

# The Chesscape

*for Jake*

Not only was Clois grounded, it was also raining. She seldom went outside, even when restricted from internet usage, but it was impressive how bad weather managed to intensify the torpor. She was stuck between thumbing through a fashion magazine (she was grounded from gaming magazines, too), and watching Cubby play chess with himself.

Tripp called. She didn't think she was grounded from phone conversations, but she didn't want to get caught all the same. If Cubby were harboring some hidden grudge, he'd go straight to Mom and she'd be grounded another two weeks.

"Today's the day of the skirmish," said Tripp. "I thought you'd remember this better than me. Where are you?"

"Grounded without the internet. I forgot to turn off the thermostat before we took our California vacation."

"Well... can't you just say you're doing homework?"

"It's password protected. And she keeps the passwords locked in a safe. And before you ask, she keeps the key hidden in her bra."

"Aw, this can't be. I've been waiting to cyberbully that peanut-head for months."

"Look, why don't you come over disguised as a maintenance handy-man and smash up the lock-box if you're so desperate?"

The skirmish in question concerned a spat between Tripp and his classroom nemesis. As far as she knew, Tripp started it. Clois would've joined for the normal excitement. The stakes for her were not as dire.

"Gimme five minutes." He hung up. His arrival was not something she'd looked forward to. His need for revenge clearly superseded his perception of sarcasm. It's okay, she told herself. All you have to do is not let him in. That's when she heard Ivy Lee in the living room.

She went out, expecting to see her brother three turns away from losing a game. She needed the catharsis. Instead she saw him handing over a dollar bill. "That'll cover the first five questoins," said Ivy.

"And this will cover the first five... uh... pounds of my revenge." Thought Clois as she went to tattle. "And I've got my sights on that dollar bill, too."

"But I'm not grounded!" protested Cubby, when Judy came to tell him off. "I'm not the one who left the A/C running for two whole weeks."

"Two weeks?" marveled Ivy. "That's an exceptionally long time to vacate. Where did you go? Turkey?"

"California," answered Judy. "But that's not important. Ichabod," for that was the unabbreviated name shortened to Cubby, "I'll not have you purchasing mathematical labor. Ivy, I'll not have you selling it in this house. Whether you have other clients is the business of your parents, but they will not be my son. My son will not be one of them."

Cubby sneered at Clois. "I'm going to get an F and it's all your fault."

"Pfft. The F was already on its way. I just made it more visible. You should thank me with a dollar."

Instead, Cubby smited her by inviting Jamie over to count money in front of her. Ivy Lee still hung around, she just didn't do any math problems under the authoritative supervision of Judy Schulz.

Clois went into her bedroom to plink absent-mindedly on her laptop keyboard. She was about to use her imagination when someone started knocking on the window. It was, as expected, Tripp sporting a fake beard, mustache, and spectacles. And a baseball hat. She lifted the seal specifically to scold him. "Are you trying to get me even more grounded? Get out of here!"

But he forced his way in. "No finger-flippin' way. I've planned this skirmish out for too long for you to bail out on me now. Show me to the password protector."

He never did get a crack at hacking. Not that Clois argued him out of his aim, but Cleo rolled out from under the bed wrapped up in an oriental rug.

"Holy Riggity-Dodger!" she exclaimed. "What in the misty white wonder am I doing here? No no, I already know." She got up and brushed off the bed lint. "Somebody left the portals open. Bet it was me." She squealed. "I was just in a play that my nephew wrote back in Singapore. I was a dinner burrito. Funny how that kid knows about Mexican cuisine." She rolled the rug up and stashed it back under the bed. "Welp, hope they don't miss me too bad. While I'm here, I might as well ski down the banister."

Clois finally recovered from the shock of Cleopatra's freak arrival to be bewildered at the ensuing nonsense that came out of her mouth. When she got over that, her first response was, "we live in a one story house."

"Silly things like that never stopped me before!"

But if the house didn't stop her, Judy certainly would. Having heard all the sentences coming from the bedroom, she needed to see if Clois was having a stroke. Seeing instead a violation of

Clois's grounding sentence, she was on her way to extending the penalty when Clois blurted out, "Looks like those darn portals are open again."

Judy folded her arms. "I expect you to fix them immediately. Well, not you." She beckoned Cleopatra into the living room, where the three younger kids were bickering over the rules of chess. "I expect you, Cleo, and you, Ivy Lee, to fix them. The rest of us would just blow up the world or something."

"What? What do you want fixed? I'm not a plumber, so it can't be the sink. It can't be the homework either, if the rule still sticks."

"It does. I want you to close the portal and then go home."

"I'll have to close it from the other end," said Cleo. "I'd like to get back home the teleportation way."

"Fine, just so long as you close it."

Ivy Lee didn't know how to close it at all. She asked if they had any grenades or at least some really jazzy fireworks, and maybe that's why the portal went on the run, right before Cleo could go back to her family in Singapore, too. Cubby fetched his butterfly net and they chased it around the house, finally cornering it at the chessboard. They knew where to chase it because it had become a hole with a metal rim, the other side of which swam blue and ivory swirls of mystical antimatter.

"Ha! Got you now, you cakey piece of splats." Cubby swung the net over it, but all that did was shove the chessboard into it.

Judy screamed. "No! That is a priceless family heirloom!"

Cubby huffed. "Okay Mom, do you want to get rid of it or not?"

"No, I want the magical wizard girl and the science girl to get rid of it. I told you, the rest of us will only screw it up, as has clearly happened."

"Welp, beggars can't be choosers."

While this exchange was going on, the other kids cheered Cleo's put-a-lid-on-it spell. "I hope you're full," threatened Tripp, "because that was your last meal." Cleo made wacky zip-your-lip movements in a hip-hop arrangement of moves as she moved in on the thing. Before Judy could refute the implication that she was a beggar of any kind, she heard the horrifically impressive zipping sound effects Cleo was making with her mouth. She saw her rapidly zip and unzip Tripp's pants, and knew what was coming. She couldn't let her cast such a spell, not while the chessboard was in the clutches of a catastrophic phenomenon. She dashed in front of the line of fire. The portal opened up, and Judy was gone.

"This is bad," said Cubby.

"I'd give you a C on that observation," prattled Clois.

"I don't see you solving all our problems!"

Jamie hopped between them. "Gentlemen, Ladies, please! Your mother wants a good deal of rescuing, I daresay."

"I dunno. I think she might want a good deal of reminding just what it's like to be grounded, at least for an hour."

The portal shrunk six centimeters. It took three fourths of a second to do that. Clois was convinced; to rescue was their duty.

"Before we go in, we'll have to tether our foothold in this world," said Ivy Lee. "Do you have a bunch of power cords we could tether together?"

"Just one. Mom does keep a lot of belts around."

"Lord knows she needs a lot of belts." Tripp snickered. Clois flicked him on the nose.

"They're not her belts, doofus. They're Dad's."

What Judy was doing with her ex-husband's wardrobe, nobody ever knew. The point was to have something of a foot left in the real world while they descended into the boardscape. One by one, they crawled into the portal, plummeting into that swirly maw where an unknown challenge awaited their inventory.

The shapeless colors cleared out, revealing a well-lit dungeon full of Gargoyles. The kids got a closer look; They then understood that it was not gargoyles they look upon, but Life-sized chess pieces, the size of Easter Island heads. If one fell over, it would steamroll any living creature in its path. Said creature would be a fossil. Clois suspected many bones were buried here.

"Great. How long before we get to Mom?"

But Judy was already there. She was unrecognizable because the corset she apparently wore made all the heft go to her feet. But she was the white king. She looked like some kid forced to go to a party she didn't want to but didn't have the authority to say no. The regal apparel had all the stiffness of the stuffiest Sunday best; even worse so because it was plastic.

"There she is." Cubby tread the board without thinking. "Come on, let's get out of this creepy place."

"Help!" The bishop behind him shouted. "Save us! Save some of us, and include me!"

"Save yourself," snarled Tripp. "We came here to remove one person. I got an online game to get back to."

But the portal began chewing on the belt harness. They tried to wrap it around Judy, but the closer they got to escaping, the more frantic the portal got with trying to unhook the belts.

"I daresay," daresaid Jamie, "This bally orifice appears to be dashed aware of our yearning to depart, and yet it fiendishly acts against us."

They tried to shove Judy in, but the belts got in the way. Between trying to pry it wider and heave in the hernia-inducingly heavy captive, there was too little strength between the six of them to prevail, and the belts themselves ultimately unbuckled. The portal puckered. The kids weren't likely to budge it without breaking their fingers.

"It won't work," insisted one of the black knights. "You have to complete a game before it opens back up."

"I should have seen this coming," groaned Clois. "Welp, let's get this over with."

She positioned herself behind a black pawn and the rest followed suit. The black queen cried out in defiance.

"Oh, no no! We can none of us move on our own. You have to play against one another."

"What are you talking about? I want Mom to win."

"That simply isn't the way. You see, all ways here belong to me, and I decree that three of you shall align with the white half of the board. Those who win are free to leave. Those who fail will fall behind."

"Fine. Have it your way. Guys, let's play to a draw so we can get out of here."

This time, it was the white queen's turn to cackle. King Judy grimaced at the noise.

"That isn't the way either, all of which are belong to me, by the way. I decree that a draw results in nothing whatever. The portal will remain closed, and you shall have to reset the board and play again. Do you see the pattern? No matter how many games are won, someone must remain behind. That is the way it's done."

Cubby growled. "You assign worse chores than Mom!"

"There's got to be a quibble in here somewhere," pondered Ivy Lee. "I just don't know what it is."

"Oh, oh, I do!" said Cleo. "Let me win. I know the way out of this."

Clois sighed. "All right, let's do this."

And so began the game. Cleo played white while all five of the others played black. None of them were expert Chess players, so naturally, they believed in protecting their own pieces -- including the pawns -- was the key to winning the game. Rather than let Cleo win, however, Cubby and Tripp failed to resist taking out her pieces with their rooks, knights, and bishops.

"You idiots! What are you doing? I ought to change sides, take Jamie and Ivy Lee with me, then kick your butts and leave you here. We're supposed to be rescuing Mom, remember?"

"We're supposed to be throwing the game," snapped Tripp. "I've already no doubt missed my appointment with Harry Schumaker online. I have to have some victory today."

"Yeah!" said Cubby, as he shoved his bishop into one of Cleo's rooks.

It was after she lost a rook that Cleo came to a conclusion.

"You know what, I've changed my mind. I want to be on this team."

"Are you kidding?" said Clois.

"It isn't the way!" cried the black queen.

"Yes it is," retorted the white queen. "She is ruining my evening down here. I'm getting horrendous vibes from this oraculous bimbo. Go over to the other side, dear. And send those strapping young men over here. Not the fancy one, the tall one and the one with uncombed hair."

"I don't want to trade places," whined Cubby. "There aren't any cool pieces over there."

Clois grabbed him by the ear. "Do you want me to glue my pantines over your head when we get back?"

His jerking away from her resulted in his accidentally pushing the black queen into a vulnerable position. Cleo had made an irrelevant move just in time to make sure he hadn't moved out of turn, and then conquered their queen with a pawn. Trip fell to his knees and cried out in anguished denial. The black queen toppled and rolled over into a gutter, too perplexed to make so much as an utterance.

"Well, however many ways belonged to her," observed Ivy Lee, "It looks like bo-diddly squat belongs to her now. Does she have her own personal chamber pot?"

"Who cares," said Clois. "Trip, Cubby, switch sides or I'll sock you."

"Fine. I'll win anyway and go with Cleo to see what she's doing."

"That's the whole idea."

Because of the boys' reckless and self-centered behavior, the only two cool pieces she had left were the knight and the queen, who had her own ideas of where she ought to go. Still, it didn't take long to trap the royal black widower in a place where he couldn't move - Ivy Lee and Jamie dutifully put the remaining rooks, knight, and bishop right where they'd be captured, thereby indirectly exposing the king and opening the portal to who knows where.

"I won't be gone long!"

Cleo hopped through it, followed by the boys.

The remaining three sat atop fallen pieces to await their return. They were at a loss for words themselves, eager to get back to their home in the real world. The white queen, however, was flabbergasted.

"Why didn't they take me along? There is no justice here!"

"You got that right," jeered Clois. "Why doesn't this stupid dimension just set everyone free?"

"Ooh, if I had any motor autonomy, I'd take your head. It is my right to leave this dimension, as I won the game."

"You didn't win anything," retorted Clois.

"She's right," chimed in Ivy Lee. "The people moving you and your army were the winners. You're just the weapons they used. You have no agency."

Clois snapped her fingers. "That'll be it. Mom will just have to live without her 'priceless family heirloom.' Sure, we've had this set for years, but I don't think it goes further back than my babyhood."

She leant over the black queen. "You hear that? We're leaving this dimension without you."

"I beg your caution," said Jamie. "If all ways here still belong to the queens, they just might mandate we not leave here at all."

Clois didn't say anything further. She thought the queens' power was greatly exaggerated, but it really wasn't their fault they had to compete their way out.

If the blame did not fall to the chess game, then who could she blame? She looked around the dungeon, and saw nothing but walls and lanterns. Nothing so much as a window. Unless you counted the portal, which was as close-lipped as a governmental filing cabinet.

Then it opened up, and Cleopatra rolled in pushing a shopping basket full of great big discs. Tripp and Cubby had their own baskets full of same. Yet these discs, when Clois got a better look, were thick and heavy. They looked like manhole sized smoke detectors, and she said as much.

"Oh, there'll be smoke all right," said Cubby.

"Turn out the li-- ah, heck," said Cleo, "I'll do it."

And she threw a rock at a lantern, which burst and cast the room into boundless shades of dark. Nobody could see anything, but she continued to tamper with their surroundings with iron-fisted determination. Knowing Cleo, she was probably pretending that she could see.

"Where in the blithering blue yond-scape did you three retreat to?" demanded Jamie.

"You'll see," said Tripp. "Well, that is, if we can ever get the lights back on."

Clois remembered she had her cell phone with her, and tried to download the flashlight app.

"No peeking," said Cleo. "It is to surprise you explosively the next game we play."

"I have a bad feeling about this," said Ivy Lee.

"No, feel good!" said Cubby. "I'm excited about what's going to happen next."

"All right. I'm done setting all the landmines. Whoops, there goes the surprise."

"Landmines!" cried Clois. "So that's where you went. Are you out of your--" she didn't finish because she already knew the answer to that. Something she didn't know was this: "Are you trying to get us all killed?"

"Nope, just this specific dimension. Now, help me to reset the board, and we'll play the dangerous way."

Only Tripp and Cubby jumped in without hesitation. The rest were too scared and sensible.

"Oh, do join in," insisted Cleo. "If we blow up the portals, they'll have to open up their mouths and let us jump through. I want to take away their tightness."

"We're going to blow up right along with them," lamented Clois.

"Tripp and Cubby are on board with me."

There was no arguing any sense into Cleo's mind. She lived in a world that let her cast spells that floated dinnerware and everyone could see it. And Clois lived in a world full of self-destructive nimrods. She buried her head into her jacket. She was embarrassed to be here.

"Tripp, Cubby, I'll give you cookies when we're done with here, even if we end up in the afterlife. Sorry if you end up in the red fiery underworld. I hear the big man downstairs doesn't serve his occupants cookies, just salted pinecones, but I'll be sure he at least will give you that."

"Don't bother," grumbled a demoralized Tripp. "It's called sulfur, not salt. I expect an unexpected funeral crasher in a clown suit when I bite the dust."

Clois resigned herself to the game. She wasn't any safer off the board than on it. They never did get to make any moves, though, because she stepped on a mine on her way over. It blasted them through the walls and Clois would later recall falling through fifteen giant rings on her way to... where? The grave? Saturn? Timbuktu?

In fact, none of those places. Clois woke up in her own living room, the portal a mere knot on the wall. They'd have to cover that up later.

"Tripp? Cleo?" She walked down the hall, and nearly collided with Cubby.

"Sis! Where's Mom? Where's the chess set?"

As it turned out, the set was scattered all along the living room, as though someone who took loss poorly had struck out in a rage.



Clois pulled out her cellphone. Judy was the first she had to check on. It was hard to hear her over the blasting techno music, but that seemed to indicate she needed no medical attention.

"I'm at a place where Disco came back. Jeepers! I haven't felt this young since 1984 and I saw the first Ghostbusters movie. Oooh! There's a spritely young thing I have to make a pass at. But don't fret about me. I'm definitely on Earth. Also, you're still grounded, so don't forget to lay off the internet." She hung up. All Clois could say as she went to turn on her computer was, "What a trusting mother."

Out of curiosity, she still dialed the other ones, starting with Cleo. "I'm one with the wolves now."

"What? Don't tell me they have cell phones too."

"I think what happened was that the portal split into several different pieces and sent us all in different directions. Isn't that something?"

"Yeah it is, but if you want to get back, I think you'll have to take a plane, or a bus or something. There's this knot where the portal used to be. At least," she got up and checked Cubby's room. Sure enough, there it was, behind his ceiling fan. "Hey is there a knot anywhere around you, if you haven't run off too far?"

It took Cleo a while to answer. "Whoopsy. Albert swallowed my phone. Bet he thought it was a fish I was holding out on him."

"Forget it, I'll check with Tripp."

Tripp didn't answer, so she called Ivy Lee.

"We are in the same place, the supermarket. Tripp is very embarrassed because Harry Schumaker was on a shopping trip. The portal opened up in the ceiling. I fell into the Wonder bread, so I'm all right, but Tripp fell into the eggs, right in front of his enemy, too. What a jerk! The guy said, 'too chicken to face me online, eh?' then starting egging him--"

"Yeah that sucks, look, I'll pick you up if you want later, but first I have to check on Jamie."

All in all, everyone seemed to be in order. She had no idea where Cleo actually was, but at least she seemed happy. It took Jamie practically forever to answer his phone. When he did, he spoke through chattering teeth.

"T-t-t-this is a rum-m-m-my predicame-me-me-ment..." he explained. "There's a great d-d-d-d-deal of snow and p-e-pe-pe-penguins... I popped out in the m-m-m-middle of a nest, and... oh, do hurry for tea's sake, I don't know how to build an igloo. I think I'm in Antarctica."

The computer screen flashed before her. She was only seconds away from playing Guild of War. On the other hand, some kid she knew was shivering in the world's least popular continent. Wasn't there some scientist down there who could fish him out and escort him to a research station?

She groaned. "Cubby, go put on your Eskimo costume. I need to book us two tickets to Antarctica."