

# The Endgame

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*An original short story by*

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**H**e moved the pieces in a precise manner, as though he had carefully repeated each step for years. And as the knight passed through the enemy lines, he grinned as he slowly toppled the white king. His wrinkled, weathered face was then tainted by a wicked smile that stretched from one ear to the other. With his bony fingers he then plucked the wooden soldiers from their pearly battlefield, rounding them up for a new carnage. His cold silver hair was floating as a gust of wind swept through a shattered window into the empty room.

The old man stopped smiling.

“You took your time,” he said without looking up from the table on which his miniature army was lying.

On the opposite side of the derelict room that had been empty a moment before, there stood a young boy.

Without a sound he slowly approached the empty chair in front of the man as if it were patiently waiting for him. He sat on it easily despite its height. He then watched the elder with his dark-brown eyes wide open.

The old man was taking his time, seemingly ignoring the child as though he was carrying out some obscure ritual.

“I’ve never stopped practicing,” he added as he finished placing the last piece.

“I know. I have been watching you,” the young boy replied in a surprisingly deep voice.

The elder sighed. He lifted his head and gave a stern look at the small child. His severe gaze had long lost its deep blue tinge. The passing years had worn his eyes out only to leave them with a pale gray tint. Curiously enough, they still transpired the unrelenting resolve of the old man.

As their eyes met, it was the dark haired boy’s turn to smile. His perfectly white teeth gleaming in the dim chamber. He wriggled his feet under the table, trembling with excitement.

The austere ambiance of the scenery may have turned comical if it hadn’t been for the grim gaze of the elder.

“Enough. I’ve had it with your silly games,” he thundered.

The boy immediately stopped moving.

“Is that a way to treat an old friend? You disappoint me,” he said, without blinking his malicious eyes.

The elder slammed the table with the palm of his hand.

“You are no friend of mine.”

The ebony and ivory fighters were startled and a fearsome knight tumbled.

“I was, when you were in need of one,” the boy grinned, revealing his immaculate teeth.

Silence had fallen just for an instant. An instant that felt like ages, turning seconds into days, days into years, and years into decades...

The little man picked the white horse-piece up from the board and delicately placed it in its rightful spot.

“Am I to believe that you are ready?”

No answer escaped from the dry lips of his partner. Instead, he took a sample of each battalion. With one piece in each hand, he hid them behind his back.

Without the slightest hesitation, the boy pointed to the left-side of his opponent’s arm.

The weary hand then revealed a pawn. Black as charcoal.

“Quite befitting, isn’t it?” the child replied with his everlasting smirk.

The old man replaced the soldiers on their lustrous arena. And after a deep breath, he said.

“I presume you remember our deal.”

By some unknown magic the boy’s smile widened, as if he was preparing to devour his adversary whole.

“How could I ever forget?” he squirmed with delight. “You have always been my favourite, *Gioachino*.”

The senior twitched at the sound of his own name. It had been a long time since he had last heard it. A series of images scrolled through his mind, intertwined with smells, voices and chills, but he kept calm. The grinning little fiend seemed satisfied.

“Shall we commence?”

These last words were still floating in the air when a ghastly pawn was brought to life by the equally pale hand of the Italian.

“Your move.”

The boy's smile faded. He reached out to place the same piece symmetrically across the smooth board. The old man then responded by advancing one of his horsemen through his protective front.

The small child frowned.

"The Italian bishop... How intriguing..." he said while repeating the last move made by the elder.

His adversary remained motionless. His wrinkles and eye-sockets seemed to have deepened since the beginning of the game. A face enclosed by long dangling hair that exposed doubt.

He scuffed and stretched his arm above the table. With a trembling hand, he lifted the king's bishop and softly landed it at the center of the battlefield, completing the sequence. He hadn't used that strategy in a very long time.

The boy was still perplexed. His playing hand had stopped mid-reach of the little soldiers. He suddenly knew this would be no ordinary game.

A pawn, a knight, followed by another pawn, and the elder's army already held a firm grip on the board. Only after a couple of manoeuvres, the child's forces were driven back to the other side of the field. His most valiant warriors were hiding behind a stalwart line of measly foot-soldiers.

They had been playing silently until the rigid joints of the older man broke the dim peace of the circular room. He had risen up from his seat, standing tall within the pale moonlight that had slowly been drifting across the chamber.

"You seem elsewhere. Have you lost interest in our little game?"

The boy looked up from the dreadful platter on which remained but a mouthful of his troops. His lips curled into a smirk.

"Is it that obvious?" the child replied.

The old man's eyes filled with anger. Liquid fire had flowed through his cheeks and eyes. His hands clenched into fists.

"You... wretched devil!" he cried, slamming the table with his bare hands.

The boy remained calm as if he had been expecting the fiery outburst.

"You have won again... No need to be a seer to know that."

And the boy smiled once again.

The elder released his hold on some intangible leash. His wrathful gaze had left him and his skin had become livid.

He was at death's door. Knocking with his tender bare knuckles.

"But... why?" he finally whispered, almost to himself.

The small child jumped out of his chair. He slowly approached the old man.

"Surely you must have figured it out by now...."

The crescent was ending its grim course. Darkness started to devour the silhouette of the young boy, leaving only a voracious smirk that had consumed every last human feature of his face.

"Who else, if not you, could have saved her?"

The elder stood still. He looked like an ancient Nordic god: old and wise enough to understand life's intricate devices, but unable to accept its upcoming end. He looked down at the little devil and sighed deeply.

"You wanted me to live."

He lifted himself up from his wooden seat. He seemed to be gauging the child as if he was planning an attack himself, now that his carved soldiers had failed him.

But the young boy withstood the non-verbal assault.

"The game remains unfinished, you know," he said with a certain amusement. "I could end it all in an instant."

He then turned around and walk steadily towards the broken window. A cool breeze seeped into the room.

The boy had gone.

The Italian was left alone to his thoughts. He was but prey to those gruesome little demons that were clawing their way into the soft tissue of his brain. They whispered dark visions of an empty future: a meaningless death and an eternity of guilt.

He knew that the child would come back. And even though the tide of the game was predictable, it wasn't complete yet. Their deal could only be fulfilled with a clear victory.

The imp would come back for scraps.

The old man looked around, trying to distract his mind from this fateful omen. His gaze met those of the ornate warriors.

The last few pieces stood defiantly on the board.

The Italian played a very aggressive game: fast paced attacks, several accepted gambles and a lengthy endgame.

It was always about the endgame. Every move, every bloodless cut and each glare counted towards that very moment.

The elder headed to a wooden door that sat between two walls of cold cobblestone. It happened to harbour a small breach, but the old man already knew what lay beyond it. Its chestnut planks, held tight by strong iron nails, were the only way out of his plight he ever took. However, it would remain shut during his confrontations with the small child.

There was another door across the chamber, similar to its counterpart, but much darker. He had never approached it before. He had always made sure of that.

For it was the door from which the boy had come... *the first time they had met.*

He shrugged with disgust at the thought of it. He was free at last from the hungry carrions that plagued his mind.

He went back to his seat. And after a while, his lips gently parted, revealing a smile.

He had devised a new plan.

And in the raw end of the night the young boy returned.

The seats, the table and the board were unchanged. So was the austere ambient atmosphere. He sat down at his usual spot.

“Have you made up your mind yet, *Gioachino?*”

The elder had been patiently waiting in his place. His hand reached for his last standing knight and moved him towards the remnants of the child’s army.

“How about we change the rules a bit?”

The boy was surprised. His eyes exuded his vivid curiosity.

“It is a bit late, don’t you think?”

His fingers were tapping a silent beat on his thumb. He was trying to concentrate, but he couldn’t resist the urge of a new challenge. His eyes rested on the nearly empty board.

“How shall we proceed?” he grinned once again.

The old Italian took a deep breath as though he were trying to convince himself of the triviality of the task.

“If I win... I wish to die.”

While he spoke, his eyes had lightened up.

The child, on the other hand, had frozen. His smile was slowly melting away.

“Has Time already taken its toll on your sanity? Many mortals like you have killed thousands to be within my good graces... But I have welcomed you within my dominion. I have granted you the greatest gift of all...”

The boy was startled. He struggled to understand the elder’s motives: was it some kind of trick? Had the old man become senile? Why would he disrupt the cycle?

“Don’t you love her anymore?” he murmured.

“Don’t be mistaken. I still do. But I won’t walk out that door any longer,” he answered, pointing at the chestnut door with his bony finger, “I can’t watch her die again...”

The child rose up from his seat. He was infuriated.

“You have lost your right to die when you first summoned me, *Gioachino...*,” he responded with watery eyes.

“And you don’t have the right to keep me alive eternally!” cried the elder.

The young boy laughed. A laugh that could have stirred the very boils of the world, had it not been confined to such a small body.

“Who has the right then, if not me?” he answered, not without a tint of irony. “I have every right to do so. You belong to me.”

He then leaned in gently and whispered, “Ever since she died.”

The old man’s face became livid. Horror had seized him. The crows named regret, anguish and sorrow, had come back to feast upon him once more...

However, it was far from over. He scoured the room with his bloodless sight, seeking help from the icy walls and the smashed window. Not the doors though, they each required an invaluable sacrifice.

But nothing would come to his aid... until his gaze fell upon the unresolved game.

A shiver slithered down his spine. His shaking hand pushed an alabaster bishop sidelong, threatening the obsidian king.

“Check,” he muttered.

The child sat back down quietly. His face had lost its previous jovialness.

“You haven’t quite paid the price yet,” he replied as if his words had been forcibly extracted from his mouth.

He then allowed his king to evade the bleached cleric’s influence.

The elder remained silent, leaving the cold gushes of wind to answer in his place. He could foresee his own shadow entering the fissured door. He could feel her presence behind it. He knew she was patiently waiting for him.

But the game pursued its ineluctable course.

After a few advances, his words broke the stifling peace of the war-room.

“I never meant for it to happen...,” he said.

The boy only responded by moving a forsaken pawn into the grasp of his opponent’s knight.

“I was young... I was frightened... I wasn’t ready...,” the elder murmured.

The boy stared fiercely at the pathetic old man. Or at least what remained of him: a benighted carcass only held by the sheer phantasm that it may one day be relieved of its torturous existence.

“It wasn’t your fault... Is that what you wish me to say?” he shrieked.

He had risen from his seat. His eyes, nose, ears and mouth were alienated by pure hatred. None were spared from this gruesome metamorphosis.

“She was alone when she needed you most. I was denied the right to live because of your cowardice.”

He threw the board away scattering its pieces across the room. The childish figure had left. Only to be replaced by a shrouded specter.

The unholy weaving of a dying young woman gripping a newborn corpse rested underneath its cowl.

“Why have you forsaken me...?” the chimera wailed, “You could have saved us...”

The nightmarish ghoul slowly approached its prey.

The old man knew he couldn’t flee.

He remained as inert as the chamber’s bleak stony frame.

He was tired.

His hands fell from the table, lifeless.

“YOU KILLED US BOTH!” screamed the creature.

The chestnut door flung open.

He could smell the tantalizing fragrance of her raven hair carried by a warm zephyr.

He had lost once more.