

The First Jaim Kibir

'Let us play.' The Jaim Kibir rolls back the billowing sleeves of his silken, yellow robe and picks up the pile of cards.

The young woman glances around the circular table. It is perfectly polished obsidian. There are twelve chairs in all. She and the Jaim occupy one each. Ten are empty.

'Shouldn't we wait for the other players?'

Laughter erupts from the Jaim Kibir and he rocks back in his chair. His extravagant guffaws reverberate off the distant stone walls and the impossibly high ceiling, with their crowded friezes of gods and demons and the ancient, unsmiling heroes of religion.

'I don't see what's so funny.'

The Jaim recovers himself abruptly. 'I wonder if you may be missing the point?'

His face is handsome, but fleshy from overindulgence and twisted with spite. '*Think* about it!'

She thinks about it. 'You're saying that_?'

'Look at the timer. We are fifty minutes into the game. No one else will be joining us. It is nearly over, in fact.'

'So they've_' she hunts for the right word - cannot find it. 'Gone?'

'Correct. Eliminated. Swept out of existence. That is the penalty for losing. We all knew this when we entered.'

He deals the cards then lines up red and black tiles neatly on the lacquered game board that dominates the table. The board is dark, heavy wood, inlaid with ivory, jade, mother of pearl – fabulous designs, coiled dragons, storm clouds, birds of paradise, spirit beings – a cosmic maelstrom.

The young woman's brow wrinkles. 'But only you and I entered this chamber. I remember distinctly. I don't recall anyone else being here at all.'

'But of course.' He is exasperated. 'You perfect little idiot. Those who are eliminated from the game do not simply disappear. They *cease* to exist. They never *were*. Your recollection is quite right. Only you and I entered and ten

minutes from now only one of us will leave this chamber, the winner, having been the sole person to have entered it one hour before.'

She makes to speak then reconsiders.

'Let me guess' he sneers. 'You didn't believe it? No one believes it. Even half the bloody priests are skeptics.'

Dimly, they become aware once more of the drone from the assembled priests and nuns reciting prayers in the courtyard outside the chamber.

'You're right. Most people don't believe' she replies. 'People say the fathers keep planning to honour the divine covenant and institute the founders' game but...'

'But every month the inaugural game gets deferred, yes?'

'Well...'

'Until *now*, of course' he adds, sardonically.

'Well yes, the girls in my block couldn't believe it when I was actually collected by the priests.'

'No one believes it because no one knows anyone who has been lost. You people have feeble imaginations. The truth is the game takes place, as ordained, every month. Those who lose are lost to all memory; every trace of them erased, so of course the rabble presume no game to have take place. Imbeciles.'

He turns over a card with a picture of a blue dog caught in a snare. 'To what then' he continues, 'did you and your friends attribute my continued incumbency as Jaim Kibir, month after month after month?'

'Not to *winning*.'

'No?'

'Just *luck*, I suppose.' She lays a card on the table. It bears a picture of the moon crashing into the sun. She pushes forward a black tile. His eyebrows raise themselves a little.

'Luck?' he echoes. His contempt for this notion is clear. 'Do you know how long I have been coming to this chamber to play?'

'You've been Jaim for years.'

'Fifty-two months. This is my fifty-third. Eleven other players each time.'

That makes five hundred and seventy-two men and women. Plus these ten, of course.' He gestures to the unoccupied chairs around the table.

Their emptiness now seems ominous to her. 'Does it hurt them?' She asks. 'When they go, I mean?'

'You *still* misunderstand. They are not destroyed. They simply cease to be. So no, I don't imagine there is any sensation whatsoever. But then, how could I know? I never met any of them. My recollection is that I come here alone, I play alone, I leave alone, I wait for the next game.'

He puts down a card with an image of a tethered camel being whipped by a naked boy. He moves several tiles up the board towards her.

'You wait in luxury. *Honoured*.' She says. 'I envy that - to not live like a slave.'

'Honoured indeed' the Jaim sighs. 'And what is your station?'

'I'm at the port. I provide comfort for flight officers.'

'A little plain for such a role aren't you? Still, I imagine that's the kind of work that would turn anybody plain eventually.'

'And I have a child. I can barely afford to keep him fed. He has tuberculosis. My pay will not stretch to medicine.'

'Children? I thought comforters were sterilised to prevent such accidents.'

She shrugged. 'They fucked it up.'

'So you wish to replace me as Jaim Kibir and have your little family live in 'luxury' instead?'

'I was ordered to participate. Participation in the founders' game is not voluntary. But yes, I want me and my son safe and cared for.'

'You realise of course, that should you be eliminated in this game, your child will blink out of existence along with you?'

Her mouth tightened.

'But then, is that such a bad thing? You say he is ill with no hope of treatment. Surely to never have been is preferable to a life of incurable, degenerative sickness? And you yourself; your low station, your poverty, the distasteful work to which you are assigned - is such a life really preferable to the pure painlessness of absolute oblivion?'

‘Oblivion can wait until I’m ready for it.’

The Jaim laughs ostentatiously once more. ‘Indeed. It will have us all in the end, my dear. Why hurry?’

She sits dour-faced, unmoved. ‘Don’t toy with me, pig. Let’s just play the game.’ Angry, she turns a card. Its face is grey and entirely blank. She hears herself gasp. The Jaim’s expression remains impassive.

‘I understand your envy’ he says. ‘But we each have our prisons. You are in servitude to a government brothel. I am the living token of our covenant with God, kept in my splendid rooms above the temple, fed delicacies, guarded by priests day and night, exhibited to the faithful on the Sabbath. My only duty, to come here to this chamber once every month and play the founder’s game with eleven citizens. To remove them from the flow of life; to wipe them out of all memory.’

‘You are trying to dishearten and demoralise me. Put me off so you can win. Is this how you cheat each time?’

‘An interesting conjecture. But how could I even know? I do not recall ever having played the founder’s game with anyone but myself.’

He becomes serious again. ‘I will tell you this though, and mark these words well: for years I have done little but practice this game; each and every day, then in this hallowed chamber every full moon. No one has bested me – me, the first and last Jaim Kibir, and no one new to this game can. I know it inside and out. This board, I know it like I know my own face.’ He chuckles ‘How I despise it.’ Staring hard at her now. ‘You *cannot* win this game, my dear.’

She is sweating. ‘There is a great lie at the heart of this, I think. I see an inescapable regress.’

He sighs. ‘Oh really. How tiresome you are. In how many realities does this conversation play out in the exact same way? Only the faces change. The very thought brings me to despair.’

Slowly, he peels a new card from the top of the deck. On it, a simple black star on a scarlet background. He holds it up for her to see clearly.

He tosses the card on the table before her and places his forefinger over a

red tile. This is it, she knows. He will push it onto her side of the board and it will be over. He fixes her with his cruel eyes, pausing, gloating, relishing the moment of victory, the moment of the kill.

Then he asks her in a soft voice 'what *is* your name?'

Bewildered, dumb with horror, thinking only of her child who she will never see again, the word falls from her lips - the name assigned to her by the brothel at birth.

The Jaim Kibir speaks her name back at her, trying it on his tongue, as if it were an untranslated word from an enigmatic language.

'I will try and remember you' he says.

He slides the red tile swiftly backwards to his end of the table.

She looked down at the cards in front of her. Was she allowed to touch the deck? She didn't know and there was no one to ask. It felt like she had been here a long time. The board was set, each tile lined up perfectly for the game to begin, but no players. What was going on?

A deep, sonorous chime made the air in the chamber quiver like liquid. It was the striking of a bell somewhere outside in the temple compound. There was the sound of heavy bolts sliding and the vast double doors at the north end were swung open. Haloed by blinding sunlight, the archbishop and his retinue of priests filed in, their billowing censors swaying, a cloying fragrance permeating the air.

She stood up. The grim-faced bishop halted in front of her and stripped her of the plain white robe she wore. The torn linen fell to the ground. Naked now in the cold air, she shivered. The archbishop took a folded yellow robe from an attendant and drew it over her head and shoulders. It's silkiness cascaded down her flanks to the ground. He dipped a finger in a chalice filled with a dark unguent and drew a sign on her forehead.

'We anoint thee, token of the divine covenant' he said. 'The first Jaim Kibir.'

END.