

Check Mate

by apisa_b

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Disclaimer: Nothing you recognise is mine.

"Wake up, Ron, and get down here this instant!"

The shrieking voice, as forceful as Molly Weasley's when she had worked up steam, as persuasive as Ginny's when she had set her mind on something, and as demanding as Hermione's when she was urging people to study, startled Ron out of a very pleasant dream.

"Ronald, I'm waiting!"

The sheer volume of the voice, ringing through the Burrow, made Ron wince. He was expecting uproar the next second. Fleur would demand silence, for Bill needed to recover. Hermione would complain about how on earth would she be able to do research the next day when she couldn't rest. Ginny would want to know what was up and why she hadn't been informed beforehand that a party was being held. Molly would just panic as she expected a Death Eater attack with every unusual sound these days. But nothing of the sort happened. Ron's eyes had adjusted to the darkness in the meantime, and he noticed that Harry's sleeping form was not moving in the bed on the other side of the room.

"Ronald Bilius Weasley!"

Ron was out of his bed at that instant. He couldn't help it; it was early childhood conditioning his mother always called him by his full name when she was angry and he'd better be doing what she wanted. Harry, on the other hand, still didn't stir, which made Ron feel slightly uneasy because hearing voices nobody else could hear was never a good sign. Ron tried to remember what being under fake Moody's Imperius Curse back in his fourth-year Defence class had felt like. No, he wasn't being influenced by an Unforgivable because if he was able to worry whether or not he was being influenced, he wasn't under that curse. But who the heck was calling for him ...

"Goddamnit! How long could it possibly take you to move your fucking ass down here?!"

He would soon be finding out, as it seemed. Briefly, he considered waking Harry, but something prevented him from doing so. He remembered to take his wand though and went downstairs to see who was so impatient to meet him.

At first he crept down the stairs very slowly, listening for unusual noises, wand at the ready. But after a few more very demanding calls from the strange voice, he just couldn't help but run into the living room where he was stopped dead in his tracks by a most unusual sight: a woman if he should call her that was standing next to the fireplace and setting up a game of chess. Truth to be told, it was only her voice that suggested there was a woman hidden under those filthy locks of indefinable colour and under those hideous layers of clothing he saw.

"What took you so long?" she asked him.

"Sleeping, what else!" Ron snapped. Then he remembered to ask her, "And who the hell are you? What do you think you are you doing here?"

"Who I am is not important," she said impatiently, flicking back some strands of hair that must have been obscuring her vision. "Why I'm here... now that's probably important."

"But who ARE you?" he demanded, glaring at her balefully.

She sighed. "I'm called a lot of things, so just pick whatever you're comfortable with, okay."

The woman took out the cigar that had been hanging in the left corner of her mouth and inspected it. While searching in the pockets of her filthy clothes, she said nonchalantly, "Well, I was craving a good game of chess. It's been ages since I had one. And you're more than a decent player from what I know."

Finally, she seemed to find what she was searching for: a pocket lighter, which she promptly used to relight the cigar. While she was sucking on the stump in order to get it burning, Ron took in her appearance. She could have been considered pretty, if one wasn't disgusted by her filthy looks and her smoking a cigar. She was wearing clothes in a variety of colours Ron hadn't even seen on any witch so far and that was bound to mean a lot. A flask of some sort of beverage alcohol, he suspected showed out of one of the pockets of her long skirt.

"Well, what are you waiting for? White moves first," she said, jerking her head in his direction while inhaling the smoke deeply and blowing smoke rings right afterwards.

"Playing? With you? Only in your dreams!" Ron said when he finally had overcome the first shock. Then bellowed, "Get out here, or..."

"Wrong answer. Too bad. But you will get a second chance," the woman said in a mocking voice. "I think you should know some of the facts before trying again." Another smoke ring was blown into the air. "You see, *She* is thinking of killing a few of you. You are fighting against the *True Evil*, and therefore some sacrifices have to be made. But *She* hasn't made up her mind who is going to kick the bucket yet. And this is where I come into the game, for *She* never makes such decisions without me. Humour me and you might get a chance to survive."

"I have absolutely no idea what you are talking about. Out of here or..." Ron wanted to propel the woman towards the door, but all he got was a slap on his hand.

"Haven't you listened at all to what I told you? My, why did we have to make you that thick ... Of course, it often served as a comic relief, but just now I realise how annoying dealing with you has to be ..." the strange woman said, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "Anyway, Ron, I hate to break the news to you, but you should better comply, for I can influence your future. You do want to survive the final confrontation, don't you?"

"You are barking mad. Mad and insane, that's what you are!" Ron nodded vigorously while speaking. "Absolutely mad and insane!"

"Well, I guess I should try to convince you, tiring as it might be. Let's see." The woman scratched her head and ran her fingers through her very unkempt-looking hair. "Would it help to convince you that I know everything of your past? What about if I tell you what you had seen in the Mirror of Erised in your first year at Hogwarts? Or better I know what that Unbreakable Vow your brothers nearly tricked you into taking was about. I can tell you exactly what you felt during your fall out with Harry after he had been declared Champion in the Triwizard Tournament, or what your feelings for Hermione are. And what you have done with Lavender up in the owlery, despite said feelings for Hermione."

"Wait, where do you know this from? I've never ..." Ron's voice trailed off, his eyes narrowed as he gazed at the woman.

"You mean you can really influence my our future?"

"See, I do have a say in what *She* decides. So let's make a deal: I want a decent game of chess and you want to live. So, if I win, you die. If..."

"What? You just said you only wanted me to play. You ... you said I should play with you and you would make sure I live!" Ron interrupted her hotly. "Now you're changing your mind. That's unfair!"

"Nobody has said life had to be fair!" she said, her lips curling in amusement. "You don't really believe me, but you are willing to play and bet your life on it. Interesting! But alas, let the game begin!"

She moved behind the chessboard, on the side where the black chess figures lined up, already shouting insults and making rude gestures in the general direction of their white counterparts.

Black is the colour of death! The thought came unbidden and made Ron shudder. He approached the chessboard cautiously, studied it for a moment, not paying attention to the exclamations of his chessmen. Playing chess had always worked its own magic on him. As soon as he had made his first move, he forgot against whom he was playing and what if one believed that strange woman could be at stake, totally engrossed in the game.

Their way of playing couldn't have been more different. At first both were moving their pieces quite quickly over the board, but as the game progressed, Ron began taking his time, painstakingly pondering every possibility before drawing, whereas she still swiftly glanced at the board and quickly made her moves. Ron barely seemed to stir in between the moves; he was all concentration. She on the other hand, was wandering through the room, looking at pictures, lifting up the little knick-knacks Molly had placed all around, while Ron was considering his options. Barely a word was spoken between the two antagonists.

That was, until the mystery woman snorted derisively, a picture of the Weasley family in her hands. The picture showed all nine Weasleys a rarity in itself in front of a pyramid. In fact it was the picture published in the *Daily Prophet* when they covered their annual *Grand Prize Galleon Draw*.

"What's there to laugh at?" Ron said hotly, his hand hovering over one of his pawns.

"Nothing. It's just that you look so ... comical together. It's one thing coming up with how you all should look alike, but actually seeing you all together is something other entirely. Your mum looks so like the ... ideal mum in children's bedtime stories that it's really funny."

"What's wrong with my mum?" Ron snapped.

"Nothing, nothing at all," she said and put the picture, in which Molly wasn't waving as enthusiastically as before and the twins were making rude gestures towards the stranger, back on the mantelpiece.

Ron felt very gleeful when he was able to make the first capture in the game, as his hand finally dropped and moved the pawn. That feeling quickly dissolved when she almost carelessly moved her knight into a position that threatened his queen. The defence of his queen cost him his first knight; a great loss, especially so early in the game, but it couldn't be helped. Ron realised that the stranger truly was a good player, even better than Bill, who had taught it to Ron and against whom he never had managed to win so far. It was as if she knew every strategy he was trying before he even thought of it; whenever he built up a trap, she effortlessly defused it.

"What are you waiting for, take it already!" she impatiently sighed, nodding towards the black knight who had just taken Ron's bishop and was sitting there, waiting to be captured by a white pawn. Smoke rings were drifting Ron's way, and he was waving his hand in front of his face to avoid getting them in to his face.

"Lemme think!" he exclaimed.

"What's there to think about?" the woman exclaimed, shaking her head.

Of course Ron took the knight because he came to the conclusion there was no false bottom in that constellation and no other move would have made much sense. He'd even settled on the move before she prompted him, but he liked to take his own time.

When Ron was able to put her king in "Check" for the first time, she started tapping a steady rhythm with her boots. Of course the game was far from over, and her king in no real danger at all, but she acknowledged the critical stage of the game by not leaving the board for her usual stroll round the room. Instead, she stayed seated, taking a big sip from the flask she'd had in her skirt pocket, but her boot tapping showed that she now felt the challenge.

Ron seemed to be stuck. He had lost his knights and his bishops; true, he still held both rooks both confining the black queen and his own queen, but only his king seemed to be able to move without opening the defences. Upon studying the situation, Ron realised that the white king was in the position to achieve victory, and so Ron decided to take his chances and set his king on the way through the black lines. At first, the strange woman only cocked her eyebrow at his seemingly desperate move, but the constant rhythm her boots increased in speed. The forefinger of her right hand was joining the rhythm, tapping against her lower lip.

For the first time since the game has commenced, Ron felt comfortable. He stretched and folded his arms behind his head.

"Nervous?" he drawled, smiling for the first time this night and allowing himself to watch the stranger instead of the chessboard. Her brow was furrowed; she hunched over the chessboard, imitating his stance from the beginning of the game. It was as if they had a role reversal.

"Dream on!" she spat, but after three more turns she had to admit defeat. Checkmate was inevitable. She lay down her king and rose from the chair.

"You played well! I never would have thought you were that good ... Well, congratulations. You are going to survive for the time being." With a move of her hand, the chessmen disappeared. A satisfied smile graced her lips. "I have always wanted to do that!"

With another dramatic gesture, she threw her pink, crocheted stole over one shoulder, raised one arm into a goodbye gesture and exclaimed, "Sleep well now, Ron. Keep thinking about new strategies, until we meet again!"

"Why should we meet again? I have won and you said you will keep your promise so there's no need for us to meet again," Ron retorted, his brow furrowed.

"Don't you have a girlfriend?" she asked with a wicked smile. "Wanna keep her?"

A/N: Letting a story's main character play chess against death is a bit cliché ... so Terry Pratchett let his Granny Weatherwax play poker against Death (Maskerade). I let Ron play chess against well, against whom? For most writers the queer woman will be no stranger, I think.

And a few phrases I have ripped out of an [interview](#), might give you a hint to whom the weird lady was referring when she has spoken of *Her*.

And many thanks to Larilee, who took pains in helping me to transform the whisperings of my plot bunny into a halfway decent story.