

The card table was a mess of stains, crusty with dozens of age-old spilled beers. The cards being dealt over it were in such bad condition, Jim didn't even have to mark them. He'd hit this game last week for the first time, and found it to be the easiest game yet to cheat. The players didn't protect their cards when they looked at them, their emotions played on their faces like high-definition television, and most of them were too drunk to concentrate. With the cards in the condition they were, none of that was even necessary in the first place, but it was nice to have those extra perks.

They were morons. They were giving him their money. His plan this week, though, was to let them win. He couldn't look too good, or he wouldn't get invited back. It was a delicate balancing act. Too much loss, and he would waste his time. Too much winning, and he wouldn't even be given more time to waste.

Jim looked at his cards. His beer was still three-quarters full in the shallow cup holder under his chin after two hours of play, while everybody else was on at least their third drink. He tossed his cards away. They had both been kings, and he didn't want to win too much today. He sheared his sheep last week. This week, it was time to let the wool grow back.

"I know what you're doing, you son of a bitch," the drunkest person at the table managed to mumble.

Jim ignored him. Cowboy was a bit of a dimwit, and nobody really took him seriously.

"Hey!" said Cowboy, wafting his whiskey breath across the table at Jim, "I'm talkin' to you!"

"What is it?" Jim asked.

"You're cheatin'!"

"You're drunk, Cowboy. If I were cheating, I'd have more of your money than this."

"That's what you want us to think! You just folded Kings! You're a shark tryin' to make the fish feel safe!"

"If I'm the cheater, how do you know what my cards were?"

"Son, I've been playing in this game for ten years. I know the backs of every one of these cards. The funny little smudges on the backs of the kings are a dead giveaway."

"That means you're using a marked deck, Cowboy, that makes you the cheater!"

Cowboy's face turned bright red.

"I ain't a goddamned cheater! I never use the backs of the cards but to catch cheaters! I just play like I don't know."

"Wally?" Jim said to the game's host.

Wally looked over at Jim, a warning in his eye. Jim saw the warning, clear as day, but he couldn't figure out what it meant. Should he just stop; let it go? Should he leave this banquet of free money?

He decided to throw caution to the wind.

"Could you either get out a fresh deck of cards or throw this cheater out?"

Cowboy erupted.

"YOU SON OF A BITCH! I TOLD YOU I AIN'T CHEATIN'!"

He reached a hand into his vest and then left it there, staring furiously at Jim. His face was beet red, his mustache bristled, and anger was etched into every crease of his face.

He didn't do anything.

He just stared.

"Uh," Jim tried, "were you going to do something?"

Nothing happened. Jim looked at the other players. Either fear or confusion or both was planted firmly on each face, but none of them moved.

"Guys? Is this some kind of joke?"

A wisp of black smoke appeared behind Cowboy. It grew larger and darker as it began to take shape. Soon, the ghost of death itself was standing before Jim.

"To whom," said Death, "do I have the pleasure of offering a game?"

Jim stared.

"You're not crazy," said Death, "and you have nothing to fear from me."

"But..."

Jim paused, sure he was crazy. But if he was crazy, wouldn't be just as well to make the best of it? He decided that whether or not he believed it really was Death, it would be best to treat the situation seriously.

"But aren't you Death?"

"I'm not going to kill you," said Death.

"Then why are you here?"

"He," Death said, gesturing at Cowboy, "is going to kill you."

"Oh."

"Again, whom do I have the pleasure of addressing? I already know, of course, but the niceties must be observed."

"Lee. James Lee," said Jim.

"Amusing," said Death.

"I have come to make you an offer," Death told him, "You and I will play a game. If you win, Mr. Ronald Johnson here will miss you, and the other players at the table will subdue him. You will not come back to this game, nor ever see him again, and will live to the ripe age of eighty-seven before passing away quietly in your sleep.

"If I win, Mr. Johnson will shoot you right between the eyes. You will feel no pain, and will die instantly. The police will be called and everyone at the game will be arrested except Sam, who will make the call."

"And if I refuse your offer?" Jim asked, knowing this is what one ought to ask.

"Refusal to play is forfeit. In that case, I win."

"What do you stand to gain from offering me a game?"

"Technically nothing," Death said, sighing but not really sighing, "but I'm a gambler at heart. There is nothing I can gain or lose in my existence, so I play with stakes wagered by others. Think of me as your croupier."

"Do you offer a game to everyone who's about to die?"

"Only those who will be killed over a game. It's no fun playing with anybody who wouldn't already wager their life."

"I see."

Jim stood transfixed at the weirdness of it all. Mostly, he was amazed at how little he was amazed. Something about it felt totally mundane. Didn't anyone ever tell you? If you're killed over a game, Death comes to give you the chance to win your life back! It's ordinary. Everyone knows that.

"What game do we play?" he asked Death.

"Choosing the game is part of the wager. Choose wisely, because like you, I have strong and weak games."

"Angry Birds."

Death chuckled and also did not chuckle.

"Computer games are drugs, not competitions," he said.

"I was joking, but there are many people who would take offense to that statement," Jim advised him.

"Surely you understand I'm somewhat old-fashioned. The game must be played at a table, not on an electronic gizmo."

Jim thought. Chess wouldn't do. Chess was purely skill, and Death had had a thousand years to perfect his game. Poker wouldn't do. Jim wasn't actually very good at poker, and he knew he couldn't cheat Death like he cheated the punters at the game.

Briefly, Jim toyed with the idea of making the game baccarat. It was a sophisticated game that he enjoyed, and the first choice of a certain spy of whom Jim was rather fond. What's better was that since the game was entirely luck and no skill, Jim could not be at any significant disadvantage. Baccarat would be a strategically sound choice.

But there was one serious flaw with using it here.

Baccarat is a single-bet game. The player places his bet, and the cards decide who gets the pot. It's only worthwhile to play if you can play at least several hands. Given that he only had one life to wager, Jim didn't want to blow the whole game on just one hand. Baccarat, though strategically sound, just wouldn't be fun. This was the only chance he would ever get to play against Death. It was a petty thing, but he wanted to enjoy it.

He couldn't bring himself to suggest any modern boardgames. Angry Birds had been a joke, and he didn't fancy playing any games below a certain level of sophistication. He could imagine playing Connect 4 with Death, and amusing as the image was, it didn't seem like fun.

"What game do people choose most often?" he asked Death.

"Chess is surprisingly common. I've had a great deal of practice with it."

"I did have a feeling that might be the case. What game is your favorite?"

"I adore Connect 4."

Jim raised an eyebrow. "Can you read minds?"

"No. Why?"

Jim decided it must have been a joke. He wanted to play cards, but poker would be as good as forfeit, and baccarat or blackjack would be over too soon.

"Gin Rummy," Jim said with full apparent conviction.

"So be it."

In that instant, the kitchen dissolved. Jim and Death were sitting at a small card table, exquisitely crafted of human skeletons, pale yew wood, and a sleek, clean black baize. The cards sitting on it were backed in black with a white border and an intricate silver design that gleamed in the light of the human skull chandelier that hung above.

Jim knew he ought to be scared. His life was, after all, on the line. He didn't have a wife or kids, but he had an active, enjoyable life. He had lots of friends, lots of money, and at least a couple of strong leads on starting up a romance, too. He definitely wanted to live. He had every reason in the world to be scared, but all he could feel was exhilarated.

Death offered the cards for Jim to shuffle. He took them and fanned them out on the table, admiring the ethereal intricacy of the designs as he checked to make sure each one was there.

"I will not cheat you," said Death, "The cards are all there. As I have said, I have nothing to gain by winning, so cheating would undermine my entire purpose in offering you a game."

"I was just admiring the design of the deck," Jim said, half-truthfully.

"Do you like it?" asked Death, sounding truly interested for the first time.

"May I keep it after our game, or will you be needing it again?"

"Not at all!" Death said, with real inflection in his voice, "If you win, it's all yours! It's my own design. I wanted to capture the delicacy of the events that govern the lifespan of mortals. So uncertain, just like the fall of the cards. But with wise play and careful timing, a player may turn the odds in his favor!"

Jim smiled and nodded, "I love it."

He flipped the cards back over and began to shuffle with practiced movement.

*Riffle, riffle, cut, cut, riffle.*

"To a hundred points," Jim said, handing the cards to Death.

Death cut the deck and returned it to Jim, who began dealing.

The cards slid smoothly over the baize, and each stopped exactly where it was meant to. There was no disorder on Death's table, excepting the randomness of the cards.

Jim thought about his weekly game with his friend Greg. They had been playing Gin Rummy every week since they were kids. They had only missed their game twice: once for Greg's wedding, and once for the birth of Greg's son. The stakes were usually twenty dollars: much lower stakes than Jim's life. He briefly thought how great it would be to tell all about this game of life and death as they played their Thursday night game with Death's own deck.

"Where'd you get these cards?" Greg would ask.

"It's not a deck you can buy," Jim would tell him, casting a dramatic look.

"Did you have them made?"

"No," Jim would say, "I won them from Death."

Greg would start chuckling now.

"I was shot at a poker game," he would continue through Greg's laughter, knowing it would all be taken as a joke, "and I played Gin Rummy against Death to win back my life. As you can see, I won, and he let me keep his deck."

Greg would howl with laughter.

"No, really," he'd choke out, "Where'd you get them?"

"It's the truth," Jim would say, holding a scout's salute.

"You're full of shit," Greg would rib him, wiping tears of laughter from his eyes as he regains his breath.

Jim would smile and deal the cards, knowing Greg would never believe him, and knowing it wouldn't matter.

All this would happen the very next night.

If he won.

Jim looked at his hand. *Shit.*

There was nothing he could work with here. It was all deadwood. There was perhaps one run he could make, but only if he could pull the Queen of Clubs.

Death began his turn.

Things didn't get much better. Jim couldn't seem to pull any good cards. He still hadn't made a single set by the time Death knocked, ending the hand. Jim still had all deadwood, adding up to thirty-six points. Death knocked with five points of deadwood, giving him thirty-one points. With a hundred points to the win, Jim was starting off thirty-one points behind.

Jim checked his pocket for a pen to keep score, but as he did so, a skull, a rib and a vertebra floated from a pile of bones in the corner and landed softly next to Death. Each bone had a number carved into it. Jim understood. Skulls, emblazoned with a 25 across the brow, were twenty-five points, ribs were five points, and vertebrae were one. Thirty-one points.

Death cleaned up the cards and shuffled. It was the deftest, fastest shuffle Jim had ever seen.

Riffle-riffle-cut-cut-riffle-cut-riffle

He handed the deck to Jim, who cut it and returned it.

Jim's heart was racing now as the cards flew back and forth to each of their hands. What if he did lose? Was there an afterlife? Jim had never given it much thought. But then, he did find himself in the company of an individual uniquely qualified to tell him.

"Is there an afterlife?" he asked.

"You would be surprised," said Death, distracted by his hand, "how few people have the guts to ask that question when they're losing."

Jim looked at his hand, expecting Death to answer soon. His hand was much better than last time, but still not ideal. He drew a card, made a set of eights, and discarded a King.

Death remained silent as he began his turn. Jim realized he wasn't going to answer.

"Well, is there?"

"You are not dead," Death replied with no inflection at all, "and that is knowledge nobody living is allowed to have."

"I may be about to die, though. I would like to know whether I'll still exist."

Death finished his turn, discarding the Queen of Diamonds.

Death replied, "Suppose you elect to pull a card from the face-down pile on this turn. This is something you may or may not do in the very near future. But because you may instead elect to pull my Queen of Diamonds from the discard pile, you are not yet allowed to know what

card it is. Because you may instead live to tell this tale, you are not yet allowed to know beyond the veil."

Jim looked at the ornate black-and-silver back of the card on top of the deck. A miniature death in pasteboard. It could be anything except what was in his hand or what was already discarded. The mystery of that card was as inscrutable as the mystery of what would happen if he lost.

With that thought, he drew the card.

A few turns later, Jim managed to get his deadwood score down to ten, which meant he was allowed to knock and end the hand. He laid down his cards face-up.

"Knock," he said.

Death laid down his hand to reveal that his deadwood totaled eleven. A single tiny vertebra floated over and landed next to Jim on the baize. He looked at Death's more impressive skull and rib, and his heart sank.

Jim cleaned up the cards and started shuffling.

It was a long and arduous battle of wit and luck, but even as he won by little margins and lost by larger ones, Jim was enjoying this. This was the ultimate game, with the highest stakes any person can afford in the most exotic place against the most powerful opponent with the nicest deck of cards. He feared for his life, but never felt more alive.

After around half an hour of play, which was long for a game of Gin Rummy, Death had three skulls, four ribs, and two vertebrae for ninety-seven points, and Jim sat with three hard-won skulls. He could not lose another hand.

When the cards were dealt, he looked at his hand and tried to mask his surprise at finding it was already nearly ready to knock. Death took a card, placed it, and discarded a Jack. Jim drew from the deck and got a five, which matched the two other fives in his hand. The only cards left in his hand that weren't part of a set or a run were a lone ace and a three. He could knock now, discard the three, and have only one deadwood. He looked up at Death. The problem was that if he knocked and didn't win by a large enough margin, he would still be at risk. He could not afford for Death to win again. He discarded his three.

His hope now was that either Death would knock with a worse hand or that he would be able to discard his last deadwood and go Gin. In either case, Jim would win the difference in deadwood points plus a twenty-five point bonus: the life-saving fourth skull. He could still lose only if Death went Gin.

There were a couple more turns, during which Death rearranged his hand drastically, and Jim searched for an elusive Gin.



Finally, Death spoke.

"I have really enjoyed this game."

Jim's heart leapt. Could Death have made Gin?

"You were a worthy opponent, and probably the best Gin Rummy player I've faced since Stu Ungar. Now, I knock."

Death laid down his hand. He had an unmatched Deuce. Jim realized he had been holding his breath, and let it out.

"That's a pretty nice hand," said Jim, laying down his own cards with only an unmatched Ace, "but I've got you beat."

He had beaten Death's hand by one point, the vertebra for which floated over to the table. Then he watched as the pile of bones shifted, and a bright white skull rose from it and floated over to the table; his twenty-five bonus points for undercutting Death's knock.

Jim grabbed the skull out of the air and kissed it.

Death rose and glided around the table, offering a bony hand. Jim reached out to shake it, then paused.

"Is it dangerous for me to shake your hand?"

Death let out a short laugh that Jim wasn't sure he really heard.

"Not at all, James. You won. You're going to live."

With that, Jim's face broke out into a wide smile, and he grasped Death's hand and shook it.

He was back in Wally's kitchen. Cowboy pulled out his gun and shot wildly off-target, hitting the refrigerator. Jim dove for the ground, and the other players at the table jumped on top of Cowboy, wrestling the gun from him. Wally ran over and helped Jim up, apologizing profusely on Cowboy's behalf, telling him that he was drunk, that he didn't mean it, that he had always had anger issues, and how Wally should have warned Jim not to provoke him.

Jim stopped him. "Wally, it's a good game you've got going here."

Wally nodded, swallowing his words.

"But I don't think I'll be joining you next week. I'll see you up at the Tangiers sometime."

With that, he picked up his money from the table and left.

By the time he arrived at the door to his apartment, he had begun to wonder whether his game with Death had really happened. But when he opened the door, there was a beautiful deck of black and silver cards sitting on his dinette table. Next to them, there was a piece of golden parchment folded into three with the name *James Lee* inscribed in blood red on the outside.

Jim unfolded it and found more blood-red lettering inside.

*James,*

*I enjoyed our game.*

*Here is the deck of cards I promised you.*

*They will not wear out until you do.*

*I'll see you again when you're Eighty-Seven.*

