

Checkmate

by Savannah Verts

The battle had gone on for hours. The soldiers were tired and dying. Night had long since fallen, but the enemy persisted despite the darkness, silver swords gleaming in the pale moonlight as they sliced through the air. On the outskirts of the battlefield lay the dead and broken, for there was no time to bury them. Around the dim, dying fires sat the last ranks of the battered army, shivering with cold and fear. Every tactic they'd tried, any edge they'd attempted to gain, every ounce of their training and strategy had failed, and order among the troops had long since fallen apart, taking the last remnants of hope with it. And in the blazing golden light of the sunset as it descended behind the crest of the faraway mountains, the queen had fallen.

But the commander would not back down. He stared towards the distant horizon, at the line of enemy soldiers still standing strong in their unbreakable formation. Their ranks had held stronger than any he'd ever seen, steadfast against all attacks. They themselves were akin to the mountains, immovable and ancient. Their strategies had been immeasurable, and the commander had to admit, if only to himself, that he was in awe of their skills. Were they not an enemy of his, he would have commended them. But his enemy they were, and the only thing on his mind was that he must defeat them. His army was falling, and only he still managed to muster the strength to remain standing. The entirety of his host, if not dead already, was resting for whatever precious few moments they still had to do so. The commander understood their weariness, their apprehension, for he too had once stood where they did now. He had once been a young, inexperienced soldier facing bitter hopelessness in the face of sure defeat. But those days were long over, and he had become hardy to war. He had a duty to his king, his country, his honor. If

no others would fight, he would. Of all the battles he'd partaken in, he'd never lost one, and he would not begin now. If the end came for him on this night, he would go down with a sabre in his hand and a battle cry on his lips. That was all that still mattered in this small, cruel world.

The commander peered into the distance at the crescent moon rising higher in the twilight sky, bathing the land in an eerie glow, faint and white. Atop the hill across the sodden red field, the silhouettes of the other soldiers nearly blended into their dark backdrop of space. To any other the enemy would appear as the physical embodiment of death, black armor shining and black flags billowing, cursing the earth with every sour puff of breath that escaped from their mouths into the chilly air. Even face-to-face, it was hard to see that there were even men under those heavy suits. They stood tall, broad, and black as night, or perhaps blacker still, for their faces could not be seen beneath their helmets and cloaks. Maybe they were demons, the commander thought silently. Maybe they hailed from hell itself, here to carry him away to his eternal burning as punishment for all the lives he'd taken on battlefields just like this one. It was fitting, he had to admit.

He shook the thought away as quickly as it came. He did not regret slaughtering anyone in the name of his king, though slaughter he had. His life was consistently marked by a spray of crimson on grass, on brick, on the shimmering crystal surface of rivers. And these foes were not demons; they were men, and men could be killed. Could, and would, if the commander had his way. They were regrouping, he assumed, atop that far hill, drawing yet another unpredictable, awesome strategy from what he could only guess was an endless slew of options. Or perhaps they were waiting for his surrender, for anyone would call him mad if he attempted to persist. Maybe he *was* mad, but that was no matter. He allowed himself a chuckle. They would not get the satisfaction of seeing him cower like a frightened animal.

A cool wind began to blow across the plains, chilling the commander through his blood-soaked battle leathers. Yes, he was weary, just as much as his men. But this was not his first battle. He had long since learned how to endure it, the pain and the fatigue and the ever-present reek of blood and the decay of the dead around him. The most recently dead around him channeled pillars of steam from their wounds into the cold air. The last of the heat within their bodies leaked slowly away into nothingness, just as their lives had. The smell of it had driven many of the other soldiers to sickness, but not the commander. Over time, that smell had become just another unpleasantness at the back of his mind, another toil of war.

Soldiers around him huddled closer to the fires. One of them was crying, tears of shock and fear dripping onto the frosty ground. Another was praying, mumbling words that begged for forgiveness and mercy, offering them to whatever god he still believed in. The commander had given up all hope of his god's existence long ago. No god had spared his queen from death, so such a god could not be relied upon to save his king. That was his duty now. And he would not wait for the dawn. No, he would finish this here. Now.

Standing tall atop the hill, the commander straightened his shoulders and howled into the wind, "I am not done yet!" He knew his words had been carried across the valley when the other soldiers paused in whatever they were doing to gaze across the battlefield at him. The commander continued. "I have not fallen! If I die, I die with honor, but I will not retreat! Come and fight me, you cowards!" His men said nothing, but rather fell silent, staring at him with wide eyes. The crying man's sobs were cut off completely, and after a moment the praying man began to pray faster, near-sobbing himself. Would they follow him into battle, or would he face the enemy alone? At this point, neither mattered much to him. This fight was his.

The other commander stood at the front of his ranks and raised something in the air. Squinting to get a better look in the darkness, the commander focused his eyes on the object. It looked like a teacup. In the glint of the fire next to the black-clad man, the commander could see a tea kettle hanging over the flames. He scoffed at the sight of it.

“What is it, sir?” a soldier braved from behind him.

The commander spat on the ground, offering a vulgar gesture to the horizon that he doubted the enemy could see. “That coward!” He spat again, then swore violently. Anger bubbled up inside him, red and hot and blinding. He stomped the ground with his boot, feeling the sudden urge to swing his sword at something. He prayed his soldier knew to stay a safe distance from him.

“Sir?” the soldier tried again.

The commander turned to face him. It was one of the younger recruits, but the commander had seen how bravely he fought on the battlefield. He did not take his anger out on this kid. “I want to stand and fight,” he said, “and that bastard just wants to finish his tea.” The young soldier furrowed his brow in confusion. “It’s disgraceful,” the commander muttered, turning away. “Coward.”

“Come on, bro, you’re just going to lose,” Nick said from the kitchen.

Devon looked up from where he’d been staring intently at the coffee table before him. He’d been lost deep in thought as he studied the black-and-white-checkered board before him. “I could still find a way to win,” he argued. “If you’d just put the tea down and come finish.” Outside the curtained windows, the wind howled in the chilly night. There was a blizzard coming. All of the

news stations were warning people to stay home unless they absolutely had to leave. Devon and Nick had opted to stay inside tonight, watching TV and playing board games.

Nick held up the mug in his hand. “No,” he said, “it’ll go cold if I don’t drink it soon. Come on, man, just admit it: you lost. It’s not the end of the world.” He shook his head, amused, his mousy brown hair falling across his eyes before he pushed it back with his hand.

“I’ve never lost a game of chess before!” Devon shouted, starting to get angry. “I’m not going to start now! Now get over here and finish the game!” In every game he’d ever played, he’d been victorious. He wasn’t necessarily eager to begin losing now.

Nick shook his head again, chuckling. “Nah, man.” He strode from the kitchen into the living room, patting his friend on the shoulder as he walked by. “It’s over. Better luck next time.” He flopped into the worn brown armchair, kicked his socked feet up, and began flipping through channels on the television.

Devon huffed a sigh. He couldn’t believe it. Nineteen years old and he’d never lost a chess game until now. It was almost laughable, really. He stared back down at the board. At the back sat his king, surrounded by three pawns, a bishop, and a knight at the front. Across the board sat twice as many black pieces, including the queen that Devon hadn’t been able to take out, the king nestled safety behind an unbreakable wall of pawns. Devon’s own queen sat amid the pile of pieces off the board to his right, the ones that had been taken out. How could he have lost? It seemed every strategy he’d ever used had failed this time, and Nick had slipped through them all. He just couldn’t believe it. With one final sigh, Devon reached forward and flicked his king over, the echo ringing in his ears as the piece thudded onto the board. Fallen. Defeated.