

MICHAEL D. YOUNG

BOOK #1 OF THE CHESS QUEST SERIES



IN A GAME
OF KINGS,
HE CAN'T
AFFORD
TO BE
CHECKED.

PALADIN: PAWN

FOR ONE THIRTEEN-YEAR-OLD BOY,
CHECKMATE IS ALWAYS A MOVE AWAY...

Chapter 1: Pawn in the Box

Rich trained his binoculars out the window, focusing on the white-and-blue truck winding its way up the street. He knocked his forehead against the glass. Why couldn't they give mail carriers faster cars? Every day this week, the mailman had let him down. The website had said seven to ten business days. This was day eleven.

The mail truck finally pulled up in front of his house, and Rich checked his reflection in the window to see if he'd sprouted any gray hairs in the meantime. With the intensity of a sniper, he peered through the binoculars again, tracking the mailman's every move.

The squat, balding man wearing shorts and tall socks with his uniform tripped as he left the truck, and Rich's heart somersaulted. His package was probably marked "fragile."

While Rich held his breath, the mailman righted himself and lifted the stack of mail. Rich studied the pile, scanning it for his prize.

"Bill, bill, magazine, flier..."

His head slumped against the window. The website had lied. Their ten days were up. His mind jumped to ideas for creative revenge, but then again, how did you get revenge on a website? With his eyes pressed shut and his head against the glass, he wished that he'd picked up some computer hacking skills over summer vacation.

He opened his eyes a slit to see if the mailman had lumbered off yet, and his head pounded double-time. The mailman had turned and now rummaged in his truck. A few seconds later, he swung back around, clutching a bright yellow box that could only be for Rich.

The binoculars clattered to the floor and Rich bolted from the room, down the stairs, and out the front door faster than he had ever run in his life. Before the mailman had reached the mailbox, Rich scrambled forward and snatched the box from his hand.

"Hold on there," the mailman called out. "Is that box addressed to you? You know it's a crime to open other people's mail."

"It's mine!" Rich called over his shoulder and rushed through the still-open door, not bothering to close it. He took the stairs two at a time and reentered his room, barely noticing how hard he was breathing.

He rummaged around in his top desk drawer for his box cutter. Finding nothing but paintbrushes and old tubes of paint, he settled for the nail clippers he discovered in the back corner.

With a little extra effort, he sliced through the tape holding the box closed and gazed for the first time on his loot.

Nestled in a bed of pink and green packing peanuts lay two knights in full armor, complete with lances and steeds. One wore burnished silver armor, while the other wore shiny black. His fingers twitching, Rich lifted the two out of the box, trailing peanuts.

He grinned as he studied the fine craftsmanship. "I think," he said, "it's time for a joust."

* * *

The knight's armor caught the setting sun, and his horse whinnied and squirmed. "Easy," soothed the knight, trying to still his own anxiety.

His blue eyes stared from his open visor, fixing on a solitary target in the distance. They narrowed as he

confirmed its identity. There had been many confrontations before, but this would be the final one.

Without a word, he raised his lance and shut his visor, his ancient armor squeaking in protest.

In a fluid motion, he spurred his horse forward and brought his lance to bear, leaning into the saddle with grim determination. Giant evergreens towered on either side of him, providing a narrow corridor for his galloping steed.

From far away, a cry shattered the twilight stillness, sending woodland creatures scrambling for cover. Hurling in the opposite direction, a dark rider bearing his own lance kicked at his horse's flanks in a brutal attempt to coax a little more speed.

The dark knight's armor, free from dents, blended in with the dark trees. He rarely allowed his opponents' weapons to get close to him.

The two horses accelerated, their gazes fixed forward, neither rider deviating an inch from the impending collision. Two lances thrust forward, the knights intent on turning their opponent into a metal-wrapped feast for wolves.

Lances smashed into shields, and a cry pierced the deepening evening.

* * *

"Rich! Come down for dinner!"

The scene shattered into a million pieces as the voice snatched Rich out of his daydream.

He rose from the chair and pushed up his thick, brown-rimmed glasses. Leaving the molded figures of the two knights facing each other on the table, he called back a grumpy response. "I'm coming! I'm coming, already!"

On the way to the door, something caught Rich's eye.

Two boxes about the size of harmonicas sat on his dresser. One was wrapped in shiny silver paper, and the other in black. His mother's calls forgotten, Rich reached for the silver package and fumbled to find a place to tear the paper.

And it's not even my birthday.

Working rapidly, he peeled back the paper and lifted the lid, ready for either surprise or disappointment.

What he felt next was a mixture of both. Inside the box in a black velvet casing lay a hand-carved chess piece, a white pawn. He turned it over in his hands and found that the letters HWW had been etched into the base.

"My initials," he muttered. He knew right away that he wasn't going to put this piece where anyone could see it. They might ask him about his name.

When he had lifted the lid, a slip of paper had fluttered out. He replaced the pawn in its case and picked up the paper. Squinting in the low light, he made out the words written in his grandmother's familiar script.

For Heinrich—you will know when to use it.

Rich laughed out loud. He already had a chessboard, and all its pawns were working great. And the last thing his social life needed was for him to join the chess club.

"With a monogrammed piece. That would take me from nerd to übernerd." He shook his head and replaced first the paper and then the lid. His curiosity piqued, he turned to the second box, picked it up, and shook it as he might a mysterious Christmas present. It didn't make a sound. He thought his grandmother might have gotten him a black pawn to match the white.

He unwrapped the paper, and the instant he slid off the lid, a fine black powder exploded from within and hung in

the air. Rich jumped back, wondering if this was some kind of prank. It wouldn't have been the first. Just last Tuesday, Joe Stockton had covered his bike seat with Super Glue, just the latest in seemed like his favorite hobby.

The sparkling black dust swirled in the air, forming into the shape of another chess piece—a black pawn as long as Rich's forearm. The lights in the room dimmed, giving it the feel of night though it was still late afternoon.

Feeling his skin prickle, and his eyes shooting open, Rich stepped forward, thinking that if this were a prank, he'd have to ask how they pulled it off. Usually, he felt annoyed, but looking at this, his stomach filled with dread.

"You have been challenged," came a deep voice from within the cloud of particles. "Do you accept?"

Rich glanced around, trying to see if someone had managed to hide in his room or plant some kind of speaker. This was one committed prankster.

"Uh, who's challenging me?" Rich asked. "Are we playing chess? 'Cause I just got a new lucky piece."

"Answer yes or no," came the voice again.

Rich rolled his eyes and played along. "Sure. Why not?"

"Answer yes or no," the voice insisted.

Rich glanced in the corners to see if he could find a camera somewhere filming him. Even if he couldn't see it, he decided to give whoever was watching a good show. He bowed theatrically and said in a dramatic voice, "Yes."

The dust swirled back into the box, and the lid snapped shut of its own accord. The lights returned to normal, and not a speck of blackness remained in the air.

"Whoa. That was weird." Rich tried to open the box again, but found that the lid wouldn't budge. He'd have to ask his grandmother about both of the boxes.

His mother's voice broke into his thoughts. "Rich, I'm serious. Come down this instant!"

He bounded down the stairs, grumbling all the way. Maybe his mother hadn't interrupted him on purpose, but it didn't make it any less annoying. He hadn't even had a chance to find out what challenge he had just agreed to take.

A few seconds later, he entered the dining room, where his mother already had their dinner on the table. His heart sank. Beef stroganoff again. He hated beef stroganoff.

His mother, Helena, and his grandmother, Minerva, sat around the table, already piling food on their plates. His mother was a tall, slender woman with a mass of brown curly hair and dark eyes. While her body appeared to be in shape, her extra-pale skin and the deep bags under her eyes told a different story. Rich's father had been declared missing in action in Iraq two years ago, and his mother hadn't been the same since.

His grandmother was a full head shorter than her daughter-in-law, with deep green eyes. A crown of snowy hair billowed out around her head, and her wrinkled face always looked pleasant, though often tired.

Rich slumped down and poured himself a glass of water from the pitcher next to him.

"Well, well, well," his mother said. "Look who decided to show up. I've been calling for five minutes!"

Rich shrugged and scoped out the table for redeeming factors to the meal. He moved on from the green beans and settled on the croissants. He grinned. Even stroganoff might be bearable next to a few mouthfuls of buttery goodness.

He reached out a hand, and gave a cry as it was swatted back by his grandmother.

“Ah, ah, not yet. We haven’t said grace.”

“And,” his mother added, “you need to finish your stroganoff first. I’ve tried a new recipe this time. Maybe you’ll like it a little better.”

Rich sighed and slid the glasses from his nose. Maybe if he couldn’t see what he was eating, it would go down easier. He also knew better than to voice the thoughts that ran through his mind. Stroganoff sounded more like the name of a disease, or some wicked ogre from a fantasy book, than an enjoyable dinner. He bowed his head as his grandmother said grace, and then reluctantly offered his plate and allowed his mother to dish up a generous helping of the lumpy, gray glop.

He ate in silence, reminding himself that every spoonful would be another step closer to the promised reward—and a chance to ask his grandmother about the strange presents. It wasn’t as if she had given him a gift card to the mall. He wanted to ask her when they were alone.

He let his mind wander so he barely tasted the food.

Croissant. That might be a cool name for a knight. A French one, at least.

His mother and grandmother chatted, and for a moment, he might as well have been in the next country instead of in the next chair.

His mother’s voice changed tone, and it took a moment to realize that she was talking to him.

“Rich, I asked you how school was today.”

He resisted the urge to roll his eyes. School was even worse than stroganoff. Instead, he shrugged. “About the same—you know, tried to ignore people making fun of me and to avoid the ones who want to stuff me in lockers, and in between, I managed to pick up a few things about math

and science.”

His mother’s face reflected a mixture of concern and annoyance. “Seriously? Why would they make fun of you? You’re such a nice person.”

Rich sighed at his mom’s naiveté. In junior high, “nice” got you stuffed in a garbage can. “Oh, the usual—the hair, the glasses, the name.”

His grandmother’s hand slammed the tabletop. “What’s wrong with your name? It’s been in the family for generations, and it’s been good enough for all your ancestors.”

Rich gritted his teeth. This was nothing new. His grandma was full-blooded Austrian—and quite proud of it—and had insisted that his parents carry on the family tradition of naming their firstborn son appropriately. Rich was not short for Richard, or even Richmond. It was short for Heinrich.

The name “Heinrich Wulfrich Witz” might be great for a famous composer, but in junior high, it was a death wish. Nobody cared about heritage there.

Probably because all their ancestors were barbarians.

His days were filled with calls of “Heiny-Rich” and other comments as to the financial status of his rear end. His middle name was no better, as it sounded too much like a rich wolf. He never let on that his last name meant “joke” in German.

It wasn’t just the name, either, but the whole package. He wore thick glasses, had talked with a stutter when he was nervous until sixth grade, broke the curve on most tests, and came to school half the time with mismatched socks or his shirt on backwards. In short, he was the perfect target.

There was no explaining any of this to his grandmother—or his mother, for that matter. They wouldn't understand, and might be offended if he tried. He decided to fill his mouth with another bite of stroganoff, avoiding having to make any response by chewing instead. He nodded and managed half a smile. His grandmother went back to studying her green beans.

"What about that nice girl . . . Angela, wasn't it?" his mother asked. "You two hit it off last year. Is she in any of your classes?"

Nodding while chewing his bite of food, Rich then answered without enthusiasm. "Sure. She's pretty nice. But it's like there's a score. Bullies: fifty. Nice people: one."

"I still say that's something," his grandmother added.

Rich cleaned the rest of his plate and stuffed himself with croissants until stopped by a gaze so stern, it might have given Medusa a run for her money. He was about to sweep his plate from the table and off to the sink when he glanced at his grandma and froze.

She had suddenly risen to her feet, and her face looked as if the FBI had landed on her doorstep with an arrest warrant. Her hands trembled, and her fork clattered to her plate. Rich's mother stood, placing a nervous hand on her mother-in-law's back. "Mutti, are you all right? Can you talk?"

Rich had only heard his mom use "Mutti," the German equivalent of "Mommy," on one other occasion, and that had been when she thought his grandmother was having a stroke. The woman blinked several times, as if trying to fight off sleep. Her hand moved to her chest and then fell to her side. Her face, already a good deal paler than theirs, had gone a shade usually reserved for corpses and brand-new bed sheets. A single word formed on her lips, but she spoke so softly that they couldn't understand. It

sounded like someone's name.

Finally, she sat back down and stared off into space. Rich's mother was already fumbling through her pockets for her cell phone. Rich stood rooted to the floor, unable to act, to think, or even to breathe. It was as if a giant had sucked all the air from the room, leaving them to gasp and sputter before falling into a heap. Helena managed to take out the cell phone and was about to dial when Grandmother's hand shot up, grabbed the phone, and clicked it closed.

She spoke, her voice soft and strained, a bare echo. "That won't be necessary, dear. I'm fine. But I need to be alone for a while."

With that, his grandmother stood, turned her gaze toward the stairs, and left with an even shuffle, leaving behind a half-eaten plate of food and a pair of stunned onlookers.

Rich's mother spoke first. "I've never seen her act like that. Do you think I should call the doctor? She might have had another stroke or something."

Rich considered and then shook his head. "No, we should leave her alone. I'll go check on her in a little while, if that would make you feel better."

It would also make him feel better—and it would be the perfect chance to get some answers.

Helena nodded and began to clear the table. "I don't have much of an appetite, and you're right about the stroganoff." She sighed. "I think I'll go lie down too."

Rich carried his plate to the sink and balanced it on a stack of other dishes in the left basin. When he turned around, his mother was already gone.

In his room, Rich tried to get back to the scenario that

dinner had cut short. He knew knights would not stop for dinner in the middle of a joust and felt ridiculous trying to pick up the story where he had left off. Then again, most knights probably didn't live with their mothers.

He stared at the miniature figures below him, and for once, they seemed to him no more than metal and cloth. He sighed, reached out one finger, and flicked the figure of the dark knight's horse. It teetered and fell on its side, trapping its rider beneath it. Rich shrugged. That was about how things were going to end up anyway.

He stood and glanced over at his open textbook. For the first time in many weeks, he decided that it might not hurt to study a little, just to take his mind off things until he could talk to his grandmother about her strange gift. It seemed like the pawn was supposed to mean something, but Rich couldn't figure out what. Maybe it was some sort of family heirloom made for someone who had the same initials.

He took his seat, flipped on his desk lamp, and stared down at the open world history textbook in front of him.

His gaze fell on a colorful picture that graced the bottom half of the page. It was a painting he had seen before of thirteen men at a long table, all facing forward. He scratched his head, wondering at the strangeness of the scene.

Why would they all sit on one side of the table? he wondered. It looked awfully crowded.

His eyes wandered to the caption, and he found out why he recognized it—The Last Supper by Leonardo da Vinci. He read on, and his eyebrows shot up. Apparently, the original was painted on the back wall of a dining room in a monastery.

That would be something, he thought. His gaze drifted

from the book and he felt his mind wander, floating off into a place only he knew where to find and whose guests were those he invited.

He pictured an army of artists in paint-smattered smocks, brandishing brushes and pallets, descending on his dining room like a swarm of gnats. They painted furiously, their brushstrokes revealing a sweeping medieval landscape where only blank plaster had been before. A knight in full battle regalia sat perched atop a lofty hill, surveying a vast, rolling kingdom bathed in the first glimmering rays of sunrise.

Rich sighed, and suddenly, he was the knight, perched on his brilliant white stallion, pausing for a moment of quiet, peaceful introspection.

A sudden clang shattered his dream state. He jumped and grunted in annoyance, realizing that it had only been the clunky old water heater turning on.

"Why does this always happen?" he mumbled in frustration. Real life had a nasty habit of interrupting his dreams.

He stood, closed his history book, and glanced at the luminous digital readout of his alarm clock. Nearly an hour had passed since dinner, and he figured it was high time he kept his promise to his mother and checked on his grandmother.

He snuck out his door and treaded lightly down the hallway to his grandmother's door. He didn't want to wake her if she was trying to rest after what happened at dinner. Even when she felt good, she didn't like to have people in her room, not even his mother. Soft light filtered from the small space between the door and the frame. He couldn't hear anything from inside.

"Grandma?" he called into the dimly lit room through

the crack in the door. No answer. He reached out with one finger and pushed the door open farther. The old hinges squeaked in protest, and he tried again. "Grandma, it's Rich. I've come to see if you're all right. And I wanted to ask you something."

He waited another few seconds for a response. She might not be wearing her hearing aid. Though his grandmother's room was normally off-limits, he decided it would be best to go inside. For all he knew, she could be lying unconscious on the floor. With a deep breath, he opened the door the rest of the way and stepped inside.

The musty air of a room that didn't get much ventilation smothered him like a feather blanket. A large, lumpy bed with a brown comforter and yellow sheets dominated most of the room, so covered with papers, magazine clippings, and dusty books that Rich couldn't imagine anyone sleeping in it. A small nightstand stood to one side of the bed, covered with old picture frames and unrecognizable trinkets. The floor was likewise cluttered, creating a minefield of random junk strewn about in an order Rich couldn't even begin to understand. On the far side of the room, her closet door stood ajar, spilling light into the room from an overhead bulb.

Rich coughed and picked his way toward the closet, imagining that one false step would set off an explosion. "Or at least a dust storm," he muttered.

As he approached the door, he called once again for his grandma. No answer. He paused for a moment, wondering if she could be buried under mounds of junk. He dismissed the idea, stepping forward to grasp the doorknob.

The closet proved to be an extension of the rest of the room, cluttered with every kind of useless item. However, in the center of the floor appeared a small, open area of carpet with a single unframed photograph in the center.

Rich stooped down and picked up the photo.

It was black and white, the edges ragged and yellow from advanced age, and it depicted a young man with his arm around a young woman. Both smiled, their faces carefree and vibrant. Rich stared at the picture, considering each face. More than anything, the woman's smile gave it away—it was his grandmother, and that meant the man in the picture could only be his elusive grandfather.

He was a tall and muscular man with carefully kept hair and intense eyes. Rich sighed as he gazed at the man who had a face for the movies. If only some of those qualities had been passed down two generations.

Rich realized with a start that he had no memories of his grandfather. He had disappeared when Rich was a toddler, and his grandmother had never shown Rich a picture before. He squinted in the dim light, noticing something else that was strange. He touched the surface to be sure, his brow wrinkling in confusion. There were two damp splotches near the bottom of the picture, round splatters that made him think of raindrops.

He set the picture down, nervous and uncomfortable at the sight of it. The moisture was fresh, and that meant someone had been looking at it recently. It had to have been his grandmother. But where was she? He turned and made his way out of the closet and back across the junk-littered room. He slipped again through his grandmother's door and sprinted down the hall, taking advantage of the clear running space.

Frantic, he looked through every room, calling her name. With each successive attempt, he could feel panic welling up in his throat, threatening to overwhelm his common sense. He knew there had to be an explanation for her disappearance.

After making sure that she was nowhere in the house, he approached his mother's door. He tried to tell himself that his grandmother was in there, having a chat, but he couldn't silence that little nagging voice of doubt. No light came from under his mother's door, which meant that she had gone to bed. He didn't want to wake her up, but in this case, he felt as if he had no choice.

He rapped three times, making sure the knocks were loud enough to be heard. A patter of footsteps sounded from beyond, and she swung the door open a crack. "Rich, what's wrong?"

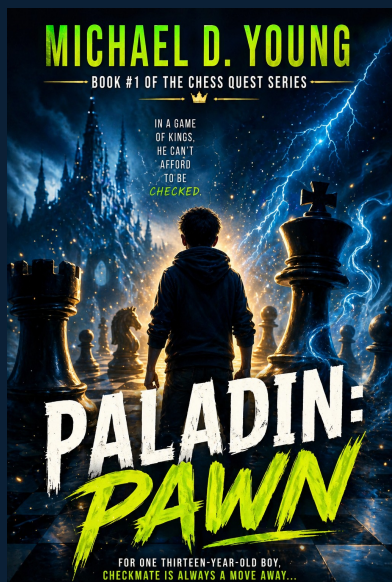
The story of his search came spilling out like a water balloon meeting a nail. Together, they searched the entire house, calling her name, checking even the most unlikely places. At last, his mother broke down and called the police to report a missing person.

Exhausted and confused, Rich collapsed on his bed, staring at the ceiling. It was as if his grandmother had gone in her room and vanished into one of her old photographs.

As he closed his eyes, the image of the black pawn took form in his subconscious. Not for the first time that night, he wished he could take back the answer he had given. He couldn't get rid of the feeling that if he had rejected the challenge, his grandma would still be around.

THE NEXT MOVE IS YOURS

End of Sample



Rich has accepted a challenge he does not yet understand - and a mysterious pawn is about to turn ordinary life into a very dangerous game.

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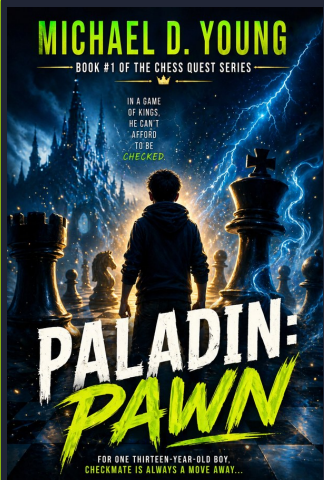
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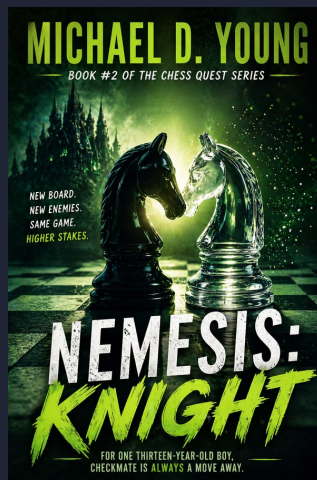
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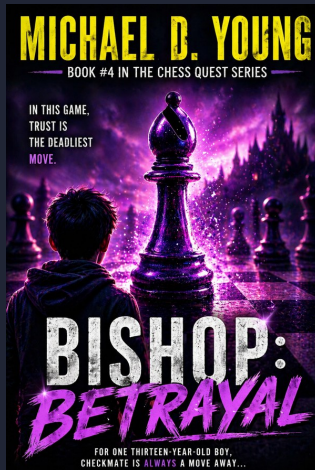
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