

## The Chessmen Wars

Benjamin Clemens

The fires stones popped as air pockets were exposed to the cool night air in the Alyssian camp, people rushed to and fro finishing jobs quickly before the night set in. The glow of fires dotted the camp's grounds.

A small group, consisting of the legendary Dodge Anders, General Döppelganger, Hatter Madigan, and a few chessmen sat around a small fire pit gazing into the fire.

Alyss, Queen of Wonderland, had just returned from her safe, oblivious, sanctuary of Oxford and her innocent identity of Alice Liddell. She sat with her head resting on her hand, sadly gazing into the pit where the fire's dance calmly blazed.

All the people in the camp were hurrying to finish their chores before dark, but all stopped to try and get a glimpse at the newfound queen. The news of her arrival had sent hope through the camp. It had drifted like the smell of a meal, and like a meal, they flocked to the source.

The Rook, a new friend of Dodge, walked slowly over from the cook's tent. He juggled they few dishes that he carried. When he got to the fire he dutifully handed the first platter of food to Alyss, then proceeded to distribute the rest. The meal was bland, some energy bars, a piece of fruit, and a bowl of porridge (what was in it they did not know, and did not want to ask for fear of the worst). They all dug in happily to the meal, all famished by the events of the day.

Alyss glanced around her trusted circle and her eyes rested upon the Knight and Rook, who were swapping fruit. Their white armor gleamed orange in the firelight, gashes casted dark lines over the surface. She glanced around the camp and noted the white pawns pacing slowly on guard duty. Some sported swords hanging by their side or strapped to their backs, some carried spears. Others had crystal shooters at their side while other flaunted AD52's and GOGs.

She glanced back down at her scarcely touched meal, not feeling as hungry anymore thinking about the state of despair the queendom she loved. She sighed and placed the still full platter on the ground.

"My Queen?" the Knight asked looking sheepish "If you do not care for your remaining ration bars may I have them?" This brought laughter out of all, including the recently sullen Dodge. Hatter M who never even smiled was the only one who didn't join in. Alyss smiled a genuine smile that wasn't plagued with worry, the one she wore most often now, and gladly handed him the remaining bar. He ate it happily while everyone's chuckles faded into the night.

After that brief moment of bliss everyone's hearts seemed to be lightened by a hairsbreadth, the Knight sighed in contentment. He had lightened the spirits of the queen.... and also ate some of her dinner.

\* \* \* \*

That night Alyss sat at the edge of her cot nervously. She worried about the Alyssians. They put so much faith into her it was a surprise she didn't collapse with the force of it. *We need more fighters* she thought glumly to herself. *We have not enough chessmen and card soldiers.* Then an image popped into her head.

When she was young, and still living in Oxford there had been a day where there was a terrible snowstorm. Ms. Liddell had brought out a chessboard with the pieces. They had set up the board; Alyss had liked the neat rows of pawns, and the look of the knights. Ms. Liddell let Alyss be white since she was so attached to them and she was other side....

"The other chessmen!"

Alyss's cry of sudden realization stirred the sleeping people but did not rouse them. At her cry Dodge, Hatter M, and General Doppelganger rushed to her tent. She engaged them outside the door of her tent.

"Call a council of war immediately." Were her words to them; and they did just that.

"When I was in Oxford," she began "I had the memory of learning how to play chess." The chessmen stirred in interest and amusement. Chessmen were used for war much to their knowledge but they had seen the game before.

"What I remember most was the two sides, the black and the white. I have only ever seen the white here though. What of the others? They would be a huge boost in the army. The question is, where are they?" Her words hung heavily in the air and rang in the war council's ears. General Doppelganger, Hatter Madigan, and Dodge all knew the answer, so they both looked at the chessmen; they were the ones that had the right to speak the story that would lead to utter disappointment.

The Knight and the Rook looked mournfully around the expectant faces, then both their eyes fell upon the pleading, hopeful, face of Queen Alyss.

The Knight sighed

"Rook, tell them the background... then I will finish."

The Rook glanced once more around, twice looking back on Alyss's face, and began.

"As we know White imagination and Black imagination have warred for centuries. The first chessmen legions began around the time of Queen Issa's, your grandmothers, reign. They began in the Chessboard desert, Queen Issa established training camps all around and in it. But dark things lurk in the crevasses there. That is why she established them there, to prevent Black from advancing further into Wonderland. But with the foul, grasping, power that Black imagination has to offer it drew many soldiers into its practice. Slowly those who practiced in secret began growing darker. They had a cloud of shadow wrapped around them. They no longer cared for their armor to gleam white. They began painting it black in defiance. This was the time of the black chessmen."

He stopped at this point to look around at the faces of the spectators. Dodge, Hatter, and General Doppelganger, who knew their military history, looked glumly at Alyss. Her face was plastered with horror and sadness, wondering how she could have missed that connection of white and black.

"I will continue from here Rook." The Knight said. The Rook nodded in sad agreement.

"Years past, every year a few more chessmen would slip away; the seductive power calling to them. Eventually the queen began an underground war against them. She didn't want the citizens of Wonderland to be terrified by the events of war. It would involve no card soldier; it would be fought by chessmen alone. I began fighting at the beginning of the end of the war. I was there when Issa gave a long speech and said it was time to prove our worth and fight for the good of White imagination. I was a pawn then, treading the waters of war carefully. We fought, we fought long and hard, wave after wave of the shaded chessmen were thrown down. We stayed all the time in the Chessboard desert where none would see. It lasted years. That war is where I learned to hate Black imagination, I saw friends fall, and so I made enemies fall. I became a bishop, then a rook. I spent most of that war a rook. Then one day I was fighting front line when all the black pawns turned and walked away, then all the other chessmen turned and disappeared into the shadowy gloom of the Chessboard desert. We were surprised so we didn't attack; we all stood poised as if they would return. A black knight turned as he walked away and snarled

"Black will be back, and White will fall!" then he raised his sword and proudly strode away. Those words still haunt me today. The white chessmen took a day or two to recover then slipped back into Wondertropolis. Many were decorated for valor; I was promoted to Knight."

"So that's the end of the black chessmen..." Alyss murmured

"No." sighed the Rook "That is far from the end. I will explain the final chapter Knight."

"After what was rightfully named the Chessman Wars, the war a time of peace for the chessmen. They trained, learned, and rebuilt their numbers. I became a member of the army. Then Redd began to cause disruptions in the kingdom, she began a rebellion. She gathered up all those black chessmen and used them in her armies. They painted their armor red now, in honor of her.

Again we had to fight them, through those battles I was promoted to Rook. Many had died in the mountains, and many had wandered into the Volcanic Plains and ran into things there. But there were enough to provide hundreds to her army; they were here elite fighters, they had learned the chessmen strategies and they had come up with their own.

They armed themselves with the power of Black imagination and met our armies for a battle for Wonderland. The white chessmen, through many casualties, managed to eradicate most of the chessmen in the beginning of the war. Without them Redd's armies started to struggle and then she fell. The remaining hundred or so chessmen fled to the Volcanic plains and the Chessboard desert where they hopefully died and disappeared.

That is the story of the black Chessmen."

"We must fight this war on our own then." Alyss said worry weaving in between her words.

She rose and uttered a single word intended for her aunt

"Checkmate."

Then she turned and fled from the tent into the darkness of the night.