laundering service, and she's here, unsure of exactly what to do with her hands. Off-white: a crude description for her dress and lost class status.

The two men gossiping ahead of Olione are right enough that the woman had money, but they don't know anything about seven suits, not really. The woman in white isn't playing a dealer or some lofty crown. She's sat across from Appolyon Orphemeral and she is going to lose.

Olione noticed the white dress, she saw the high waistline cutting just below the chest, she saw the browning stitches and she saw the empty track along the left sleeve where the ribbon is supposed to be. This woman is not rich right now; she might be educated, but more significantly, she is desperate. And Olione doubts that woman is choosing this game because of personal skill. The woman's brown hair does appear like it would be blonde with a wash; she will likely be fine barring she knows when to set down the cards.

The woman fails her trick, drawing several cards; maybe she will be bad enough to call it early. It takes a bad gambler or the best gambler to call it early. A weight fills Olione's hands like a faucet, and she is quite sure she is neither. From where she's standing — several paces ahead after a few left for the beginning of a game — she can see cards that the blonde woman is holding. She can watch the king barely move and she knows exactly what she would do in the woman's place. Olione itches to move the cards herself, to sort through the horrendous organization the woman's using and carefully pull the numbers down. But seven suits is a fool's game against Appolyon, and it's made all the more clear by another failed trick punctuating her thoughts.

The woman is crying, though trying very well to not let it interrupt anything. She moves one wrist to hurriedly push away some tears, before going right back into the game, biting her lip as she does so. Appolyon, for all his flaws, does not antagonize the woman. It's likely the game isn't engaging enough for him to bother. Seven suits for all its chance in drawing cards, is a game of skill. Carelessly, Appolyon takes trick after trick. He quickly loses cards.

The woman is no longer subtly weeping; she doesn't bother to brush her cheeks and she struggles to sort through her cards. Appolyon moves in clear mistake. Olione is dumbfounded: he has — quite intentionally — provided the blubbering off-white with a chance. He wants to see if she will take it. She clearly doesn't see it, nearly picking up a three of iron. The weight in Olione's hands move before the thought crosses enough axons to reach her brain. Olione has left the line, and the eyes of the room have found her.



The king says nothing for a second's edge. He begins to open his mouth, showing several completely unique teeth. Appolyon has given Olione the moment of clear mistake. He wants to see if she will take it.

Olione has no time to waste, no seconds she can afford to lose. There's a livewire force behind breaking the crowd meniscus; she pushes on. A guard standing behind the table steps forward, his armor fighting to shine dully besides King Orphemeral. The guard's spear tips down naturally as he moves, but Appolyon stops him. The king's hand pulls taut and the guard settles back into place. Olione does not speak, she does not curtsy, she does not think to. Her clothes are clean but faded blue. It's clear that the dress is durable, made for working hands; Olione couldn't carry civil society rules aloft if she tried. It does not matter here. The king can already tell she does not have this information and Olione has only a second before her chances are dashed.

That's the half of it. In the other, a very real voice in Olione's head knows why she stepped out of line.

She does not ask. Olione takes a card from the hand that the woman is holding and drops it on the pile. Appolyon shifts in his seat, but he does not correct her behavior. The golden king lays a card of his own on the table.

Olione wins her trick. And the next. It's not enough to make up for the deficit that the woman put her in, but something sparks in Appolyon's eye. He sits forward. Gilded joints coming together like plate armor. There's a glint in his one good eye, there's something of a fox in Olione's pupils. There's a sentiment that both parties recognize. Something dangerous and poignant: a mirror's portrait in the knife blade. The king sits forward and the room moves with him. Small squares of light jaggedly through the space, dancing on the faces of the line that has stepped up to see closer. It wasn't that Olione's step out of turn was accepted, it was called. There's only one way to really deal with Appolyon; anyone hoping to win has to raise his bet.

Olione adjusts, her hands practiced at holding the deck just so. Seven suits is a court game, she's come with something else. Something dirtier and much, much quicker. There's more on the line in what she wants to play.

Appolyon gestures to his servant, "Marcus, take this woman to her husband. Deal with the warden promptly." He waves the off-white away, turning one eye to Olione. There's an unsaid question of what she wants, what he can get out of her before she gets it or loses. Or more aptly: if she'll fold with direct attention.

"I'm looking for my business associate, she's been missing in the palace for more than three days." Olione is direct, to the point. She does not say who she's looking for or what her business is. The king wouldn't know the name anyways, he's just looking for her to ante up.

"And you've sat at my table to deal with simple grievance. Very well," he severs his sentence with a smile. The room holding its breath as to not miss what happens next. King Appolyon smiles. Ruthless and sharp and many more colors than white. He smiles like he knows something about Olione that the line waiting does not. He smiles like he can smell blood in the water. "Pick your poison."

Olione is ready for this.

"Black Pearl."

"An odd court game, sure you don't have a more suitable choice in mind?" Olione doesn't respond, her face set. She keeps her hands piled in her lap. "Ah, I hope you don't mind if we use house tools for the festivities. Can't eat in everyone's homes and so on."

He's behaving airily but he's testing her, some low-level cheater won't use anyone else's cards. Some low-level cheater should never play in his league. From around his neck — or rather, affixed to the clasps of either corner of his cloak — Appolyon removes a small dazzling key and hands it to the servant standing at the end of the table. It only takes a second, but from the locked compartment in the dealer's position comes a set of four dice and a small platform that could be mistaken for a little shooting target.

The four dice are wrapped in a thin sheet of wax paper. Appolyon makes a show of sliding a long pointed nail through the seam of the dice. Olione isn't sure if it's gilded claw ring or simply adhered to the nail bed, but it's beautiful. The craftsmanship is wonderful.

When the king pulls the dice out of the package, it is clear even he is impressed with himself. Each cube shines, intricate designs of golden ivy delicately cradling gemstones in a rainbow of colors. Tanzanite, red beryl, alexandrite, emerald, the dice are held by the only man in the world who can afford them. The bezel cups took weeks to make, replicating the precise shape of the individual gemstones. Not counting the cabochons, one set of the king's dice cost more to make than many of the citizens waiting for audience will see in their lives. Olione knows, she made them.

They are perfectly weighted, servants spending days rolling and rerolling, calculating odds and returning any unbalanced pieces, these are quite possibly the fairest dice in the world. The several identical dice, sewn into elaborate tubing throughout Olione's skirt, are not. Made from the rejects and set with colored glass, they are made for a particular number. The king takes a moment to admire the pieces, rolling them across his palm and rippling one across the backs of his fingers. Olione does not tolerate any twitch of her hands as they beg to wander to the patches that would allow her to palm the first of her dice.

"I trust you're familiar with the rules?" Vital that she does not overplay her hand, Olione's tone is light but respectfully cordial. The king huffs a laugh, it rasps up his throat.

"Refresh my memory, I fear it's been a while since I've deigned to walk a parlor." He is lying.

"I'd have taken you for a scholar, I'm pleased to be the one to add this to your repertoire." His lip curls up at this, but he says nothing for the moment. It's an unguarded secret, the king's affection for gambling. It's how he lost the eye.

"Black Pearl is a game of chance and skill, it cannot be won without mastering both. Each player will have two dice, throwing in alternating turns with their partner. The three rings act as multipliers for the number shown on the dice set at one, three, and five times," when Olione says these words, Appolyon's pupil seems to tighten like a big cat. He goes from simply listening to appraising. "It is expected and encouraged to hit an opponent's die, sending it to outer rings or off the board. Dice sent off the board count for twelve. Betting takes place between each set of thrown dice, alternating players. Lowest total score wins."

The Black Pearl multiplier typically isn't so high, but Olione's dice are weighted. Appolyon clearly noticed the change, but he shouldn't be able to do anything about it. Not without alerting the gathered crowd that he is practiced at a commoner's game. Black Pearl



isn't played anywhere too well off. It's a quick game of raucous bar top fun and cheating is encouraged if you can get away with it. The game is quick, high stakes, and brilliant, an invention the aristocracy hasn't lowered themselves to yet. The few times the king visited town as a younger man, Olione saw him watch the tables with focused eyes. Without the chalcedony prosthetic, he might've been able to flit amongst the town for a night, but a jeweler recognizes money. He was playing in fire that shouldn't have felt his heels.

Olione chose this game for the draw Appolyon would feel to it, for the excitement he would have to finally play, for the once in a million chance that he would bet not to win, but to seek thrill for a tiny bit longer. When she loses, Appolyon wins, but the game also ends. She just needs a little extra luck. From his seat across the table, she knows that he heard the difference in city rules, she knows he will ignore it. Her pair will have the tiniest advantage in holding their ground. With all the gods looking down on her, Olione prays his hits will rebound.

"Pray tell, why did you bring this game to me dame..."

"Whitbone. Olione Whitbone."

"Charmed. Why did you come here?"

"Your brilliance, my business associate is being kept in your castle, I would like her returned." Technically not a lie.

"And the game?"

"It's the only one I know." Lie. Olione looks down as she says it, she wants to appear bashful but she's trying to hide her hand.

"This is a deal for the warden, not for me. You are wasting my time Olione Whitbone." The fact that he hasn't ushered her away is proof that's not the case. She has an entering.

"Please, I have something to bet." Olione produces a ring from her waist pouch — the one purposefully too small to hold anything useful. Appolyon's shoulders move slightly as he draws them back, taking in the small item. Olione is playing dirty. The ring is modeled after his late mother's. She recreated on commission from a potential suitor. When the suitor lost their luster, she couldn't be paid but she kept the details for the project. She made the ring for one purpose: to make an offer King Orphemeral would not refuse. His eyes widen, and for a second, the water does not ripple.

The current breaks an oxbow.

"Please submit the item to Marcus, he will exchange it for a sufficient value in lapidite." Olione hands the ring off; Marcus pulls out a jeweler's loupe, it's simple but well maintained. "Tell me Dame Whitbone, what is your business associate worth to me?"

"Nothing sire. Nothing in this great palace."

"Interesting you would come this far to get her. What is this woman worth to you?"

Olione struggles to place another rock in the cairn she's maintaining. What is Carazumin worth to her? Everything. A leg to stand on, her sheer foundation, she is someone worth betting on. "She is a business partner I owe my trade, I —"

"Partner. Isn't that an interesting new word to this dynamic?" Olione's eyes widen, she cannot begin this far down. "Caught then, I imagine. Marcus! Please return with a musgravite, broken, alongside her stones," the servant quickly disappears.



"You're making a mistake. I won't play for her.

"Leave then. If you won't play, then leave.

Olione rights herself. She has already lost the first game.

"I could tell you'd stay. You're the same kind of person that would walk up," Appolyon hands Olione two dice. Marcus returns, a large tray filled with various stones. He sets them down filling two divided containers with practiced efficacy. Appolyon takes the heftier of the two trays, five hundred stones to thirty. "After you."

Olione places two jade cabochons on the lower ring of the table, Appolyon matches her. There isn't anything to be done for the first game. Olione will need to survive until she's able to switch her dice set. With shaking hands, she rolls her first die. A three, firmly in the center ring. Olione shifts in her seat. It looks like she's attempting to get a better view of the board, but she's allowing her skirt to pool between her legs. She aims to pull her trick dice quickly. Appolyon, with court luck as an aid, rolls a four but pushes Olione from her center position. She isn't in the second zone yet.

Appolyon, with right of way, raises the bet an additional five jade. The king wants to play this game, but he isn't willing to allow Olione a single stone. Olione calls, matching his bet. Currently, Olione has the lower score, but not by much. Further, Appolyon has much larger coffers. He can afford to make a few bad calls, he can afford to lose this match.

She rolls her second die aiming to hit Appolyon's center die. Olione succeeds in rolling her first one of the night, completely missing his die and rolling smooth into the third ring. There's a point where the die bounces and just doesn't stop, springing clearly from the safe zone. It's still only worth five. When Appolyon rolls his second die, Olione sits forward, fidgeting awkwardly with the waist ties of her skirt. One hand tweaks and readjusts while a second pulls the first of the die out, dropping it quickly into the layers of fabric.

She pulls the second die out as Appolyon makes his final roll. She drops it as he rolls a careful two. Marcus pulls out a thin rod from his inner clothes-pocket, he gestures to the various die on the table, tabulating silently.

"Seven to eight. King Orphemeral." Olione hears the crowd begin to stir behind her. Rooting for the little man is fun, but there's something to be said about watching the throne win in every game. It's Appolyon's turn to roll, he places ten black stones into the center table, he's forcing Olione to increase her bets. She has twenty three stones to his five hundred and seven, she only needs to go all in five times, theoretically. What Olione needs, is a strong drink, or Carazumin. Someone to pull her away from the table, from the dice, from the small part of her who thinks she can pull this off. Olione shifts one of the skirted dice into her palm. It's a sleight of hand trick she learned from her pa, back when he still did this kind of thing for a living. Being a jeweler, Olione's learned more lucrative ways to take lapidite from people with too heavy of a stone bag. There's a trick to isolating the movement of individual fingers, tendons, and thenar muscles; today, Olione will put it to the test, or be thrown from castle grounds.

The next time Olione rolls, she's holding two dice in the underside of her hand. She picks the fair die off of table with the changeling already obscured, dropping the loaded die, or rather throwing it. For the second roll — two, four Appolyon — Olione throws hard. This roll isn't about scoring, or even scoring low. Both dice could skitter off of the table for all she cares.



All Olione needs at this moment is a flashy collision, a noise and shock of movement to draw the King's eye and keep his head away from the quick dart back to her skirt.

Olione throws her die and it rebounds from Appolyon's center position to a not awful far second ring. The knock sends Appolyon's off the table. Twelve to nine, Olione's favor. The crowd is nickering, trying and failing to appear only faintly interested. They draw closer, pushing and surging like waves. High tiding when a good roll is made. A few hands in the back are slipping into pockets to pass quartz around.

Appolyon's second roll is not one for the books, not for the papers, not for the press. He doesn't go to knock Olione into the final ring but his roll towards the target's center lands a four barely over the line. A cautious but ultimately terrible roll. Appolyon set the starting bet, and Olione raised five rubies. Risky, but she figured a roll that mattered more would make her charged bowling move hold tension for an eye catching, breath holding second longer. It's impossible to know if it helped at all, but a win's a win. Twenty four points to her nine.

"That's unfortunate math sire." Olione says this slowly, allowing mirth to leak through a false veil of deference. Appolyon's top lip pulls up slightly.

"There's a lot that can happen in one roll Dame." Appolyon is trying to pull a mental game out of a blunder.

"You would argue that?"

"I would never bet against the raging river of kismet tide," Appolyon says, tapping a long golden nail against his stone eye. Olione allows the clicking noise to pull a considerate face against her. She draws her brows, purses her lips just so. You'd have to be really looking to see it. She's trying to make him think he won something already. Appolyon has played many games, but he's never played in dark rooms and thumping sound. High court follies will never measure up. "There are many rings to land on."

Olione lets Appolyon run his mouth, tap his eye. Olione lets the crowd's nerves wash over her and she allows a fear that his words don't inspire show briefly. Quickly, she sets a mold of determination. Hard like stone, she waits for Appolyon to catch her set-up.

"I'd be willing to raise my bet." Appolyon dances his fingers in a pile of stones, picking them up and allowing a short trickle from his hands. Olione lets him play his game, she palms her second trick die. "I'd raise sixteen sapphire stones." There's aren't any rules preventing bets outside the game, Olione just doesn't have to take this one. Sixteen sapphire stones, just over everything she has left. Olione grabs the remaining real die, nestling it alongside the fake. Pretending to consider her options, she steeps Appolyon in his game for a second longer.

"I will take this secondary bet." Olione pushes the pile of organized stones to the stone tender. There is nothing in front of her, no net to catch a miss-slip.

"Wonderful." Appolyon smiles. If it was of this world, the king's smile could be considered beautiful. It is too many colors as it stands. Sapphire, emerald, and anhydrite sparkling in their golden frames. She wonders what was on the line for him to bet his human teeth, Olione wonders what was worth it to do it again. Appolyon counts fifteen sapphires from his riches. There are many stones left.

"Sire, would you say you play many court games," Olione is either going to make things more interesting, or she will have drastically miscalculated. "Would you say you are well studied in their tricks and strategies?"



"My father desired me practiced in many of the classics, yes."

"What did that curriculum include?"

"Scacchi, Seven Suits, King's Corner, Sea to Land, Mercenary Bond, every game currently popular with the court." Appolyon says this with the confidence of someone who is very proficient. Olione knows he has not observed Black Pearl enough if he has not figured her out.

"I see."

"Why do you ask, Olione Whitbone?"

"I understand this information as accurate, it's curious that it doesn't carry to this game."

"What is the mean — " Appolyon is cut off. Before he can finish his question, Olione calmly shakes her hand as if to roll then drops the hidden rigged die directly off of the table. Appolyon's eye widens and he starts to mouth off: "Dame Whitbone, what are your intentions?"

"Twenty four to twenty one." Olione allows the recognition to strike in Appolyon's eye. She pockets the final fair die in her skirt's open tube. With both dice floated to the hem line, secured among the normal skirt weights, Olione pinches the hanging thread. Pulling it taut, her stitches close themselves, sealing the fabric tube's opening, closing the real dice away from discovery. She can't knot it without drawing suspicion, but it looks the same as any other clothing snag.

Appolyon picks her die from the position near his feet where it landed, mouth gaped slightly. He darts an eye to Marcus, who only nods once, confirming her win. When Appolyon meets Olione's face once again, there is a respect occupying the emptiness before. Appolyon is a king before he is a gambler, but it is a close second. He sees Olione in a way he didn't when she entered, when she walked to the table, when she chose the game.

Looking a second longer, Appolyon studies Olione. There's a small percentage of his kingdom that he can truly play with, only a few who make it worthwhile. Even they don't play like Appolyon does. Win, lose, draw, lost eyes and teeth and stones. There are not many who understand the draw of the game itself. People attracted to the sport. Olione isn't here just to save her colleague, or whatever line she's concocted. There were likely many solutions to her issue or at least one that wasn't here, attracting his attention.

Appolyon understands all at once, a change as monumental as a spinning room coming still, Olione is a gambler.

Olione receives her bet in a broken sum of sixty seven stones, just over thirty sapphire lapidite. Appolyon's treasure is as big as ever but Olione is closer than when she sat down. It's the king's roll, and bet.

Appolyon knows her goal, she needs to bleed his pile dry. This cache is immaterial, the woman she is searching for means even less to him. What he wants is to see what she will do when cornered. Appolyon needs the serrated edge of human ingenuity and there are so few real slivers. The young king is aware he is chasing darts of light in a river, he does not care.

"I believe I may have to play my cards a bit closer to my chest Dame Whitbone. I bet five jade," Appolyon speaks lightly and sweetly, like they are playing on a breezy Sunday afternoon. If Olione wants to drain his coffers, she will have to take it.



"Very well, King Orphemeral, we shall see." She collects five jade cabochons from her pile, placing them among his in front of Marcus. Olione doesn't care if she has to pick the remaining gems from Appolyon's stone-cold body, she will make a vulture of her name in saving Carazumin.

Appolyon rolls his first one of the game. Olione follows with a four, her dice teetering on the edge of a top side pearl before choosing the wrong side of the line in the final seconds. Olione's dice trick is far from a final play. Appolyon's dice are more than capable of rolling low and hers are only slightly weighted. They are marginally inclined to ones and against sixes. The longer Olione plays this game, the more important Appolyon's money becomes.

"All in." Olione doesn't look at anyone as she says it, eyes obscured with a bowed head and fallen bangs. She needs to go all in four more times, then she'll see Carazumin. Appolyon is gleeful, it's not contained. He keeps trying to tug the corners of his mouth down, right his jaw, but he can't so he stops trying. Appolyon matches her bet.

"Tell me about this woman, Olione. Who drives this?" Appolyon understands that he does not know this woman, that he has never met her, that she would not be given audience in the courts if any of the nobles had their say. He understands this on some level. Every level. Every level but this one. He knows her. He sees it in the set of her jaw, in the way she jumped into everything. There were other ways to bet this. Surely, she knows that he wouldn't end this game. She understands this. Appolyon recognizes Olione, he understands her. The longer this game extends the more he gets to know.

Appolyon rolls for Olione's die, hoping to knock it to an outer ring. It glints against the edge, but only serves to spin the die in place. Appolyon's three skitters to the second ring.

"Carazumin is my right hand man. She manages the shop where I make all my product."

"Surely anyone could do this job. It doesn't take a genius to sell wares."

"You would know nothing about pricing artisan wares, about convincing stone heavy nobles to lighten their load, about trusting me to cut apart a livelihood's worth of lapidite and knowing I will make something beautiful." Olione is allowing her tongue to slip but she can lose it all in this moment. Appolyon only narrowly decides against telling her about how evenly he can understand Olione's sentiment.

Olione continues, "Carazumin is essential to me, I will not leave without her release." Rolling, Olione plays it safe with a light twist of the wrist. She lands a one and another win. Appolyon can't bring himself to care, he's gained what he wanted.

"All in." Olione sends a few more stone soldiers off to war.

"What will you do with your winnings, if you pull this charade off, Olione."

"When."

"When?"

"You asked me what I will do, King Orphemeral. I'm telling you now. When I win. That's how you should ask." Olione resists creasing her nose, she takes a deep breath and does not snarl at the most powerful man in the next three lands over. "What will I do when I win."

"That's awfully sure of yourself," he can't stop smiling. Appolyon spins his dice over his fingers.

"I have to be." Olione rolls and lands a decisive one in the center of the ring. A period to punctuate her statement. Appolyon claps his hands together, delighted. He rolls a formidable three but Appolyon still trails.

"I suppose I can't raise the bet any further. Your turn Dame."

Olione makes no reply. She picks up her second die. There's a loud rushing in her ears, a full-headedness she can barely hear over. The crowd is murmuring. Appolyon sits forward in his seat. It all blurs together in a single indescribable moment. Olione rolls again.

A perfect one. Appolyon gasps like a spectator. His next roll pushes Olione's away from center but nowhere far enough. Olione wins, her pile only growing.

Olione is small again. A little waif tugging at her mother's sleeve. Unable to see the pots on the stove, unable to assist at the cutting board as she did a few years later. Olione is dragged back to a rainy day. Soup on a simmer and her father gingerly lowering himself to the floor to roll dice against the ceramic tile. When supper's ready, they drink straight from the bowl, three crows on a line. Her mother hides behind her two-tone hands, pretending not to see the tricks Olione practices. Her father picks her dice up from the floor when she accidentally drops the small things. His dark and worn hands encompass hers. Her father has only nine fingers, old cauterized payment from a job gone badly. He tells her she will make it. She will be fast and light and she will shake the world for all it is worth. Her mother opens her eyes and pushes the candy collateral to Olione's pile.

Olione has rolled a perfect game.

She is quick.

She is light.

She is going to save her wife.

Olione is close. So agonizingly close. She is quick, she is light. She is going to save her wife. Appolyon will understand this. Appolyon bets only one stone, a single quartz: the lowest lapidite. She calls. He rolls his own one. She responds by knocking it clear into the second ring, her face up two responding like a hard coal stare. She is quick, she is light, she is going to save her wife. Olione will save Carazumin.

"All in." Appolyon cannot look away.

Many people think that he lost his eye in a needless gamble.

It was anything but.

"Of course, Olione." Appolyon chuckles at her roll. A perfect one, she could do no wrong in her streak of determination. He had seen this spark so few other places. Appolyon did bet his eye, but he didn't lose it. He paid the cost of viewing something amazing. Appolyon's father was the best in the land. He won every day, took every trick, kept every hand. He was very, very busy at controlling his cards and building this land. Constructing the hills that would shine gold during Appolyon's reign, tearing out deltas that would feed his people and his son.

Appolyon rolls an outer two. Olione understood what she was doing when she chose this game. He had only ever watched. What she likely doesn't know is it used to be a court game. It used to be the King's favorite. Until his father lost. For the first time, he sat to the right of the throne and he wasn't on the winning side. The man across from his father had bet an eye on



the line, and the dice hadn't been on his father's side. The man in blue was owed the eye of a king. The kingdom wasn't where it is now, the hills weren't gold and the rivers weren't azure. It wouldn't have been if Appolyon hadn't been there.

The man needed a king's eye, he got one only slightly underripe.

Appolyon got to watch the greatest strategist continue playing games with the confidence of someone who could say they'd never lost anything. Could watch a game with the bluffing power his father still had. Could watch greatness intact.

By the time his advisors finished their oath of a king's life long lived, Appolyon's eye was a distant memory. A story warped by nostalgia and time. Appolyon never had the image of his father, never held a fist of untouchable triumph in the same way. It didn't matter, he had caught lightning in a wave.

"All in," says Olione with everything to lose. It dawns quickly on Appolyon, this is the match. Either she stays or he does. The world is bright and fresh, the air clear and quick. He splits into a grin, pushing the remainder of his stones to Marcus.

Olione rolls a one. Appolyon doesn't know what tithe she paid, but he allows the brilliance to wash over him, cleansing his starched clothing. He almost doesn't want to roll. Doesn't want to wrench this game from her, doesn't want to ruin the culmination happening. That would be unjust, a levee in fate's path. Appolyon throws his die, letting it bounce hard against the perfect one Olione has given the world.

Appolyon doesn't just hit her die. He doesn't just drive it into the second ring. Appolyon's die pushes a kinetic energy into the golden toy. Olione's die enters the quarry and emerges a five. The crowd, the crowned man, the woman with everything to lose; they all stare at a ten-two game. Olione is quick to roll her second die. Too quick. Whatever luck she has wrestled together has abandoned her. Whatever skill she collected left her similarly. Olione rolls a six into the third ring.

Appolyon rolls a four into the center ring. To try anything else would be wrong. He is losing his firefly in a field of darkness.

There is nothing to say at the end of it all. Marcus counts the total and gestures to a king that isn't listening, pushes a pile of quarry's wealth to a man that needs no additives. Olione counts the numbers on the table herself. She does not arrive at any different conclusion. Her head raises slowly, her face fully meeting Appolyon's before her eyes leave the dice. His lips are ajar, like he might say something but cannot find the wind to rub his vocal chords.

"Double or nothing. Appolyon. Double or nothing." Neither notices that familial names have been abandoned. Neither are playing a family anymore. There is an intimacy in your head against an opponent's shoulder, in that same breath of desperation.

"You have nothing left."

"Anything. I will give you everything." Olione will trade her place. Will do anything until she can do nothing. She is quick. She is light.

She is going to save her wife.

Appolyon sees it. That light behind the eyes. Olione will be great. Appolyon will see it all.



"What is this woman worth to you? This right hand man. Your home, your family, your work, your legacy? What are you willing to give Olione Whitbone?"

"Everything." Olione steadies herself, pushing up from the table to stand. "Carazumin is my home. I will give you everything."

"A right hand for a right hand."

Olione is silent again. What good is a goldsmith without her right hand?

Appolyon continues, "how far will you go, Olione? Will you seize this moment of finality? If not, you have no further business at this table." Olione lets the terror filter through her. Fall from crown to wrist. What's a goldsmith without her hand? What is Olione without Carazumin.

"Deal." Olione picks up her dice, mirrored on the other side of the table. Carazumin would not like this bet, this needless danger. Olione reasons that Carazumin is not at the table, she is. There's an electricity filtering through her. She is quick. She is light. She is going to save her wife.

Appolyon rolls a one. Olione pushes his one to the second ring, she rolls a four herself. There is no second bet. Appolyon's roll is nothing special. He aims to push Olione away but does nothing but succeed in rolling a six. Olione can go for the one, she can spend this turn rolling for a potentially low roll. If she misses, she loses Carazumin and her hand. Black Pearl is a game of chance and skill, it cannot be won without mastering both. It is expected and encouraged to hit an opponent's die. Lowest total score wins. Olione is quick. She is light. She is going to save her wife. Olione throws solely for Appolyon's six. There's a moment where her die is in the air for what feels like a sun cycle. Appolyon's die slides away in indignation and looks like it will never stop sliding. Olione's own die lands five up just past the line of the second ring. It doesn't matter.

Appolyon wants to whoop. He wants to go motionless and hold lightning for just a little bit longer. Marcus nods.

He raises one hand to his right side. Appolyon's die shows six up, still touching the edge of the third ring.

Olione has won her bet. She sinks back in her chair. Sagging despite the weight off her shoulders. Appolyon smiles, teeth glittering a hundred colors, "Marcus, fetch this woman's..."

"My wife: Carazumin Sarrafet."

"Fetch this Carazumin, bring her here." Marcus turns on his heel, leaving abruptly. Appolyon picks up the four die, aiming to return them to the case, though stopping suddenly. Separating two dice into each hand, he balances each of the pairs against each other. Olione holds her breath as she watches Appolyon's hands bob.

King Orphemeral laughs. His mouth open wide, head tilted back. Appolyon sets two of the die down on the felted table and laughs long and low. The noise rumbling up his throat like the whole thing is jewel encrusted. He takes the two remaining dice in his hand and cocks his arm, throwing them with surprising might down the lengthy hall. The movement is sudden and jarring enough that no one from the waiting lines stoop to pick them up — pricey as they may be. The king looks back up and meets Olione with a single eye. The glittering chalcedony striking in its focus. He looks like he has finally caught something.



"You, dame Olione Whitbone, work for me now." Appolyon is once again King Orphemeral, his voice rounded with authority. "Whatever it is you were is over. A previous chapter. You are no longer small Olione Whitbone, I will shape you into something." Appolyon is going to bottle this feeling. Vivisect this girl into something that will make this kingdom brilliant.

Olione can only nod.

"Your Carazumin may join you. Say you will advise me." This is not a question. Olione is a gold smith, she will make this kingdom brilliant. Dress this man in jewels and gold, outwit the same people she used to. Carazumin will come. Olione will make the gamble once again.

Appolyon feels like coronation all over again. He never thought he'd hold this feeling. His hands feel the grooves of this moment like home.

Distantly, Olione wonders if she will ever be able to actually walk away from that felted table, or if it will be the last thing she sees. Just like her father. Appolyon shifts to stand and there is gold in her eyes.

"Olione." Appolyon beckons the answer he knows Olione will give him.

"I'm all in." ✱

