

A United Chess Set

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It was an average day in an average town. As the sun lazily arose from over the distant hills, small bells on wind chimes rung softly as the door to an equally average store were being unlocked. Located at the very end of the main street, the Champions Chess Store had long been a popular attraction for chess lovers and xenophiles alike, as the windows of the store displayed endless rows of beautiful chess sets from all over the world.

Yet, despite the sui generis nature of the store, times had been tough; people only wanted so many chess sets in their house. The owner knew he had to advertise for his store, or it would close. He stared blankly at the store, his mind wandering off -- thinking of how to appeal and attract new customers. He sighed heavily as he watched countless children merely glancing at the delicately handmade pieces that sat quietly on the windowsill.

At last, when the day ended, the owner locked the untouched doorknob and gathered the pieces to put them back into their respective boxes. At least that was what he was supposed to do. Today, however, he lined up all the pieces one by one and kneeled down until he was eye-level with all of them.

“I know sales are not good,” he murmured, “but I do know that there is a Chess Fair tomorrow. I have a stand there, and I need a way to advertise. Maybe I should just bring the best of you along with me for display. Yet all of you are so beautiful; I don’t understand how other people cannot see what I see in you all. I want you guys to pick six countries-one country per type of piece-king, queen, rook, bishop, knight, and pawn.” And with that, he turned around and went to his room without another word.

As the owner closed the door to his bedroom, the pieces slowly came to life.

“How are we even going to pick who is going in the first place?” A pawn asked.

“Perhaps we should do it by whose country can boast the best chess players,” a king nearby replied.

“Then obviously we’re going,” a Russian knight said. “We’ve got so many world champions! We have Kasparov, Botvinnik, Tal, Spassky, Petrosian...”

“And who spanked Spassky? We did! Fischer of the USA!” an America pawn cut in.

“And who beat Fischer? Karpov! From Russia!” a Russian rook spat back.

“There wasn’t even a match!” the pawn pouted.

“Whose fault is that? Yours!”

“Stop making excuses! You’re just a stupid --”

The Russian rook and the American pawn both raised their voices.

“I’m sure we could have, too, if we’d gotten the chance!” a nearby Norwegian knight chimed in. He was ignored for the most part.

“Why can’t everybody just go?” a number of pieces pouted. But the rook and pawn were too excited to stop their arguing.

“Stop arguing!” a Mexican bishop cried. “We are most powerful when united. We can settle this with peaceful means.”

“What? *You?* You don’t even have any good players!” the Russian rook retorted.

“Why are we talking about men’s chess only? Women can play chess, too! And we are the best at women’s chess!” a Chinese queen questioned.

“Can any of them beat Magnus Carlsen, the current World Chess Champion?” the Norwegian knight replied.

“Ooh... You and your Magnus Carlsen again! We have grandmasters too!”

This went on and on for a good while. Bystanding chess pieces wondered how the owner could possibly sleep with such a commotion going on.

“Hold on, everyone!” an Indian knight shouted. “My country created this game for the world. We created it for many reasons. One was so for all, no matter your race, color, culture, or religion, could have fun, while using your brains to think.”

The commotion died down a little. A rook reluctantly climbed off the back of a knight. The Indian knight took a breath.

“But furthermore, this is a noble game. Like Mexico has been saying, we should settle any dispute with peaceful means. Are you allowed to yell and scream at your opponent while playing chess?”

The pieces had an awfully hard time answering this.

The Indian knight continued anyways. “No. So why are we? We are *always* playing the game of chess as chess pieces.”

“And who do you have that’s been world champion?” the Russian rook still spat out. “No one! It does not matter right now that you invented the game!”

“Not only are you not being a gentleman like you should be, you are flat out wrong. India is the home of Anand,” the Indian knight replied coolly.

“Very true- gotta cool down, man!” an American bishop agreed. “In fact, it’s getting close to dawn. We’d better get going and write down the six countries before the shopkeeper comes. He said he’s leaving at dawn, remember?”

“Very true. Since India invented the game, not only will they go but also with the right to choose the positions for each country,” a Norwegian pawn said. There was a consensus from all the pieces.

“But obviously, *we*, as in all the other pieces, pick who goes in for the other five spots,” the pawn continued. Everyone agreed to this at once as well.

After some more friendly discussion, the pieces finalized their nominees to India: the U.S., Russia, China, Norway, and Mexico.

“Why Mexico?” the Indian king asked. “Didn’t you say this was based off of player skill?”

“Yes,” a queen said, “but since Mexico was the first to try to settle this, they deserve a spot in the united set.”

“Very well,” the Indian knight began to announce to the other pieces. “The Chinese queen will be going since Chinese women play the best chess in the world. The US knights are going since the US is the most technologically and scientifically advanced country in the world, and everyone knows that the knight is very smart.”

“Thank you very much, on behalf of all the knights here,” a US knight grinned.

“The Russian rooks will be going, as Russia is known for how formidable it is, not to mention how well it survives every harsh winter,” the knight proposed.

“Correct!” The Indian knight said. “Since India is in charge, we have decided we should act like gentlemen. We shall take on the role of the pawns. Norway, as you have the current champion, your bishops will go. And Mexico--”, the knight turned and smiled, “-- since you have played such an important role in this meeting, we would like to save the most unique spot for you. The Mexican king will go.”

At once, the tiny room exploded with cheers.

The sun was just starting to rise in the east, its rays painting the sky into a beautiful golden hue. The sleepy village people -- including the shopkeeper -- slowly began to wake up. As the sun rose into the sky, the pieces finished writing down their final decisions, then settled back into their positions.

The shopkeeper soon came downstairs with his son. “Remember now,” he said, “I will be gone for the Chess Fair today, and so you will be in charge of here. If anyone comes, do what you know I would do.”

“Yes, Dad.” The son was standing up straight, and had a big smile on his face, clearly very excited to run the store. Despite getting up a lot earlier than usual, he seemed very energetic.

“All right. I’ll assemble the set and then go.” The shopkeeper assembled the pieces on his special board then left with the board without another word.

Soon, the shop opened. “Let’s hope for sales today, shall we?” the son grinned to the pieces. “The Chess Fair should have already started.”

A little while later, a customer walked through the door. He looked around the room, then his eyes settled on a British set. “I just learned that you guys have chess sets from all over the world. May I please buy this set? It is my son’s birthday, and I’d like to give it to him as a gift.”

It was sold.

“That’s one sale, earlier than expected! Papa’s ad effect of a united chess set must have caught a lot attention at the fair.” The son looked hopeful.

It did indeed. Within the next half hour, another six customers had come into the shop to make purchases. When it was time for lunch, there was no way to take a break since the store was filled with people looking at or buying a set, with many more outside, waiting for their turns to go in.

By the time the fair was over, all the sets were sold. The son had to close the shop earlier than usual, but there were still people outside looking at the sets on display.

Later, the storekeeper returned, “How many have we ...” his jaw dropped as he entered the now empty store: “Woah...”

His idea had worked. People at the fair had noticed this set of “united nations” more than the other dull sets. Furthermore, upon entering the store, they would see even more international sets. Now every full set was sold.

That night, when the storekeeper and his son retired to their beds, the same Mexican bishop from the night before spoke.

“When I said we are most powerful when united, I wasn’t kidding. Do you see now? Thanks to the realization of our collective dreams at the Chess Fair, I heard the store has big number of backorders and now we have to ship in more sets from all over the world. Remember just a day ago, the divisiveness, bias and ego among ourselves rendered such a union almost impossible. ”

All the other pieces could only nod.