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Playing The Dozens

Leah Bobet is a first-year student at the University of Toronto with dreams of becoming a starving artist. Her work ranges from urban fantasy all the way to mainstream literature, and has appeared in various publications, including *On Spec*, *Star*Line*, and *Vivisections*, an anthology from Catalyst Press.

"Playing the Dozens," coalesced from a historical insult game once played by black American slaves, 19th century roadside boxing matches, and the thought that words have power beyond our knowledge.

May your hair turn brittle as year-old straw, stink like a pig's trough, and become the colour of cholera!"

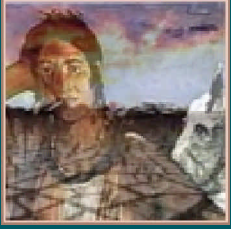
From fifty paces away I couldn't see my opponent's eyes narrow in concentration, but I pushed the tingle at my scalp away easily. The crowd still cheered, and I lifted an eyebrow in amusement. I was definitely in the back country.

As if I had much choice; there were no more good-sized purses in the cities. In the capital they'd already moved on to other, more complex amusements than the Dozens. All the talent was out here now, and traveling one of the most desolate country circuits in existence still yielded the same income as it always had. But when there were bills to pay, one had to go where the audience was.

At the crossroads and in the villages I was still a celebrity, someone any up-and-coming young thing could make a career from challenging. This boy, for example; perhaps I'd underestimated him. He wasn't bad for someone born and bred in a dusty backwater town like this. I actually had to expend energy to ward off his attacks.

Of course, despite his efforts my hair stayed black, smooth, and sweaty from the noonday sun. I drew in a breath, glanced at the expectant crowd, gathered my wits. "May you grow like an onion, with your head on the ground and your feet in the air, making women cry whenever they pass!"

The onlookers let out a pleased hiss, torn between fear for their champion and appreciation of a blow well delivered. I saw my opponent turn a shade paler, perhaps a touch translucent in the skin. I felt a smile crease my face, just slightly. It wouldn't



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do to look like I was enjoying myself too much; that would be bad form.

He seemed a little befuddled, a touch desperate, and his voice wobbled as he delivered his next shot. "May you live like a chandelier, hanging by day and burning by night!"

I must admit, I felt the rope around my neck for an instant, strong and solid, not just a tickle of forces coming together. I reasserted control and calm within myself reflexively, but it took a second before the sensation vanished, flaring uncomfortably into heat and then nothing at all. The crowd gasped, fell silent. Surely, they must have seen the dangerous anger light in my eyes, for just a moment. The little whelp was crossing the line. People weren't supposed to get *hurt* playing the Dozens. Sure, people were humiliated with the staples of the craft - strange odours or odd but temporary physical attributes - but it was a game. You put on a show, shook hands, and parted friends. Even the curses rarely lasted more than an hour, once robbed of the venom that sustained them. That was the trick to it; it was a delicate balancing act, a lesson in control. Enough anger to fuel the curses, just enough so your face was still calm and you wouldn't lose your temper — and the game.

This pipsqueak of a boy was obviously out to make a name for himself. He wanted a reputation? Well, I'd give him one all right. "May your name be as foul as the fruits of your guts, and your armpits stink yet worse than that!"

It was a clumsy curse. I was still horribly off-balance, shaken more than I would have ever cared to admit out loud. The upstart still staggered, enveloped in a fetid, stinking cloud. The crowd hooted cautiously, encouraged by the jovial, comfortable smile still pasted to my face. They knew something was wrong — with me and with their golden boy.

I was surprised they couldn't see how the heart had gone out of that smile. I was putting more effort into keeping up the casual facade than the actual curses. So much for not working too hard in this match.

He recovered, dispelling the cloud in a flurry of wind, but his eyes were flashing; there was a barely repressed anger in him now. He was about to lose his temper. This unsophisticated village crowd hadn't yet seen it, but after years of playing — and winning — the Dozens, I knew when a challenger was about to fall. Still, I steeled myself against whatever he was preparing. Desperate men are the most dangerous, especially when it comes to the amateurs. Hopefully this particular amateur would either learn the rules or keep out of the game for good if I dealt him a sound defeat in addition to a small rebuke.

"Tread carefully, boy. I'm not sure you know what you're getting into." He had fair warning now.

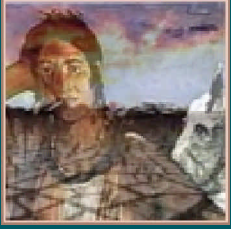
He took a deep breath, glanced, worried, at the crowd, forced the colour out of his cheeks. "May you blight the land you walk upon, bringing sickness and despair to all who lay eyes on you!"

"...wait, Mary...your Johnny's cursin' us!"

"...not part of the game..."

"Look away from 'em! 'Ware!"

I hadn't thought land as arid as this could get any worse until the ground around my feet started to crack, streaming backwards through gardens and fields like a snake that stretched over the land, retracing the steps I'd taken this morning. The assembled villagers started to stagger, averting their eyes from myself and the game as the first few fell to the dirt. What the hell was he doing? These were his own people, and they didn't have the kinds of defenses that those who played the Dozens



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spent years cultivating.

I'd never thought of myself as a hero or even much of an asset to society, but I sprinted behind the nearest house I could find faster than I'd ever moved anywhere. This was a game, not a weapon. I skidded to a halt behind the ramshackle dwelling, out of the sight of the crowd, spreading my arms wide as if they could catch the magic.

I looked down at the ground below me. I could see it firming up again, wavering between a hard, dead, tan back to normal, and then losing its moisture all over again. I squinted at it. Its natural state — a dry, golden grit that held the promise of both sweat and poverty — could have been the very best lowland soil compared to that grey, stinking, rock-hard ruin. I felt a stab of guilt in my belly; how much could the land here yield? Should I really be taking a purse from these people?

I sucked in a breath and called up my showman's voice, the loud, disarmingly cheerful tone I always used in public. "Ladies and Gentlemen, please do me the favour of averting your eyes for just a moment."

Anyone who was still out there was fool enough to deserve what they got. Perhaps I should have been on the road as well, but a direct attack would be the only way to break this boy's concentration. He showed no signs of stopping, even though the time limit must surely have passed us by. I was one of the few who could both attack and defend simultaneously; it split many people's focus too many ways at once.

The earth going mad beneath my feet, I waited a moment before I broke cover and walked straight up to him, will focused on keeping my anger at bay.

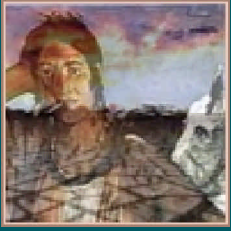
The power of the curse was like a wall of wind, pushing me back, battering at my defenses. I could tell that it wasn't directed entirely at me. It was trying to go through me, to wrap its magical fingers around the throats of those cowering on the sidelines. Why did he hate them so much? In a way it didn't matter. The immediate issue was that if I lost my cool now that would be it for me, for the audience, for the ground where we stood. A new resolve was forming in my belly, fueling my internal shields. Responsibility. I was responsible for these people. I had to protect them like a parent would a child. I didn't know that I liked it much. That was one of the things I'd always avoided by taking up the traveling life.

As I spread out my inner calm to envelop his curse I realized that there was no getting around it. This little fool was dangerous, and these two-bit villagers didn't have the wherewithal to deal with him. He'd ignored my warning completely, and that meant only one thing to be done. I'd heard of people having to take such measures in a game of the Dozens, but I'd never thought the onus would fall upon me. It made me shiver, even in the dusty summer heat.

I walked up to him, stumbling over the uneven ground, stopping only when I was close enough to reach out and slap him clean across the face. He fidgeted slightly, unsure of where to look, half-ashamed and disgustingly proud. The ground settled with a self-conscious murmur as his concentration faltered and the strain eased off his face.

I backed up a few paces, rolling up my sleeves. He followed me with his eyes, obviously uncertain as to my next move. I stared straight into his eyes and took a regretful breath. "May your tongue fall silent, weighted down in your mouth with the sins you would inflict upon others!"

It came out...strange. The anger that fueled my words wasn't my own delicately balanced will, but the righteous wrath of a million masters of the art. I could feel the power of those words suck the energy from my bones and travel straight to their



target, over every ponderous inch between us. It left me gasping for breath, feeling a terrible pressure on my chest, but somehow I knew that this curse would stick longer than I would live. The boy staggered under the power of the curse, and was slow to straighten. His mouth worked, ready to shoot another vile barb right back, but...no sound emerged. He coughed, tried again and again to speak, to shout.

I watched him struggle, and was caught between horror and a sudden smugness that was horrible in itself. "It's no use. I'm sorry, but I tried to warn you. If you can't play fair, you won't play at all."

The words echoed in the terrible silence of the village, driving the chirping birds away in a flurry of frantic wings. The crowd looked like they wished they could do the same, and the sun beat down on my shoulders, bathing everything in the blinding fire of a judgement I wasn't sure I had the right to make.

His face was pale as he fled, mouth opened in a silent scream. The villagers were equally silent, watching their town champion in a mixture of awe and fear, little children watching their favourite toy burn. The tense quiet was snapped by a deep, gasping sob, a woman weeping with loss.

One older gentleman cleared his throat, stepped forward to touch me on the shoulder. I couldn't be sure then, but I thought he had been taking the bets before the match. "Ma'am...I'm sorry to interrupt' your thoughts, but...y'have won the purse...but...I do wanna apologize."

I turned in surprise, reluctantly taking the heavy purse with one hand. "Apologize?"

The man lowered his head, watched the dust swirling over the hard-packed ground, ground that was no longer churning. "Li'l Johnny there's mother, Mary..." He gestured to the weeping woman. "...well, he was raised to be competitive, 'n took to it like a duck to water. She wanted him to be the best 'n all. He's been a public menace with those powers o' his, and wasn't none who would do a thing about it. He's our player, after all, and jus' a boy, you see. He was...encouraged to challenge ya after an...incident wit' the parson's daughter." He shrugged. "Nobody else coulda take a firm hand with 'im. Always was proud. So, I wanna apologize. An'...to thank ya."

I watched until the figure of the young man had disappeared into a small wooden house, until the cheers died, until the lump of ice in my belly had settled and my hands stopped shaking. It was only then I looked back at the still-shaken but smiling crowd. They were trying to escape responsibility for one of their own, one they had groomed to challenge others.

I weighed the purse in one hand and set it gently on the ground. It didn't matter if I slept in the fields tonight; this was blood money. Their cheerful, shining eyes turned blank with surprise. They couldn't even realize that what had just happened had been driven by their own desire for amusement. And I had taken responsibility for them, as a parent would for a child. I'd been used. I hated them, I hated myself, and for the first time in my life, I hated the Dozens.

As a parent would for a child. Well, if I was to be responsible for them, then I'd do my duty indeed. "You know what?"

They must have heard the ragged edge to my voice, seen fire pouring out of the eyes they had only seen calm. They drew back all at once like some giant organism, studded with heads and arms and legs.

"You know what?" I asked, and my voice was soft. "Now, I'm getting angry."

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