

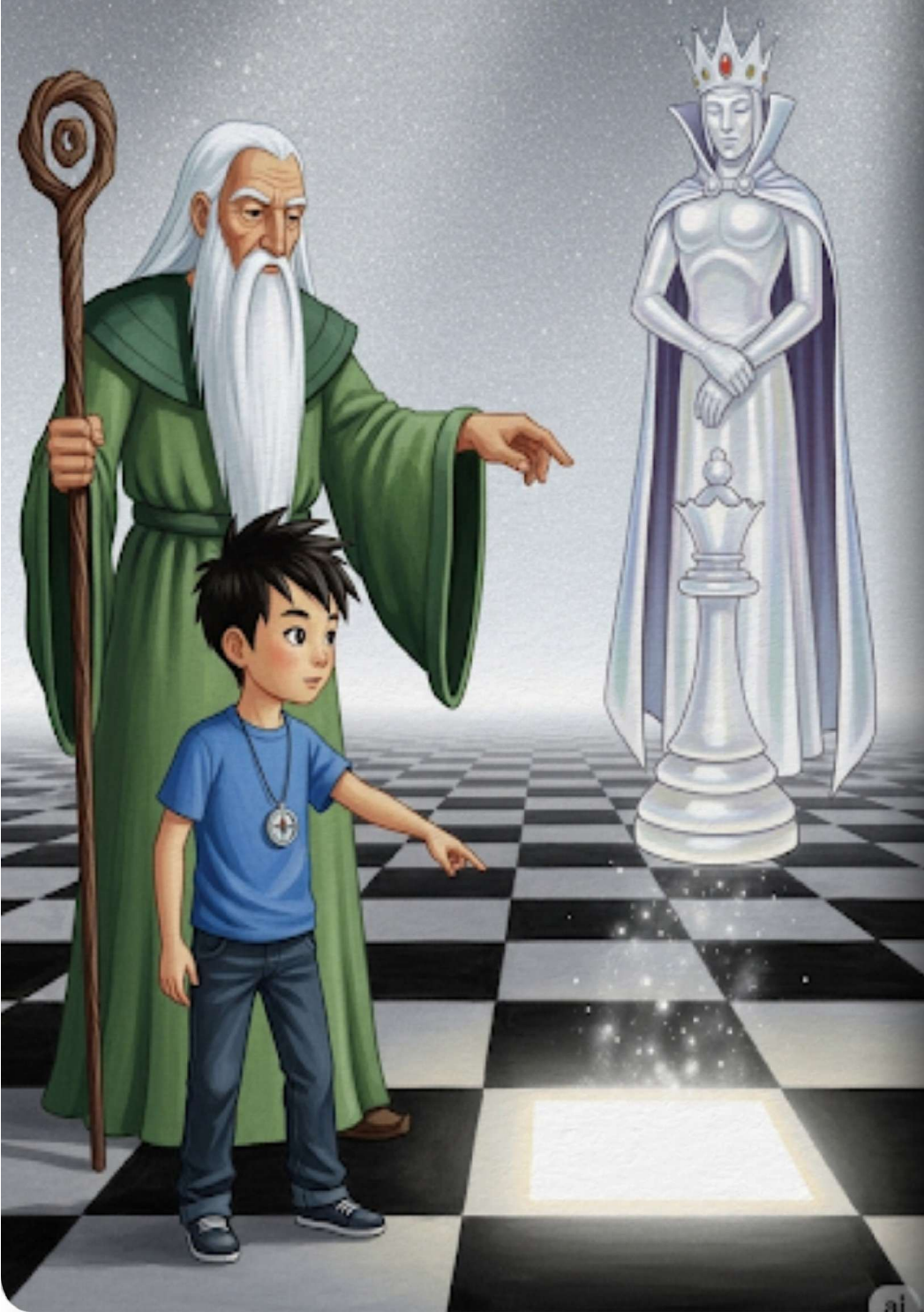
The Architect of Squares

By Ron



Silas found the dusty wooden box in the corner of his grandfather's attic. As he lifted the lid, the air began to shimmer with a silver mist. Suddenly, the floorboards beneath him vanished, replaced by an infinite expanse of polished black and white marble tiles. Silas gasped as he landed softly on a square that glowed with a faint, inner light. He wasn't in the attic anymore; he had entered the Realm of Squares, an eight-by-eight world where every step was a calculated decision.

Realm of Squares



A tall man with a beard like a waterfall appeared. "I am Zeno," he said, "the Guardian of the Board." Zeno pointed to the ground. "To start, the board must always have a light-colored square in the bottom-right corner. Think: 'White on Right.' Then, place your army. The Rooks guard the corners, the Knights stand beside them, and the Bishops sit next to the royals. Remember, Silas: the Queen always starts on her own color—the White Queen on a light square, the Black Queen on dark."



Zeno waved his hand, and a row of Pawns marched forward. "Behold the infantry," Zeno whispered. "They move one square at a time. However, on their very first move of the game, a Pawn has the strength to leap two squares forward! They are brave but unique; they can only capture an enemy by moving one square diagonally, like a hidden dagger. They never strike forward, only to the side."



Behind the pawns, the heavy hitters waited. Zeno pointed to the corners. "The Rooks are your towers; they slide as far as they want in straight lines—up, down, left, or right. They follow the ranks and files with unstoppable force." Then he gestured to the figures with tall mitres. "The Bishops are the archers of the diagonals. They slice across the board in slanted lines, but they must stay on the color they started on forever. One for the white squares, one for the black."



Suddenly, an armored Knight leaped over Silas's head. "The Knight is the most mysterious," Zeno laughed. "He moves in a sharp 'L' shape—two squares in one direction and then one square to the side. He is the only piece in your army who can jump over other pieces, friend or foe alike. He hops over the crowded battlefield to land exactly where he is needed, always switching the color of his square with every jump."



"Now, look to the heart of the army," Zeno said. The Queen stepped forward, radiating power. "She is the most dangerous, combining the moves of the Rook and the Bishop. She can move any number of squares in any direction— straight or diagonal." Zeno then placed a hand on a sturdy, older King. "The King moves only one square at a time in any direction. He is slow, but he is the one you must protect. If he is trapped with no escape, the game ends. We call that 'Checkmate'. "



"Before the battle, you must learn the King's Secret Step," Zeno commanded. "It is called Castling. If your King and one of your Rooks haven't moved yet, and the path between them is clear, they can move together in one turn! The King moves two squares toward the Rook, and the Rook leaps over him to the square right beside him. You can do this on the short 'King-side' or the long 'Queen-side' to tuck your King into a safe corner. "

The sky turned dark as a figure emerged from the shadows. It was Lord Vane, the Shadow Master, his black pieces already arrayed. "A match for your freedom!" Vane hissed. Silas took his place and moved his center pawn two squares forward. The battle intensified. Silas saw an opening and commanded his Knight to leap, "A Fork!" Silas cried. His Knight landed on f7, attacking Lord Vane's King and his Rook at the same time. Lord Vane snarled; he had to move his King, leaving his Rook to be captured.



"Checkmate," Silas said quietly. Lord Vane vanished into a cloud of smoke, and the giant pieces turned back into light. Silas felt the wooden box in his hands again. He was back in the attic, the sun setting through the window. He looked down at the board he had set up on the floor. It wasn't just a game anymore; it was a world of logic, bravery, and endless possibilities. Silas smiled and reached for a pawn. It was time for a new game.