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THE EXCHANGE: A NOVEL

by

PETER FONTAINE

Under the Direction of Josh Russell

ABSTRACT

The Exchange is a fiction novel about Xavier "Savvy" Kowalski, one of the most promising American chess prodigies and rumored up-and-comer for international fame as a potential challenger for the world chess crown. After he loses the junior world chess championship in Venice, Italy, he retires to Las Vegas, Nevada where he hopes to start his life over. Savvy's father and the chess world at large conspire against him and he finds himself returning to competitive chess again after three years away. He assembles a new team to train him for a return to the world championship, and he also falls in love with a young prodigy he met during his retirement. Together they travel the United States and Europe as Savvy attempts to win back his reputation as America's premier chess player while encountering various rivals, including his own father. The story culminates with Savvy's final championship game, and with his dad.

INDEX WORDS: Exchange, Chess, Savvy, Novel, Father and son

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PETER FONTAINE

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2012

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2012

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Georgia State University

May 2012

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my father Fred Fontaine, who first taught me to play chess, and to my partner Cara Minardi who believed in me and supported me through the writing and completion of this novel.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I could not have written this book without the help of several, marvelous individuals. Every one of them has my thanks and appreciation. Josh Russell as my director and mentor was there at the inception and guided me throughout the process once it became my dissertation. Sheri Joseph helped me turn the idea into the book and got me to finish it. John Holman provided essential encouragement and valuable time in reading and responding to drafts and excerpts. Five colleagues responded meticulously and enthusiastically to the first draft of this book: Amber Brooks, Michael Cooper, Liane LeMaster, Sam Miller, and Calaya Reid. I also received indispensible advice, encouragement, support, and general nurturing from the following friends and family: Cara Minardi, Melanie McDougald, Will and Maggie Breen, Bill Sommer, Melissa Smith, Jared Kuhn, Pir Rothenberg, Matt Sailor, Jennifer Forsthoefel, Oriana Gatta, Damon and Julie Hawk, Sarah Higinbotham, my parents Kris and Fred, my sister Jeanette, and the rest of my family.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION iv

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS v

1 INTRODUCTION 1

2 THE EXCHANGE 15

1 INTRODUCTION

Over the years my own aesthetic priorities have changed; or rather they've come to the surface. My earlier attempts at articulating a personal aesthetic involved adopting one from a mentor of mine, one that I greatly respected, but while I agreed and respected it (and him) I don't think I understood it completely like he did, and I came to realize that I didn't always faithfully apply it to my critical appreciation of short fiction. My personal aesthetic has developed from being a college student for sixteen years, and having been a reader and fiction editor for *New South* and a reader for *Five Points*, and also having taught my own courses in creative writing, helping students develop an aesthetic awareness of their own.

My personal aesthetic criteria began with a story I read over a decade ago and have carried with me ever since: William Carlos Willams's "The Use of Force." For a long time it was my choice for "perfect story." It's only about three and a half pages, what we would term today as "flash" or "sudden" fiction, certainly not over a thousand words. What made it "perfect" by my definition, was how the entire story was built around, devoted to, and all about conflict. Specifically, a doctor, the first person narrator of the story, has been called in by an immigrant couple to examine their five or six year old daughter because they fear she has contracted diphtheria. To treat her, he must first diagnose her, and that means an examination. The daughter is described as an opponent, her sole purpose to frustrate the doctor's efforts, and she views the doctor as a villain, come to give her shots and all manner of torture and pain. The parents want to help the doctor, are on his side, but are conflicted because of their daughter's reticence and resistance. In trying to help the doctor they end up complicating and prolonging the struggle. He (the doctor) tries talking to her, cajoling her, outsmarting her, even threatening her, before finally

he must give in to the impulse he's been resisting (a struggle within himself), to hold her down, pry her jaw open, and identify the membranes at the back of her throat. He succeeds in this finally, but then in victory the girl lashes out, trying desperately to hurt him in anticipation of the painful shot she will receive. Every single element, detail, moment, and part of the story I could point to, examine, and analyze worked together toward the single ultimate purpose of the story's conflict between the doctor and the little girl. Secondary conflicts (the parents' interior conflict about how best to serve their daughter, to her wishes or her best care, and the doctor's interior struggle about how best to diagnose the girl without resorting to brute force) spawn from and exemplify the central conflict, complicating and enriching it. The girl's appearance is meant to deceive: in spite of her innocence she was savage to protect her secret, as the doctor knew she would be before he even asked to examine her. The parents' immigrant status made them outsiders, both to the doctor's country but also to the struggle, one older than nations or even language. It also informed their conflicted thinking, trusting in something they don't understand, the doctor's authority and expertise, but undercutting that trust by deferring to the familiar, their daughter. When not directly engaged in the doctor trying to overcome the girl's resistance and her thwarting him, the conflict is maintained through tension in the exposition of details and background. I say tension, because like a high wire trapeze, these moments are pulled taut, sharp and fine, between the relevant posts of conflict that structure the story and move it forward. The story is pure conflict, there's no respite due to the tension between conflicts-in-action, and it "ends" when the main conflict has been resolved, though a new, lesser one is the final image through the last sentence (of the girl lashing out at the doctor pitifully).

Part of what made this story "perfect," in addition to the Swiss-watch quality craft of each word, line, and moment in complete service to the overarching conflict, is that the

conflict(s) had a universal resonance contained within its concrete, contextualized struggle between a physician and a little girl. The child, we are told, is too young to truly understand lofty concepts such as mortality and the threat of oblivion as the doctor usually deals in, but the fact the girl understands pain and suffering, willingly accepting he sore throat to thwart the doctor's giving her a shot because that will be the end of something precious to her, thus plays out the struggle as if she understood about life and death. The title, "The Use of Force," also foregrounds the doctor's reluctance to use force on the girl even though he realizes that this will be, not the expedient way that will get him home to his wife sooner, but the only thing that he knows will ultimately work. He wants to believe reason, or patience, or sympathy will work, but the only answer that can work or will work is violence. It is the only solution that will resolve the struggle and end the conflict to the satisfaction of all involved, the girl included. The doctor is a peaceful man, cherishes life and health, but as a doctor must constantly resort to "the use of force" to achieve his goals for the good of his patients and his ideals. The central paradox of a doctor, who is a healer and a pacifist, who must deal in violence to achieve his goals is at the center of a psychological conflict that emerges within the action of the physical conflict the story is built around. Conflict is exemplified at numerous levels, to various degrees, all executed simultaneously to universal and long lasting effect. The physical conflict is visceral, compelling. The existential conflict within the doctor (and to a smaller degree within the parents) is moving and thought-provoking. In almost fifteen years I haven't been able to let this story go.

Williams wrote the story almost 90 years ago. He was a poet, an American Imagist who distilled his poetry down to the most essential line, image, and object he could, and this miniature narrative I've outlined is constructed to a similar purpose. Without slipping into meta-fiction, Williams nevertheless strips away all but the barest scaffolding of what makes a story

function, what a story needs to work completely, and that central aesthetic is the conflict in all its forms (conflict-in-action, tension) and varieties (physical conflict, internal conflict). The simplicity and length of the story make it ideal for teaching and also for analyzing in greater detail than longer works, which is one of the reasons I used it an all three of my creative writing classes and is my go-to example for modeling conflict in fiction to this day. However, there are limitations to it as my sole example for an aesthetic built around conflict. Being almost a century old it can hardly account for the movements and shifts in fiction and form that have succeeded it, and also its length excludes the framework of more complex conflicts in narrative. Nevertheless, it was the starting point for developing an awareness and articulation of my personal aesthetic.

Turning to contemporary examples of fiction with this aesthetic foregrounded, the conflict must be overt (though potentially, necessarily shot through with subtle, sub-conflicts or secondary conflicts connected to, or interconnected with the main conflict) and layered with tension. The conflict should be grounded in the struggle between distinct characters or around concrete events in which there is clear motivation, or goals that can be discerned by the story's end (much of the girl's resistance in Williams's story is fueled by the fact she knows she's sick but this is not absolutely revealed until the last paragraph of the story). The conflict needs to resonate universally with the reader both because of and in spite of the concrete nature it takes within the story. The nature of the resonance will be a sticking point based on a reader's personal taste, beliefs, politics, etc. I take issue with Wayne Harrison's conflict in "Least Resistance" (bad title for a story when conflict is the central aesthetic) because it essentially plays up the masculine gift to morally create "art" against women's selfish, sinful desire to manipulate and destroy men for their own happiness. I'm not a misogynist, so this "resonance" is particularly offensive. A better story, in this same respect, is Steve Almond's "Donkey Greedy, Donkey Get

Punched," where both characters, the psychiatrist and the poker player, are pretty repugnant people in their own way, but their conflict and internal struggles resonate a much more truthful idea about character, honesty, and self-destruction, which redeems the story at a central, thematic level. Harrison's story sabotages itself in virtually the same way. The prose, characters, and set pieces can appear very attractive, but it's all in service to an ugly conflict that is ultimately (I'd argue) harmful.

What to do with the post-modernists? Or post-post-modernists, like David Foster Wallace? The aesthetic of conflict is still applicable, but must be adapted to the shifted concerns of the fiction and the author's goals. For DFW, the language, as expression of existential crisis, is where the conflict now resides. The presumed reader (and for that matter, the presumed author) now plays a part in building and maintaining the tension that make up the majority of the story. This also works backward to the prose stylists and plotters of the 19th century and before. Henry James works tension in masterful ways, but it's a tension of syntax and decorum rather than of suspense and expectation.

In short, something has to be at stake. It can be a young girl's health, or a poker player's sanity, or the question of one's ability to pierce through solipsistic self-loathing, or just how a man can convince a friend to write his (the friend's) mother, but something has to be on the block to be pardoned or chopped. Once that is established, it's all in the handling. How do I come by the conflict? Who stands to gain and who stands to lose? Is the conflict executed properly within the logic of the construct? What does the conflict have to tell me about the human condition and my own life? How do each scene, each character, and each moment contribute to the conflict and my understanding of it? The perfect expression of this, I suppose, is the trapeze artist on the high wire: Will he fall or will he make it across? This is the central

question, yet we gasp and cringe at every step, every warble of the balance beam, every time we widen our gaze and take in the space between that taut rope and the hard, unnetted ground underneath. The great artist will make it across every time yet make us believe he was always one inch away from utter doom. I want that same balance for my own short fiction, and it's what I most appreciate and admire in the work of others.

To the novel and dissertation, why another bildungsroman? The coming-of-age novel is older than the term that coined it and the criticism that has defined, codified, and categorized it. But as generations pass and culture and society changes with them, the nature of how one comes of age changes with it. Likewise, the familial and cultural situation within which a person finds himself will characterize a unique coming of age that might not be found in another. Even so, a twenty-first century bildungsroman's success will be tied to how it adheres in its approach to the elements that define the form, while engaging in what Henry James calls "ingenuity" in terms of its style and the methods applied.

I wanted to approach my creative dissertation as my entrance into a conversation with writers whose work I've read, studied, and analyzed the majority of my academic career. Such works as Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise*, and Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* stand as some of the finest bildungsromans I've ever studied. However, in terms of prose style, the high modernism of these books (including *Tristram Shandy* even though it predates the high modernist period) is not something I could or would want to replicate in my own prose. Instead, I wanted my approach to emulate the design of their form: a talented, gifted protagonist who is beset the demands of the culture around him and whose family is instrumental to his coming of age. My novel would focus on my protagonist, "Savvy" Kowalski as he struggles to compete in the world of professional chess, while reconciling with

his father who has served as his manager and trainer. Savvy's art is his prodigious ability at the chessboard, and while his father has supported and shielded him from the politics of professional chess, he has also determined and controlled his son's career. Savvy's coming of age then is not only about moving from innocence into experience, but about breaking away from the sheltering grasp of his own father and finding a way to become independent and successful on his own terms, and then reconcile with his father as equals. This particular detail of breaking with and reconciling with a parent, particularly at Savvy's age within the novel of 18-21 years old, speaks directly to a growing twenty-first century condition of American children living with their parents longer into their early adulthood, looking to them for support and guidance into the later stages of their lives. Savvy pursues an education, he travels the world as part of his competitive goals, and he encounters various people new and old as he grows and eventually settles on the ambition to become a grandmaster.

This sequence of events and scenes within the novel are also meant to approach the form of the sports novel or story. Savvy's early defeat, due to lack of confidence in himself and his own professional goals, is prompted by his encounter with a chess hustler in the San Marco piazza in Venice. While functioning as the opening encounter with the real world (greed, deception, and even awakening sexuality) that first challenges Savvy's innocence, it is also the primary source of Savvy's doubt about his own ability to compete on the world chess stage. The tendency for sports novels to be non-fictional does not in any way diminish their narrative power and the means by which they propel the athlete's or team's heroic journey. In fact, many chess novels by and about grandmasters and world champions throughout history follow this same form of the sports novel. Following this form as it aligns with the bildungsroman, Savvy goes into self-imposed exile, only to return to his 'sport' with greater ambition than when he left. He

trains, competes, encounters rivals and competitors, and eventually faces his toughest opponent during the most important game of his career. While this would normally culminate in either victory or defeat to punctuate the climax of Savvy's competitive journey, this is the point where the sports novel form gives way to the bildungsroman, where Savvy's decision about the final game with Takahashi will inform his coming of age into that of a grown man. Balancing the two forms required structural and thematic support that came from two novels central to influencing my dissertation.

The Exchange's structure and many of its characters borrow from Dickens's *Great Expectations*. Like Pip, Savvy is the young protagonist upon whom much time and wealth is spent so that he may live up to the great expectations that are put upon him. Savvy's father is modeled after Magwitch who is responsible for establishing his son's training and the opportunities his son enjoys in the professional chess world. Like Pip and Magwitch, Savvy and his father also have an uncomfortable relationship. Savvy finds love in Dana, but also a competitor, a young woman who has her own name and stake to claim in the chess world, in some ways parallelling the relationship between Pip and Estella. Savvy also has friends and mentors, in the guises of Greg Stanley and Alek, not unlike Herbet Pocket and Mr. Jaggers. And no Dickensian novel would be complete without villains, or at the very least, antagonists. In this case, Boris Badulov stands in as the primary foil for Savvy's father, and Takahashi is the mirthful rival of Savvy. While they fulfill functions originated in the characters of Compeyson (to Magwitch) and Bentley Drummle (to Pip), they have almost no other similarities, being less caricatured villains bent on revenge and more ambitious businessmen who view the protagonists as obstacles to this end. These distinctions are crucial to separating Savvy's development as a character from Pip's. Only a few years of Savvy's young adult life compose the subject of the

novel, rather than his entire life from early childhood. Savvy also enjoys reasonable comfort and access to his father rather than living impoverished with an elder sibling before being swept away to the big city. The crux of their character development remains the same, however. Savvy must make a decision about what kind of man he is to become. This decision is informed by his past, but in this particular novel his past takes the form of loyalty to his father, with whom he's trained all his life. Savvy's decision is also informed by the experiences he's accumulated through his life and his associations. Pip's great ambition to win Estella's hand in marriage by becoming the perfect gentlemen makes for an enthralling love story, but the love story between Savvy and Dana is relegated to a lesser tier in the novel as Savvy must also contend with how he identifies himself in relation to his father, whose reputation and life so closely intersects with his own. Savvy doesn't want to end up beholden to his father for the entirety of his life, which necessitates in Savvy's mind the need to split from his father and become his own man. The great expectations placed upon Savvy are not nebulous and ill-defined. They are seated very clearly in Savvy's father's hopes and dreams for his son, the very machinations of his every action to prepare Savvy for his opportunity to become the chess world champion. The chess world subsequently assumes these expectations for Savvy and make them integral to everyone's dealings and interactions with him through the course of the novel. The conflict for Savvy is to reconcile pursuing the realization of these ambitions set out for him with believing he is his own man, capable and independent to set his own destiny. The distinction here places Savvy closer in line with Stephen Dedalus than with Pip. Savvy too wants to master his "art," and on his own terms at that, but much like Joyce's protagonist from that high modernist bildungsroman, the state of world chess is far more political and problematic than can be easily combated by a single player.

This intersection of chess and politics, and chess and art, is why the novel's themes and allegory are distinctly influenced by Nabokov's *The Defense*. Savvy wants to be an artist, but like Luzhin he cannot adequately articulate that desire in any way that would be useful to him. Also like Luzhin, Savvy is too successful a chess player for his own good. He soon finds himself on the world stage confronting the best of the new generation of chess masters, his future opponents for the world crown, but he doesn't yet understand what any of that means or what it will entail for his career and life. Money, sponsorship, politics (both in chess and from real world governments and ideologies) impact the organization of tournaments and opportunities to play for the highest accolades. Chess is a sport run by powerful people with little to no organizational oversight and Savvy quickly finds himself caught in the center of it due to his ability, and this ability in no way offers him any agency or means by which to engage with the politics on his terms. Savvy's reliance on his father, and later his support network of friends as trainers is meant to mirror Luzhin's own dependence, first on his trainer, and later his wife for moral and emotional support. In the original draft of the novel, Savvy suffered breakdowns due to a mental disease akin to Luzhin (who was in fact modeled after a real chess master who was delusional and eventually committed suicide because of those delusions). The decision to "right" Savvy's state of mind and mental health for the final version of the novel goes against a long tradition of "troubled" chess masters and artists of the game as they are often represented in fiction. In addition to Luzhin there are such characters as Beth Harmon from Walter Tevis's *The Queen's Gambit*, who is abused as a child and becomes an alcoholic before besting the world's greatest chess player. There is also Stefan Zweig's *Schachnovelle* where the character of Mr. B-----, an Austrian monarchist imprisoned by the Nazis, uses chess to save his sanity, only to suffer a complete breakdown when playing against a real opponent. These and numerous other examples

pair intellectual chess talent with mental anguish at the level of insanity. To a certain extent this is not an uncommon trope to encounter with artists as well, such as writers and painters, and in all cases numerous real world examples exist to almost outnumber the fictional depictions. The key to this decision to break with the depiction of Savvy as a tortured chess genius was my desire to place the conflict of the novel not within Savvy's psyche but in the decision he must make about how to pursue his life. The choice to make Savvy sane was one of practicality as well as aestheticism.

The influences that shape a novel are important, but of even greater importance when discussing a graduate dissertation are the methods applied. My methods for constructing the novel are primarily grounded in Henry James's "The Art of Fiction." Chess, as the vehicle for Savvy's art and life pursuits, was a conscious choice informed by James's recommendation that experience expanded by imagination "takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelation." Years of playing and studying chess at the club level mixed with reading from and discussing chess with professional players gave me a world, a background in which to place my characters. This background was informed not only from my experience and research, but also from my Jamesian imagination capitalizing and expanding on those experiences and studies to be able to create "the air of reality (solidity of specification)" that characterizes the tournaments, Savvy's ability to describe the games and how they are played, and the organization of the world championship. James connects characters to incidents as he connects story to the novel as both pairs are inseparable. Following this line of thinking, it was important that Savvy, as the main character and protagonist, was always active within the novel. As narrator he shares his memories, his feelings and beliefs as they become relevant, and the temptation is often to let a character narrator focus and even obsess on this interiority, but Savvy

is overtly active within the novel as well. It is his actions, the incidents that he participates within, that define him. Savvy defies his father, throws an important game, announces his retirement, and moves out on his own, all in the first two chapters. The arc of his development as protagonist is traced through the decisions he acts upon and the people he interacts with over the course of the novel. He begins his retirement alone and confused. By the end of the novel Savvy has gathered a group of friends and colleagues around him, and is certain about his relationship with his father and what he wants his career in chess to become. James's unification of character with incident in the novel is seemingly custom built for the bildungsroman where the protagonist's character and his coming of age are the basis of the novel's entire form.

The final hurdle that comes from grounding the methods of the novel in Henry James's "The Art of Fiction" is the obligation to which we, as readers, must hold the novel, "that it be interesting." For all the inquiry into form, structure, themes, and methods, the novel must ultimately satisfy by being interesting. Sports in general, and chess in particular, have their fans, but are not by the nature of their rules and history widely accessible subject matter. The bildungsroman, even one written with an eye to the twenty-first century flavor of coming of age, is a familiar and well-trod form that will not earn any merits on its inventiveness (or lack thereof). The question of the novel's success, "that it be interesting," ultimately rests in the voice and character of Savvy. He is our guide, not only through the world of professional chess that he attempts to navigate on his own for the first time, but through the relationships that define his coming of age. There is no removed, all-knowing narrator to assure us of Savvy's ability or the veracity of his father's love. Savvy himself must make sense of these things when they occur to him, and he makes sense of them through the telling, just as the readers do. I wanted the very heart of the coming of age story to be about how the transition from innocence into experience,

from dependence into independence, is how a character and even people become interesting. Through this process they become not only interesting to others but also to themselves. If the novel succeeds it is because Savvy has successfully made the significant life altering change at the novel's conclusion where he decides that his relationship with his own father is just as important, if not moreso, than his future career as a chess champion. By that climactic action, Savvy ceases to be an agent of other people's expectations of him, and he defines for himself who he is and what is most important for him.

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2 THE EXCHANGE

Chapter 1

All I wanted that day, the day everyone wants to know about, was to walk outside by myself and feel the sun on my face and see the piazza. It was June in Venice. Too humid for a suit jacket and tie, inside or out, but that was my uniform when I competed abroad. When my father and I traveled by train eastward from Milan, I took my jacket off while he was on the phone with the tournament organizers, conversing in Spanish. He saw me do it, but made no indication that he disapproved until after he finished his phone conference. He told me to put it back on, that he understood how uncomfortable it must be, but that I had to acclimate. Inside the playing hall would be no better, he said.

The playing hall was small and cramped compared to what I was used to seeing in the States. The organizers and officials, professionally attired, shook hands casually among the participants. Their clothing was more in keeping as international philanthropists than as sport officials. There were no nametags hanging around people's necks or color-coordinated shirts and pants to emphasize tournament official roles. Yet everyone knew who I was and addressed themselves to my father first, before greeting me in English. All of the older men, especially the gray-haired, bearded sponsors with the expensive tailored suits all knew my father from his days playing at such events, and told me that I was an honored guest. I was stunned to be introduced to the ICF president and vice-president, and to meet two former world champions who had come to observe the tournament. It was also the first time I met international managers and promoters of the game. The most prominent of them was Boris Badulov, a Bulgarian manager and promoter, who was currently representing the very best and most promising young chess masters in the world. His current star was known as "The Sixth," because he was named after Tigran

Petrosian, the famed Soviet-Armenian world chess champion. In the six years he was world champion every father named Petrosian in Armenia must have named his second son Tigran, and Armenia was a nation which, after the fall of communism, continued to devote a lot of funds and resources to developing their chess stars. There were six Tigran Petrosians that had been registered with the ICF active database, and the youngest was known by all the other junior masters as “the Sixth,” a fact that had not escaped Badulov and his promotion campaign for his youngest and most successful star. Along with Takahashi, another American like myself, the Sixth was favored to win this event, which would boost him from his international master status to grandmaster.

Badulov greeted me with a warm and inviting handshake and I noticed that his English was near perfect, except for a deep timbre that seemed to emanate from below his diaphragm. He told me I would be one of the next world champions, as long as I had the proper friends and representation. He gave me a card that included his personal cell phone number, and told me I was already a stronger player than my father had been. I thanked him and then broke away so I could find my father and we could return to our hotel room.

My father had warned me about Badulov in that he rarely spoke about him or gave him a single moment’s thought. I had long ago learned that things my father disdained were undeserving of both discussion and consideration, and he disdained Badulov more than most. In the hotel room I asked him about Badulov and he responded, “Boris Bad?” It was a nickname that Badulov had cultivated himself. He had aspirations of being the most exclusive and best paid manager in chess and was not above any stunt or performance to garner attention and even infamy for international chess competition. The sponsors loved him because of the waves he

made and the media attention he drew, but organizers and players learned to be wary lest they be caught up in a tabloid scandal or face censure from the ICF, as some had in the past.

My first week of encounters was encouraging. Three draws to start and then two wins against juniors in the middle of the standings like myself put me in top contention going into the second week. I was surprised to find that I was always the last to finish each day, with my fellow competitors circled around our game as we slogged through the endgame. Each opponent resisted draw offers early on and so I stopped making them all together. In each instance my opponent was tougher than almost any I had faced back in America. I always started worse in the opening, and then achieved some balance in the middlegame before having an uneven endgame where I had to defend tenaciously to force the draw. Never once did I have a clear or sweeping advantage, and only in the last two games did I possess enough of a positional advantage that I was able finally to maneuver a win, but only after hours of grinding down their stamina and concentration.

There was a rest day on Sunday before the second week of play. In spite of knowing my father would schedule the whole day for preparation, I asked him if we could instead tour Venice and take a break. He refused and so we sat to work over my opening responses that I would study for Sunday. I had been keeping my father updated each evening about my progress and he had been pleased, which I guessed would make him amenable to giving me a day off. I based my guess on nothing other than a belief in mutual exchange, my progress in the tournament for an opportunity to experience Italy. I never asked my father for anything like a day off on my own initiative, he was always the one to know my needs at any event and provide them before I could complain or ask. From a greasy spoon down the corner at a hotel in Omaha when I played there, he brought me cheeseburgers with thick-cut fries and a chocolate shake. After a terrible loss in

Chicago he ordered a night of movies on the hotel television and I fell asleep to the cantankerous glare, the pain of the loss erased from my mind the following morning. When I misplayed a prepared middlegame position at a scholastic event in San Diego he took me to the zoo and told me old stories of grandmaster Tartakower teaching the Orangutans checkers. But I couldn't think about anything like that any further and returned to my chess set to see if it were possible to trap Takahashi in an unusual opening, which were a temptation of his. Before long it was dark, and then it was time to sleep. My father switched off the bulb hanging over the small table in our room and then guided me to the bed. He stretched out on the cot that swallowed all the available floor space, and grunted his good night. In the morning he would shower, dress, and bring back breakfast for the both of us before leaving me at my studies for the day. As I lay still in my clothes, a bad habit I had picked up from my father, I planned what to do once I was prepared for the tournament resumption on Monday. The night's study had been fruitful, and I had played Takahashi before, never having lost to him. For the first time in years, I was thinking about disobeying my father about something monumental.

The next morning I was surprised to see the sun filling our room with light. I had expected my father to wake me when he brought breakfast, but I was alone. On the small table, next to my chess bag, was a package wrapped in butcher's paper. I found cold cuts inside, with two hard-boiled eggs, a tomato, two paper packages of salt, and two trimmed stalks of celery. My father could have dropped it off at any time since it was cold, knowing it would keep until I woke up. I ate quickly, changed my clothes without showering, and left the room without unfolding my board or reviewing my analysis from last night. I told myself that my father was delayed, perhaps all day. I told myself the city was mine to explore. I told myself I had earned this day.

The sun was harsh, and my only company was the sound of my shoes on the cobblestones following me. I quickly found myself anticipating my encounter with Takahashi, and then castigated myself for letting chess distract me from what I had impetuously seized. There would be nothing but chess after today, game after game, study after study, and if I won then a whole career, a whole lifetime of chess. It occurred to me, without knowing where I was going or why, I was almost running and sweating for the effort. I stopped and took my breath, running through last night's analysis to clear my head. I took the moment's peace to take out my pocket set and review a variation for tomorrow's game. Once I was satisfied that I had regained my focus, I continued walking.

Because it was my first trip outside the US, Venice was unlike any city I had ever seen. Everything was filthy and old, but also beautiful as if the sheer artistry of the architecture was the only thing keeping so many of the buildings standing. As I walked down one of the side streets toward the *Piazza di San Marco* I wished I had read Thomas Mann, for upon reflection his book on my father's library shelf back home was the only awareness I had ever really had about the place. It was still early in the day and increasingly warm. I took off my jacket, loosened my tied, and continued walking to see the sights of Venice. Even in the train car, seated next to the window, I dared not sneak more than a glance as I worked over the positions I analyzed during the journey. It wasn't until we boarded the vaporetti that I had license and quietude of my own thoughts to observe the city and its canals. These were the moments of my sight-seeing, such as they occurred, when I competed at home. The view from taxis were the scant opportunities available to take in architecture, people, landmarks, and culture. In minutes the remainder of my stay would be enclosed first in the hotel room and later the playing hall. And after the tournament was over, when my mind would be swimming with the events that occurred within

the sixty-four squares of the chessboard, I'd have no time to indulge before catching our flight back.

For years this same pattern played itself out, but I had just turned eighteen and while my opportunity to become junior world champion loomed before me, I also longed to gaze upon the world I had so regularly traveled but never quite experienced. With one rest day before the last leg of matches and my father hopefully occupied with the tournament organizers for the better part of the day, this was my one chance, and I had seized it.

Following the slender map of the city, its coastline, and the surrounding islands that had been given to us at the train station on our arrival I surmised that I was heading for Saint Mark's. I had heard advice given in the playing hall earlier in the week about the best spots to visit for tourists. One Mexican chess prodigy, after his loss to me, inquired with the tournament staff and I overheard them recommend the islands of San Michele and Murano, the first for its cemetery, including its famous internments, and the latter for the exquisite glass-blowing that was world famous and unparalleled. I would have loved the opportunity to visit either place, but my father would not be gone all day and so I reasonably had only until mid-afternoon to explore and take in the sights.

As I made my way down side streets and alleyways, I saw kiosks set up for candlemaking, complex affairs where the wick was dipped numerous times in several different colored vats of hot wax and then dried to create narrow rainbows. These layers were revealed by the finished candle being carved into ornate chandeliers with curves and shoots in symmetrical patterns. One of the candlemakers, a young man close to my own age spoke enthusiastic but broken English to me and urged me to pick up his wares and examine them from all angles before I buy. Although a small crowd surrounded the kiosk he addressed only me. I noticed then

that I was the only person there walking with a map in his hands. I put it away and continued to the next intersection.

I looked in a few storefronts as I continued and was surprised by how quiet and sleepy the morning was. Most store windows had a few objects on singular display and there were no brand names or set dressing to call particular attention to anything. A few goblets and candelabras had small cards, of very fine stock, that identified the glass they were made from and their composition origination in Murano. While the pieces themselves were very beautiful in subtle ways, I was more interested in seeing the glass-blowing process than I was the completed figures themselves, like the candle-making.

I turned another corner and the world opened up before me. The buildings had been rising around me, having started out as two and three story structures yet growing to almost five or six stories in height, like townhouses, when suddenly I was in the expansive piazza of the cathedral. The bell tower loomed directly in front of me, with the Mediterranean flat and gray behind it. The cathedral itself seemed to dominate to the left, and large buildings with ornate columns and steps were to my right. Several of the buildings had groupings of tables in front of them and people walked, sat, stood, and generally milled all over the area. I smelled coffee and made my way over to a small cluster of black tables and chairs and sat in the shade. A waiter quickly came by and I ordered an espresso. After he brought the saucer with the tiny cup atop it I settled the bill in case I wanted to walk around while I sipped my coffee. He thanked me, and rather than stand I leaned back, a luxury for a chess master, and surveyed those in closest proximity to me.

The first person to catch my eye was an Italian woman. She too had a cup of espresso in front of her, though it sat untouched before her folded arms. Her gaze was centered out in the piazza, watching the people pass by her table, which was three down from mine deeper in the

shade where it was probably cooler. I noticed her because she had curly long dark hair that seemed rich, and yet light enough to almost suspend above her shoulders in tiny, perfect locks. The hair framed her olive face, neck, and cleavage, which was ample and paler, and almost bursting from the thin red blouse she wore. My stare was intense and she quickly turned to meet my eyes. Her response was cool. She smiled briefly and then narrowed her eyes and resumed people watching, as if my staring were courteous and worth only a cursory acknowledgment. As my focus relaxed I noticed beyond her, at a farther table, a man hunched over. I saw that he was studying a chess board. I made my way over to him, taking the briefest of moments to steal a look down the woman's blouse as I walked by (she seemed not to notice this), and then stood opposite the man who stared at the position in front of him.

He also had dark curly hair, but he kept his hair short, probably because he was balding. The hair loss and a slight stubble made him look older than he actually was, for his face and in particular his eyes seemed to be those of an older man. In America his dress would have made him look like a vagrant. He wore a coat too large for him and it was a different color and fabric from his pants. The pants themselves were just too short and I could see the sock on his left foot had fallen down around his ankles. His shoes were brown, coarse, and in dire need of repair. Such men were the stuff of legend in the chess parks of Manhattan. This one here was probably a burned out savant who now hustled for money. My father had never let me play such a person in all my life and refused even to discuss them other than to warn me against them, but years of playing children and boys my own age had afforded me plenty of gossip to digest about them. I took a moment to study the board and his chess problem before I moved deliberately into his periphery and gestured to the seat across from him. He looked up and nodded as if he had been expecting me all morning.

The position was an easy one, though not elementary, and I showed him the correct continuation. He showed his own choice of move to challenge my solution, but I refuted every variation he could muster. He huffed and then nodded again. Not a word was exchanged in these minutes. We spoke through chess. Silently, he rearranged the board for a game. When the pieces were aligned, he removed a black pawn and a white pawn to under the table where he shuffled them before presenting his two fists for me to choose between. I tapped his left hand with my finger and he revealed the white pawn. I took it, ready to place it for my first move when he held up his hand and said, "*Cento*."

From my pockets I began to pull out lire but he held up his hands and shook his head.

"Euros," he said.

I balked at first. A hundred Euros was a third of what I carried in my billfold. My opponent sensed my hesitation and put a tightly pressed roll of Euros on the table behind his pieces. It was clear he was trying to hustle me, but his arrogance was impressive. I had defeated his chess problem, no doubt meant to boost my own arrogance about my chances, but he didn't know that I was on my way to becoming a grandmaster by the end of the week. His money would be mine.

I took my billfold out of my breast pocket and pulled out the money, laying it behind my pieces as my opponent had done with his money. He nodded once more and our game began. It was no easy win for me, which I mean to say that I did not defeat him quickly. We had no clocks, no means of keeping the time. If I played quickly, my opponent would huff and dig in for two or three minutes, sometimes five, before making the one move we both knew he had to make. Yet when I took more than two minutes myself he would say "*avanti*" under his breath and I would have to commit to the move I was calculating or risk further interruption. Being

rushed was no concern to me, the move I was considering each time was good enough, and my calculation deep enough, that he never had the opportunity to refute it. What irked me was that I was unaccustomed to the format and execution of style in this particular game, with no clocks or arbiters to appeal to should something go awry. Finally, I acclimated to the rhythm of time spent considering moves and to the machinations of my opponent and he soon found himself mated. He folded his arms and nodded again. “Si, si,” he said. Then he held up his money and, handing it to me, said in labored English, “Double or nothing.”

I paused with my hand around the folded bills, yet the fellow’s hands had not yet released his grip. We sat there a moment, arms suspended above the board, and I weighed my response. I had ventured out of my hotel on this rest day, not to play chess, but to take in the sights, sounds, and smells of Venice. As I reminded myself of that, however, I was struck by the front of Saint Mark’s behind my opponent, fully in the sun and opulent in its age and austerity. The shadows were receding all around us as the light filled the piazza into late morning and the crowds were receding with the shadows, yet the space teemed more than when I had first arrived. Was it possible to enjoy all of my life’s pleasures in this piazza morning?

“Si,” I said. He withdrew his hand and yet again that smooth head tilted toward me in assent. He produced another fold of money and set it in the same place as before, and I took my own Euros as well as the fold I had won and did likewise.

Once the board was set up again, my opponent presented his fists side by side, knuckles facing up to the sky. This time I tapped his right hand, but within was the black pawn. He turned the board around so we each had the appropriate color and then started the game. The opening moves went quickly as they were supposed to, but then the man leaned back and stared at the board with his arms crossed. I saw that he would take his time with this rematch in an attempt to

gain his money back, and I silently accepted this since I could use his time to take in more of the scenery around us.

Unlike before, my opponent let me think longer, but I never spent more than ten minutes on a given move. He was playing much better, but I had several plans enacted to simplify to a won endgame and gave the game little concern so that I could watch the crowds and observe the minute changes the cathedral underwent as the sun rose to the center of the sky above our heads. Half an hour into our game, the woman I had noticed earlier sat down at a table behind my opponent, off his right shoulder. There was a pastel umbrella set up that just covered the chairs and she was glistening from having been caught in the sun. She leaned forward over the table to be completely shaded and her breasts nearly spilled out of her top. I looked up at her and saw she was glancing at our chess game, but had not yet caught my eyes staring at her cleavage.

"Avanti," my opponent said.

I turned to the board to see it was my move. How long had I been staring? Could it have been longer than ten minutes? I couldn't believe that my stare had gone unnoticed or unchallenged by her if it were so long.

I quickly moved, following a line I had decided on earlier in the game, and went back to observing the woman.

In front of her was a glass of ice water. She had placed several shards of ice in a handkerchief and was dabbing her forehead and neck with it. Her breasts swelled and rose with each breath she took, as her skin met the cool, damp fabric she pressed there.

"Eh, eh," my opponent said. He tapped the center of the board. Again he had moved and was waiting for my response. I felt flustered at his insistence, but could do nothing to slow or end the game without losing the money. I scanned the position, ensuring that he had not made an

unexpected move, and then proceeded with my continuation. We were no longer in the shade and I felt myself sweating as the sun inched towards noon directly over our heads.

Keeping my eyes on the board, following this exchange, I noticed that my opponent had been stepping up the tempo of his moves in response to my pauses and that his eyes now occasionally flitted up at my own. At no time before had he made attempts to look at my eyes or even glance at my face. He had sensed a weakness from my distraction, a measure of inaccuracy in my play, and was hoping now to capitalize on it. I held my breath and looked again at the position, taking time as I had earlier when the game first became interesting, and I spotted an opening he had accidently created in his kingside defenses. I advanced with my knight to support a later intrusion with my rook when the sound of glass and ice on metal diverted my attention. I saw that the woman had spilled her water on the table and she was using her handkerchief to furiously mop across the metal surface. The neckline of her blouse had seemed to shoot even further down and with each stroke of her arms across the table I saw both breasts move freely, catching sight of one of her nipples. My view was blocked suddenly when my opponent stood up, adjusted his seat to obscure my line of sight and then sat again grumbling to himself in Italian. His piece move had done nothing to prevent my attack of his kingside so I resumed my assault, and though I dared not peek behind his shoulder, my mind was nonetheless filled with images of the woman's voluptuous and perfectly displayed breasts.

I didn't see how I could lose until it was already too late. Our moves went quickly, my attack mounted, when suddenly my opponent sacrificed his queen. He had been hunched forward, letting his arms umbrella the board as he moved his pieces, and I could only focus on my attack and how his frame obscured my gaze of the woman behind him. At last, I saw that in

all my efforts to stage a mating net, I had left my own king undefended and the balding man's increased tempo won him the first check with the sacrifice, and the game.

I was stunned. I had never been beaten so cleverly and unexpectedly by an amateur. Not at my present peak. He sat back with his arms folded, his face noncommittal, but he looked into my eyes without hesitation or decorum. I recognized true patience and confidence in that pitiless glare, and handed him the money. He gestured to the board as I stood to leave. I hoped the intense shaking of my head communicated exactly how much I did not want to play again. He shrugged and rearranged the pieces for a new puzzle to play through, no doubt awaiting fresh prey of lesser talents than my own. Behind him, the woman had vanished. She had joined the crowds that moved in fluid channels against the buildings around the piazza looking to escape the oppressive noonday sun. As I turned to go, a taller man in a gray jacket and hat bumped into me, grumbled "*scuse*," and continued on in the opposite direction. He bowed his head and pulled his hat down, but something about him seemed familiar. My attention was divided between getting to my hotel room where I had to return before my father did, and my loss to the hustler. I was half way back, just passing the candlemaker stand, when I discovered my billfold was gone. I knew I had taken it out when I played the hustler at the piazza. Had I forgotten it in my furstration? I jogged back to where we had played to discover that my opponent and his chessboard were gone. I knew instantly why the man in the jacket and hat had looked familiar, his graying hair at his temples had been curly and cut short, and his jacket, although finely made, had not matched his slacks. The player's father perhaps? Or an uncle. He had stolen my billfold when he had bumped me. I never felt a thing. And the woman? Had she been for my benefit, in cahoots with the swindler as well? I would never know, but it was easy to accept completely and forever that she had been. Though I stood in the centuries old square, before one of the most

beautiful cathedrals in the entire world, I saw nothing but my own life as a pathetic farce, played out in a lost game of chess.

* * *

The playing hall had such a dense and profound scent that I didn't realize how powerful it was until it was gone. I had finally grown accustomed to the walls, the sounds, and the feel of the air around me after a week in this relatively cramped space. Instead of flood lights and overhead arrays, small overhead lamps had been strung down over tables bunched close together. The light shone brightly, but its corridor was narrow and the passages between tables and close to the walls were dark except near the entrance and the two windows at the back wall. The chessboard dominated in the seated players' vision as the rest of the surrounding venue melted away, and even spectators couldn't see more than the disembodied hands of the junior masters as they made quick blitzing moves or slow languid motions, depending on the point of the game and the player's own confidence.

I had played my game against Takahashi confidently enough at first. As I surmised he went in for an unusual opening position and I had worked on a number of variations based on his favored moves in previous games. I was soon forced into a complex middlegame for which I had no preparation or prior work to help me. I was forced into maximizing my time to calculate as far ahead as I could with each move. Before long I saw again that bodies in the dark surrounding us pressed in against the cone of light that encompassed our table and chess board. Takahashi and I were barely thirty moves into our game when everyone else had finished. The intensity of the overhead light made it impossible to make out the faces of those standings around, but

somewhere among them was the Sixth, as this game would decide who his closest rival would be going into the final round at the end of the week.

It was common for chess players to stand and stretch their legs between moves, chat with other players, even mill around the playing hall. Neither Takahashi nor I had moved from our seats, and he had taken to staring at me intently between each move as I could only bring myself to stare at the position. But my mind's eye stared toward the horizon of the future position I fought and strived for. It was unsettling to note the intensity of his stare and the casual way he sat or gestured at the board, in deep contrast to the start when he shook my hand formally but said, "Good luck, Kowalski," as if we were old pals playing a friendly game.

My greatest problem was that Takahashi had learned from our previous encounters. He had played cautiously, but inventively so that I was lost in a consistent forest of deep calculation. As I made each correct move he chipped away at my time until his advantage was staggering. I would be blitzing moves in the endgame while he had luxurious minutes to consider and calculate where I might make the slightest inaccuracy, and I would be done for. I saw my next move but hesitated, knowing it would only lead to another long think after his reply that would leave me with even less time. Objectively we were even, though the position wasn't what anyone would call balanced. There was still play left, pieces to exchange and pawn chains to disrupt, but I decided to bet on an old maneuver and offered a draw as I moved. Takahashi leaned forward as if to accept my proposal, but then gestured my hand away as he played his reply instead. A knight sacrifice along my defended king side. He hoped to break open my fortress with an irresistible and irrefutable attack. He had lined up his rooks several moves ago, but had waited until he could create an opening that would balance the heavy sacrifice of material needed. It was a risky ploy but had been beyond my calculation of what I considered a serious threat. Had I

once again missed a loss and gambled a draw as my only possible hope for survival? This time it had been due to my inability to see well enough ahead rather than my ability to bluff as before. I moved to accept the sacrifice as I had been taught to by the great masters before me when I stopped myself and stood up. I walked past those around me and began a circuit of pacing around the playing hall. I looked into no one's face nor even saw anything around me. No position as complicated and difficult as the one Takahashi and I were in was certain in its outcome. There was still a way, but I had to find it. In walking around in a small square over and over again, my brain ran through its paces over and over, retreading the moves, the hypothetical combinations, the shifts in material and position with each variation. At last I literally stumbled on the answer. I felt the vault door in my mind once more open and I tripped over an uneven tile and fell on my face, striking my head against the ground. I awoke instantly on my back with a dozen barely lit faces staring down at me. Among them was my father and Takahashi, and I smiled when I looked at him. I spoke the move aloud in our algebraic shorthand, my blockading move that cut off the knight's retreat, forcing him to exchange the piece or else sacrifice it in vain. I was stunned again as he smiled down at me and reached down to help me stand.

"You're crazy, Kowalski. Do you even know you fell over?" He laughed and shook his head.

A paramedic was called, but an arbiter ran and found a glass of ice that he applied to my swollen forehead. The main arbiter granted a suspension of time at Takahashi's request until the paramedic had a chance to okay my continuing the game. After checking my pupils, my hearing, my memory he okayed me to continue if I wanted to. Everyone smiled or sighed with relief and I returned to my seat to play.

Whether my discovered response or my fall had rattled Takahashi wasn't clear, but the game was soon mine. We entered a pawn endgame where I had distinct positional advantages that I exploited mercilessly and he finally conceded when he could no longer keep his king in the center of the board to keep my army of pawns in check.

"Good game, Kowalski," Takahashi said, resigning. I hadn't even realized in all my analysis during the game that I had a massive headache, nor did I feel any light headedness when Takahashi offered to go over the post-mortem and I passed out.

* * *

I was given an extra rest day. My round seven game was postponed until the following rest day before the final round. I played the remainder of my games below my usual level, managing only draws as I had in the first week, defending poor positions or eeking out an even game after uncertain opening and middle game play. I even played poorly in my postponed game, but managed to capture the half point from a bluff in the middle game where I appeared to defend against my opponent's queenside assault. In truth I was only delaying it, but yet again we were the last to play and my opponent was probably as tired as I was. He offered the draw and I accepted immediately.

My last round game was against the Sixth and he was in the sole lead. A draw would assure him a share of first if not outright first place, while a win for him, against me, would insure no one would catch him in the standings. If I won I would be in first, possibly sharing it with Takahashi if he won his last round game. Of course whoever was first in the final would be awarded a grandmaster title, and none of us in the top of the standings had earned one yet.

My father returned to our room the evening before my final round game, and we were joined a moment later by Boris Badulov.

My father, who had barely voiced his concerns about my “head injury” all week, was about to counsel me when the knocking started. My father was closest and opened the door giving Badulov a start. My father would tell me later it was a moment he relished as Badulov was rarely caught in a moment when he wasn’t composed.

“Mikhail, you’re here. I heard you would not be able to get away from the congress in Switzerland.”

My father made a short bow and gestured for Badulov to come in and join us. The room was the smallest I had ever stayed in and three of us sitting to talk required use of the bed and my father’s cot. Badulov smiled and extended his hand to me, which I shook. His offered hand to my father went unaccepted.

“My son is about to become a grandmaster, Boris. I could not miss such an event for anything, not even the re-unification itself.”

“Really, now, Mikhail, do you think re-unification is at all likely at this point? After all, it will take money, lots of money to fund such a thing, and the president does not have the limitless funds he sometimes exhorts. You know this as well as I. And you also know damn well that the sponsorship will wither before it’s been plucked without a proper champion at the center of this deal.”

“I have never been cynical, Boris.”

“I thought it was a requirement under Botvinnik’s tutelage. Besides,” he said, waving his hand in front of his face, “whether I am cynical as you say or not, the truth remains. Who will

give a million dollars for Patel to win? Or Cranmic? You can't be serious. As long as Weinstein is active it will require his participation or there's no money."

"No," my father said, his voice rising. "Weinstein is out. He lost his title. The Soviet stranglehold on chess is over. Time for it to end with the rest of the old order."

Badulov shrugged as if he were offering a concession. "Perhaps when he retires there will be a chance. A new champion can dethrone him in the eyes of those who matter. In the meantime, your efforts would be better spent as they have been with your son. He's quite exceptional."

"He is sitting next to you, why do you not speak to him yourself?"

"Quite right. You are exceptional, Savvy," he said, smiling.

For some reason I couldn't explain in that moment, I corrected him and told him my name was Xavier.

"My apologies. I've known your father for so long that I forget my manners. I came here to talk with you, Xavier, about tomorrow's game."

"He has nothing to say," my father said. I turned to him.

"I'm right here, Dad. I can speak for myself."

"Savvy," my father said. "You are not here to negotiate with men such as this. Your only concern tonight is the match tomorrow."

"But the match tomorrow is why I am here," Badulov interjected.

"You will be silent, Boris, while I speak to my son or I will have the owners eject you from the establishment." Badulov held up his hands in apology, saying nothing.

"Dad, let him talk. Let him say what he wants to say."

My father sighed. He looked down at his shoes. He knit his eyebrows together, and then he stood up. “You are not feeling well, Savvy. After your fall, I think you should lie down. Boris and I will converse outside.”

I told him I wanted to hear what Badulov had to say to me. I didn’t want to be kept out of my own affairs.

My father sighed. “Though I am your teacher and handle your professional affairs, I am your father above all of these things, and I must tell you that this is a blunder. Will you listen to me?”

I was struck suddenly by the image of the amateur who had beaten me in the piazza, and the gruff silver-haired man who I thought looked like his father. They had fleeced me, working in unison, but I remember the melancholy in the amateur’s face, and the mask of purpose on the old man’s. It felt to me that if I listened to my father I would be choosing to stay under his tutelage and his guidance for the rest of my life, until I retired, or he perished. The feeling upset me, forced me to acknowledge that my father had made decisions for me and he had never asked my consent. He asked about rest, my meals, my comfort, my means, but never once did he ask me if I was ready, if I wanted to assume a measure of control or information over the decisions that determined my life. I wanted him to feel how upset I was, I wanted to pierce his gruff exterior with my answer, so I said carefully, slowly, mockingly, “No, I will not listen to you. I can make my own decisions.”

“That is clear,” my father said. “What I am uncertain about is your ability to accept the consequences.” He nodded at Badulov and said, “I would like to speak with you later. Your hotel room in one hour?”

“By all means. I won’t stay long.”

My father left, and I turned from the shutting door to see Badulov staring at me expectantly.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"It is not my concern," he said. Badulov took a brief moment to hood his eyes, inhale deeply, and then continue. "Now, I have talked with the arbiter and the organizers and we both feel that in the interest of your health it is unfair to ask you to play tomorrow's game against Tigran. Instead, we've all agreed that a draw can be arranged and agreed upon before the start of tomorrow's round and you would be free to convalesce in Venice at your leisure, or even return home if you feel up to the travel."

"But I feel well enough to play," I said.

"Is that true, Xavier? To my admittedly amateurish eyes you seemed to have been struggling after your win against Takahashi, fine though it was."

"If I agree to this draw then the Sixth gets to place first."

"It's true, it guarantees Tigran his share of first place; it is why he is amenable to it. But I and the others are looking out for your best interests as well. Besides, second place is distinguished, is it not? And you will have achieved it without a solitary defeat, an accomplishment in many eyes that matter. Your talents are promising and have not escaped my notice, or the notice of others who would wish to help you benefit from them."

"Who has been noticing me?" I said.

"Far be it from me to do my competitors any favors, but let us say that I would consider myself fortunate to be able to represent *you* rather than, say, Mr. Takahashi."

"You don't represent Takahashi."

"As of this moment you are one-hundred percent correct. But who knows what the facts of the future are? Even grandmasters miscalculate what will happen. But you and I together can determine it." It was uncomfortable to hear him talk this way yet see no glimmer of a smile on his face. From pictures printed in chess magazines and posted on websites I knew he had a handsome face and a famous smile, carefully practiced to charm everyone, yet he didn't smile once at me.

"So you're saying that I should make you my manager? Why? You've already got The Sixth."

Badulov nodded quickly in agreement, but his eyes were flummoxed. "America has two new chess talents. America is large and powerful and wealthy. I am speaking primarily of chess wealth. Untapped. They need only a champion to lead them into the new global arena. Takahashi is brash, cunning, and exciting. What is the phrase used from American television? *Swash-buckling*. Very common for an American. But always the difficulty of follow through. All of your great heroes quit at their peak never to return. Morphy, Fine, Fischer. So sad. Takahashi is like them. You are more dependable. The depth of your play is far more reminiscient of the Soviets who dominated for forty years until their fall. Even today the sibling orphans of that once great school quibble and bicker for their own chance to be champion. America needs a new St. George, a new Fischer to slay the remnants of the Soviet serpent. What better candidate than you, who can beat them at their own game? Takahashi can also do this, but what to do with him once he succeeds? Does he quit? No one can say, not even he. I would rather represent you. After all, you beat him yourself. And there are other considerations. Americans and Europeans like a Caucasian. For all his flare, Takahashi's face will not sell as many magazines or banner space. You understand me. That is, we understand each other."

In my rapture with his delivery I recognized at last the truth of my father's warning against this man. He clearly liked to hear himself speak, but his grandiosity was infectious. I felt myself swept along in his narrative, placing me in the role of Fischer, but greater, building an empire of success like the Soviet champions that reigned for decades, rather than becoming reclusive, surviving only on mystery. Yet his condition for the narrative's realization was in our collaboration. I knew then it must have pleased him to see my father leave in the face of my insolence. Trouble at home with my father meant an opening, an opportunity for Badulov to assume his place. It wasn't what I wanted, though. I would simply exchange one silver haired handler for another, the man whose fingers pocketed the money while I sat studiously at the board in the sun, my back to the beautiful woman, my gaze never to enjoy her sensual lure, or the glorious cathedral beyond it. My decision was then unmade, but I knew to reject poor options.

"And what if I win on my own? If I beat The Sixth then I have a chance at shared first and my own grandmaster title. Then I don't owe you or another single person anything."

"Typical," Badulov said. "Typical American. You really do not see that a man alone cannot succeed to the heights his talents demand? Even you need your father, have used him your whole career to reach this moment. But fathers are messy. Professional goals are best left uncomplicated by personal stakes. I ask you to reconsider."

"Go sell your story to Takahashi, if he's interested."

Badulov shrugged, as if he expected this disappointment. "I must warn you that Tigran…'the Sixth' is anxious to play and beat you. A win would guarantee him clear first, no one would catch him and he would not have to potentially split the prize purse. His means are not as…privileged as your own. You see?"

"I'm playing tomorrow. And I'll beat him."

"I tried to tell him," Badulov said, standing. "I knew you were too proud and respectful to take the easy way out. It is your father's teaching, yes? Very admirable, Xavier. Good luck tomorrow!" He shook my hand vigorously and then left before I could say anything else.

In that darkening evening by the canal water I thought about my conversation with Badulov. I had never encountered anything like him before. Everything about him had seemed deceptive, from his tailored suits to his smooth cordiality, and yet he had never once seemed to lie to me in our discussion. He had admitted it was in the Sixth's best interest to take the draw without confrontation, and I'm sure he was also honest about the organizers concern for my well-being. His comment about the Sixth's motivation, though it had felt like intimidation, was really more a frank disclosure of what I was honestly facing over the board. And if he had meant to intimidate, why hadn't he followed up with something more threatening? He had accepted my refusal with understanding and had even wished me luck, which also at least seemed genuine. I had never before faced someone so impenetrable, with the exception of my own father. I realized a moment later I had been thinking of Badulov as a chess opponent.

When my father finally returned he packed his bags in silence before saying, "I will be staying in another hotel. I will see you tomorrow morning at the playing hall. Good night, Savvy. Rest well. I am glad you are feeling healthy."

I stood by helplessly, waiting for him to answer my entreaties, and when finally he spoke I could say nothing at first. I had to grab him by the shoulders to stop him at the door.

"Savvy?"

"What did you two talk about?"

"We talked about you."

"Whatever he told you was a lie. Don't leave."

My father sighed, turning to face me. He continued to grip the bags firmly in his hands.

"He told me that you refused his offer for management with the goal of an eventual bid for the world championship. He said you also refused to accept a pre-arranged draw that would benefit him and his client immensely. These are the lies he told me?"

"No," I said. "That's all true. But if he told you the truth, why are you leaving?"

"I am angry, Savvy. You disobeyed me and you allowed yourself to be ensnared in a complicated situation, which is now more delicate for your interference. If I stay we will argue until we are both exhausted and you will not keep your promise to Badulov to defeat Petrosian tomorrow afternoon. My only concern this evening is for your success. Study and prepare, as I taught you, and we can argue tomorrow after the awards ceremony. My great wish is to see you with the first place trophy. Everything else can come after. Good night." He did his best to smile, twitching the right corner of his mouth, but he embarrassed himself in the attempt and left before I could say or do anything else.

For once, chess didn't enter my thoughts or dreams that evening. I was spinning over Badulov's behavior with me and what it meant that my father was in some other hotel, perhaps across the water, and I was unable to see him until tomorrow.

* * *

The Sixth was the ideological opposite to his namesake. The first Tigran Petrosian was the toughest, most immovable grandmaster and played the most solid and positionally sound chess people had ever seen. The Sixth was all about flair and sacrifices, creating as much confusion and pressure from uncertain and chaotic positions. I had never understood about

beauty in chess until I saw the ugly position we found ourselves playing in the final round. Early and really unnecessary exchanges had created doubled pawns on both sides, and the Sixth even had tripled pawns which he was using as a makeshift hedgerow to separate his king from my forces on the queenside. There was no piece coordination in either camp, nor were there open diagonals for my bishops. I had to credit him. In the resulting mess, his knight pair was far superior to my bishop pair. Yet who could calculate through such convoluted play?

I was debating whether to force a series of exchanges which would most certainly lead to a draw as our pawns would trip over each other and blockade their own routes to promotion, or to maintain pressure by giving up some of my mired pawns to pick off his own still located on their home rank. He would still possess a positional advantage with the latter choice, but freeing up the game might make my bishops better materially to seize open diagonals. One way was certain, but even. The other was uncertain, with a loss possible for both sides, as well as the glory of victory. If I weren't going to play to win, I thought, why hadn't I taken the draw to begin with? I was about to move when the Sixth offered his hand across the board for a draw.

It was still technically his move and a draw offer was legal, but it was unusual to wait so long after one's move to make it. I leaned back and thought.

Where had he gone wrong? My father had taught me that a draw offer meant my opponent could do no better than half a point, and to play on must mean a loss. I began searching through my plan to pick off pawns to free up the game, trying to find the win. I spent another twenty minutes of my own time tracing the combinations and exchanges trying to find that advantage the Sixth had found and tried to avoid. Every time, I came to an endgame that favored his position more than my own. I could not save a single one of my queenside pawns, and knights were always advantageous in endgames with pawns on only one side of the board. The

only thing that was clear finally was that to play on would give the Sixth only winning chances. The draw was my only hope, not his. I reached over the board to accept his draw, but he leaned back and waved with both hands, he was not interested.

"I accept your draw offer," I said.

"I withdraw. I withdraw it," he repeated, trying to make his English sound authoritative.

"You can't just take back a draw offer," I said. I wanted to tell him to take the damn draw as it benefited us both, but not only would it have been indiscreet, it felt too much like the logic of Badulov.

The Sixth stood to find the arbiter and explain the situation. I couldn't understand what he was saying as both were speaking Russian, but soon my father and Badulov intervened and a discussion began that involved the whole organizing committee and event staff. I was forced to sit and wait for a decision.

I realized during the commotion that the Sixth's draw offer had been a bluff to urge me to play on in a position that would ultimately give him the full point. I was never meant to take the draw, was meant in fact to disdain the offer of it to achieve this exact scenario. The fact that I had accepted had been unexpected and the Sixth's reaction informed me they had never settled on what to do in this instance. It didn't matter anyway. The resulting piece exchange I had planned earlier would force the draw if one could not be agreed. That's when I walked over to my father and explained I would play on.

"He will?" Badulov spoke before my father could respond.

"Savvy, he cannot just withdraw a draw offer like that. There are rules…."

"I will play on," I said, directing it toward Badulov.

"He agrees, Mikhail. What can you do?" He shrugged to show his inability to affect the outcome. The man was a virtuoso of measured body language.

If he could not have been accused of coaching, my father would have taken me aside in that moment, would have argued with me and convinced me to let him handle it as he had always done in these instances.

I returned to my seat at the board and began the combination of forced piece exchanges that would force the draw. I was stunned however when halfway through the combination the Sixth pulled back his last knight rather than trade it off. I took two pawns instead and suddenly found myself in an advantageous endgame, one moreso than he would have had in my alternate plan. By his focus on the win and his bluff, he had not been prepared to accept a forced draw and misplayed as a result. He tried to disguise it by hooding his eyes, mashing his chin and mouth into his fisted hands, but I could see the anguish of his hopeless position seize his body. Once more our game was the last running, and I knew by the results board that Takahashi had already drawn his game for shared second. By beating the Sixth I would have clear first, including the full prize purse and a future career as a chess grandmaster. Nothing short of competing for the world championship would lay ahead for me. My opponent would still be struggling to earn his title after this event and be forced to split the second place prize purse with Takahashi. What's more, I would have done it by myself, without the machinations of Badulov.

I had achieved what I had set my mind on since the beginning, winning and being the best chess player, at least among all the juniors in the world. And yet in that moment when I realized that the game and the championship was mine, I felt no thrill or rush. I felt no sense of triumph or victory. Badulov's words about my privilege and how I had used my father to get here echoed until they drowned my anaylsis and combinations. And my father was now angry

with me, ready to argue with me about professional chess, his role as my manager and coach, and my future career, which Badulov said I should recognize as his doing. What delicate balance with my father had I disrupted that could wait until the end of the tournament? Only catastrophe, an event that would derail my attempts at success the night before a game. It was in that moment that I knew my father had planned things for me, organized favors and exerted influence to assure my continued success from this point. There was no move, no combination, no variation that would undo it. He had strategized, waiting until I was old enough to begin making my own plans of college and living my life independently to do it, waiting until I could win myself the chance to start an international career in chess. Waiting until I was well on my way into my own life before pulling the reins keeping me at the board, earning titles and money and fame. The king, the most powerful piece on the chess board, worked best in unison with the pawn, to sacrifice it for the king's survival or promote it for the king's victory. How could I not see that sooner? All this time I thought chess was the means and answer to everything important for my future, while my father saw the means and answer as my future. There was more to life than chess, but I had pursued chess to the neglect of everything else. I looked at the Sixth across from me and wondered what he had, if anything, to fall back on after this failure, this defeat. His result would still be as Badulov had phrased it to me, "an accomplishment, something to be proud of," but future invitations often lauded to the junior champion of the world would not be his. Grandmaster titles were arduous and extended affairs to earn, and the Sixth was already twenty years old, this was his last chance to win it in one complete effort. Takahashi, for example, or myself, would have other chances to win it. And would Badulov even continue to promote and manage the Sixth after this? He said the world was waiting for a new champion to appear, someone to assume the throne Weinstein would eventually relinquish. I knew then he was

looking to represent that person, regardless of who he was. If not me, if not The Sixth, then Takahashi.

With complete clarity and a calm that penetrated through my skull past the knot on my forehead and down into my whole body, I played a loosening pawn move and offered a draw to my opponent. The position in its simplicity was quite pretty, with kings on exact opposite sides and the pawns in a symmetrical pattern, one that could now be drawn with the Sixth's well placed knight. It was almost picture perfect in its balance and equality. A game anyone might draw were they in such a fortunate position.

Bewildered, with some difficulty seeing clearly through his glazed eyes, the Sixth extended his own hand uncertainly, and then shook with clear purpose of motion. In that moment, I felt as if I had not played a better draw in my life.

At the commencement ceremony that evening I was awarded my half of the second place prize money and was also granted an international master title from ICF along with Takahashi. That put both of us one step away from earning our grandmaster titles independently through the norming system, but I was no longer interested in such things. Badulov's famous smile outshone his charge's as the Sixth held his trophy aloft, announced as grandmaster Petrosian by the MC. The flash of cameras and the cacophony of voices were directed at me, however. During the post-game interview I announced my retirement from chess to seek a university degree and a career in the private sector. During our analysis, I had shared with the Sixth my "missed win" and he gave me a funny look, like he knew I had dumped our game. I said nothing, however, other than to congratulate his tenacity at the board. The reporters flooded me with questions then, but all I could do was play dumb. In fact, there was no "play" about it, I was dumb. My decision had surprised even me, except that I knew it was what I wanted, what I felt I needed. But I had

no way of articulating that into answers for the reporters' questions. This was the part of chess unknown to me, the public life with interviews for newspaper and chess websites, promotion internationally and nationally, and working with organizers and committees to participate in circuits, championships, and match series. So far my father had been handling all of these things on my behalf, for me, and in his absence I was the one who now had to negotiate these issues when they came up. Would I have been able to shoulder the burden myself as I believed only a few days before? I suddenly had my doubts.

The worst part of the evening was the end, after the awards ceremony. My father, who had not stopped to talk to me all day after I finished my game, finally told me that he would no longer be leaving with me. He had a number of meetings to attend, and matters to address, all chess-related, and all of them now outside my purview. I asked to stay with him to see Italy, or maybe travel to Switzerland if that was where he was going, but he wouldn't hear it. I had preparations to make for my "new life" in America, and he would be too busy himself to sight-see or otherwise spend time with me. I accused him of cutting me out of his life for not telling him about the retirement before anyone else.

"No, Savvy," he said. "You have cut me out. This is your doing, and yours alone. As I said to you before, this has always been your choice. I hope I am wrong. I hope you are old enough to accept the consequences of your decision. No one else will accept them for you. Not even me."

It was the last conversation we exchanged face to face for over two years. Before that, I couldn't recall two consecutive days when I didn't see him. I was finally on my own. My father's inscrutable obstinancy had pissed me off, and I told myself I felt triumphant in the wake

of my decision, of my break from him and chess. What I actually felt, however, was closer to regret.

Chapter 2

I flew back to the United States. My father's decision to stay in Europe on extended business ultimately proved a mistake after the terrorist attack in September. Difficulties with his status as resident forced him to live between London and Amsterdam for over two years.

The sequence of what I beheld international chess to be in Venice followed by my father's reaction and the terrorist attack left me feeling as if the past eight years I had been spending my life in a box with simple written problems and answers that, whether they solved anything or not, meant nothing. I told my father before I left that it was more than a retirement, I was completely done with chess. He would have scolded me for calling it "the life," as if it were prison or the mafia. It had felt like both to me, though. I would use the money I had won, which was substantial for my age, to support myself and fund my education at college. I would find a career that was something I wanted, or at the very least would not put me in direct competition with others. My father responded poorly to my news. He suggested that I had developed a concussion from my "head injury."

I didn't correspond with my father until after my first two months in Las Vegas. Then we communicated almost entirely through email as it was far cheaper than international calls. He had accepted the terms the State Department had laid out for the process he would undergo to eventually re-enter the country. He stayed with friends and former colleagues, and had his lawyer wire him money regularly from his accounts in the States. My father had enough, I suspected, to live in Europe indefinitely, but he didn't want to impose any longer than he had to on his friends, and I also knew he had made America his home. All of my expenses were paid by the university except for cab fare and groceries and my prize money and scholarships were more than enough to maintain those indefinitely.

I was staying in a dormitory, and if it hadn't been for my roommate that first year I would have dropped out or at least moved off campus. He was short and had a round face that made him look younger than he was even though he was two years older than me. He was in the marching band and the university orchestra so I rarely saw him during the week, which suited me fine when I was in our room working. Our first weekend into the semester he saw me with three different books open on my single bed, studying with only half the energy I put into my game preparation. That was it for him, and every weekend from then on he pulled me out of that room to take me to band parties or to do something that wasn't related to school. I never would have met anyone or done anything but college work if it hadn't been for him. He also put our dorm mates in perspective when the halls were thick with marijuana fumes or someone streaked up and down waving a basketball jersey in time with his hooting.

"The people who aren't stupid are crazy," he said. He added, "Present company included," and then swiveled his thumb between the two of us to show he wasn't being unfriendly.

We were assigned to different floors the following year, and though my new roommate was respectful and easy-going, I missed David for the interest he took in me, even knowing I was a genius kid on a free ride.

The problem with my replacement roommate was that he played chess. Not competitively, of course, but he was an amateur who had done some reading and received some coaching and who knew what he was doing. He played ongoing games with a guy across the hall from us, keeping the board in our room. By then it had been a year since I had played my last game against the Sixth. I had kept to my resolution not to play chess anymore. I had not read, studied, or analyzed a single game or position. And yet there it was again, tempting me. I soon

started spending every waking hour I could in the library working or out in the city exploring the sights or the opportunities to have fun, as David had showed me. He still called occasionally to see if I wanted to go to a party, but I had gotten so accustomed to being out of the dorm that I rarely saw him my sophomore year.

Ultimately, my new roommate, Charles, caught me staring at a new game they had started. Only four moves had been made, and it was clear Charles' opponent had no idea how to defend with the black pieces.

"You know how to play?" he asked.

"I do," I said.

"My math teacher in middle school taught me. I mean really taught me. He showed me all kinds of important strategies, you know. Develop knights before bishops, pawns shouldn't be moved unless absolutely necessary. Connect your rooks on the back rank, don't bring the queen out too early. That stuff."

"Yeah, that's good advice." I could have told Charles that those rules were written eighty years ago based on the work of world champions and master class players who had developed these strategies on the board over a century ago. But I didn't say any of that because it wouldn't help him be a better chess player or even appreciate the game further. And it certainly wouldn't have taught him anything he actually needed to know.

Sure, he knew how the knight moves, the rules for castling, and even about *en passant*. That's not enough, though. To know the rules is to know next to nothing about Chess. Had he ever played through all the sidelines of the Berlin Variation of the Ruy Lopez? Could he recite the line of world chess champions forwards and backwards, taking into account the championship split and the dual line of champions created in 1993? Had he read about how

David Bronstein came within two games of being world champion and then dumped it because the Soviets were going to put his parents in a gulag? I was willing to bet he hadn't even heard of 19…Be6!! or what it means. And that was all completely understandable, but it only highlighted the gap between us. Charles knew the rules and was a competent amateur, and I could dismantle him a hundred different ways at the board, but what good was that knowledge? He had a girlfriend, he played the piano, and he was going to start his own business after he graduated. He even volunteered at the Veteran's hospital on Sundays since his dad had been in Vietnam. He could dismantle me with all of that if he wished, in a far more complete and significant way.

The truth was I couldn't begin to help myself, aside from eschewing chess. But as with any opening that is new, that you have to see for the first time, that's no reason to give up playing. I had to keep going and hope I learned something new along the way. Of course my father had taught me that too.

It hadn't been all that long ago either. Now my father was expatriated, like Fischer had been, though in my father's case it was against his will. Every day after class when I finally arrived at my dorm I thought about my life and how I had arrived where I was. I couldn't think of my room as home, though there was no other place I lived anymore. It was a kind of post-mortem analysis, I guess, but one where no answers were forthcoming. I could see all the errors and mistakes, the inaccuracies and blunders, but it gave no solution as how to progress differently this time around. I was pursuing my life differently, but it felt emptier somehow, hollow like wooden a chessboard that housed the pieces inside when the game was finally over.

I tried to immerse myself in my college studies as I had my chess studies, but I had lost my interest. Rather trying to ignite a curiosity for the subject matter or creating a process for engaging with the material, the assorted professors had their own games for combating general

apathy and attitude in the classroom, and the rules were cruelly simple and without any measureable purpose. They were tedious in worse ways than the advanced classes I took in high school. English classes were the one exception. I disliked the writing required of us, in spite of my oft-noted aptitude, but the reading had always remained pleasurable. I couldn't imagine a career from reading, however, especially one that would support me or otherwise make me feel like I was doing something in my life more important than chess.

* * *

One day, as I was reading Nabokov's *King, Queen, Knave*, Charles came in pre-occupied and red-faced. The table with his chessboard sat just beside the door, and my bed was closest of the two to the door. I looked up and remarked that he was later than usual for a Thursday, and that he had not paused to examine the position of his game. I saw that his red face was in fact mildly burned from the sun, which was easy for him in the early spring since he was normally so fair.

"I got hustled over by the engineering college," Charles said. "Three games, and I lost fifteen bucks." He was about to explain himself further, but I interrupted and said I understood. He shrugged and then went into the bathroom we shared with the room next door.

Losing a chess game when you know what you're doing is completely humiliating. Losing three in a row, even in the worst circumstances, makes anyone want to shave his head and join monks in the Himalayas who have taken a lifelong vow of silence. In athletic sports your opponent is sometimes just bigger, taller, faster, or stronger than you are. Each and every contest will be pretty much decided on a particular physical disparity. But in chess, even

amateurs feel like they should be able to “out see” their opponents or somehow learn from their mistakes in subsequent encounters. Unlike muscle strength or height, which can’t be acquired instantaneously, there’s a pervasive belief that with chess you will see your error and play much better the next time. Even grandmasters succumb to this belief. Chess is a sport, however, albeit largely intellectual. Stamina, dexterity, and even muscle memory do play a large role in a chess player’s success. When I was a child my father had me exercise regularly and eat balanced meals three times a day when I was training and studying for tournaments. The tournaments themselves were the only occasion I was allowed junk food and sweets whenever I wanted. My only exercise at events consisted of walking to and from the playing hall and then to local sights if they provided a necessary diversion, but those were rare. In the year since my retirement I had let myself go, eating out whenever I wanted, which was all the time since I didn’t know how to cook for myself, and neglecting my exercise regime of tennis and swimming, though I still walked a great deal. I was the only person on our floor who didn’t own a car.

When Charles emerged from the bathroom I asked how he knew he had been swindled.

“Each game I lost faster than the one before,” he said. “But each time I played slower, you know, more cautiously than the last. I thought I’d have him for sure the last game, but he never made one mistake, and he was crazy fast. It’s like he didn’t have to think about the moves.”

“Sounds like a pro. Do you think he’s still there?”

“Why? You think you can take him?”

I smiled because he had guessed my motive, but I answered that I would probably get busted too. He led me across campus to the quad outside the engineering building where two rows of stone tables and benches formed a phalanx between buildings of shimmering glass and

weathered concrete. I was surprised to see that although many of the tables were occupied, only one was set up for chess. In Manhattan, Atlanta, and even in my native Lone Pine, I saw plenty parks filled with chess boards and players of all rank and disposition. Las Vegas, which had hosted a number of major chess events, including a world championship a few years earlier, now seemed arid by comparison. But then I reminded myself that it should have made my new home all the better.

The hustler was not who I had expected to find. I briefly imagined the balding, curly headed Venetian in the cheap suit, but even more, I had let the image of the busty woman with the olive skin and long dark hair float in my imagination for the better part of our walk to the quad. At the table, the hustler was as young as Charles and me and vaguely Middle Eastern looking, perhaps Egyptian. He wore American clothes, but his styled hair and goatee did not match what his apparel suggested.

He was engaged in a blitz game with a man in a white shirt and glasses. The man had meaty forearms with which he slapped the clock every few seconds, the pieces always in motion. I covered my smirk when I saw he was wearing a pocket protector, something I had only heard my father mention as a detail from playing American tournaments in the early seventies. The man was too old to be a student, but maybe the right age for a professor. The hustler banged his clock with force only twice, first when he played his queen sac, and then again when he delivered checkmate. Otherwise his hands were fluid, graceful, and practiced. He was probably a titled master.

The man in the white collar exhaled in disgust and slapped ten dollars on the table, leaving. Charles had gotten off cheap.

"May I?" I said. I gestured to the black pieces that the previous opponent had vacated. The hustler looked from me to Charles to me again and then nodded.

"Sandhib," he said, extending his hand. "Five dollars?"

I had already pulled out a twenty, and so I snapped it end to end in front of his face before laying it beside the board. He stared down at it for a moment before looking back up at me.

"Xavier," I said. I started his clock and we began.

It was difficult losing that first game. Twice Sandhib almost over stepped my time, but he always managed to bluster a tactic at the last moment and gain an increment to continue. It was also difficult letting the long, circuitous combinations go and choose moves that looked good four steps down but failed on the fifth step, but I managed it. It was much easier to lose the next two games. The money had probably intimidated Sandhib at first, but once he saw he was better than me he found solid combinations and I let them succeed with only superficial resistence. He asked for a fourth game with embarrassment, but I had gotten what I wanted by that point. I thanked him for the games and left with Charles, who seemed cheerier to have a friend also be taken in. It would have killed him to know I could have crushed Sandhib and Charles too a thousand times over without breaking a sweat.

When I returned to the quad the next week there were more players and boards at tables, and I was the biggest whale that had come along in a while. It took almost a month, but I eventually earned back more than double what I had spent positioning myself as a mark. By the time the semester was over there wasn't a single chess player on campus who would play me, even in a friendly game. I told myself it had been enough, that I had learned enough of what it was like to be the man that had taken me back in Venice, and if I wanted more it could wait until

the fall when new students came to campus. But then Charles told me about the Las Vegas chess club, and I had more temptation than I cared for.

* * *

It was during this malaise at the end of my sophomore year that my father finally returned to the States. I had told him to find a place to settle and I would fly out to meet him when the semester was over, though I didn't tell him I had no place to stay since I hadn't registered for summer courses and would have to impose on a friend or rent someplace temporarily, both of which sounded exhausting for three months. Instead, he flew to Las Vegas and I helped him look for an apartment immediately. It was only when I accompanied him on our first site walk-through that he mentioned us moving in together as roommates. It was unexpected and not entirely wanted. I had missed my father sorely, sending him an email every week, but I wasn't prepared to move in with him. I had been resolved in my new independence and life choice, and moving in with him would complicate things immensely. However, he couldn't afford to live anyplace decent himself and all of his friends still living in Las Vegas were married with families. They could put him up for a few weeks or even months at the most, but none could board him indefinitely. Our house in Lone Pine had been sold to liquidate assets to send him while in Europe, so he was as homeless as I. Moreover, I wondered if he had missed me perhaps more than even I had missed him.

So we looked together and finally found a place we could both afford and tolerate and then moved in, becoming reacquainted with one another over the summer until the fall semester started and I was once again obliged to my new life.

Our apartment was a small two-bedroom condo on the second floor of the southern most building in the complex. It faced south as well and, being Las Vegas, there wasn't much of a view directly out from the balcony. However, we lived on the east side of town, off Sahara Ave, and at night if you leaned out over the rail and looked off to the right you could see the Strip lit up like no other place in the world. I was out on the balcony a lot, drinking coffee and watching the lights of the traffic streaming on Boulder Highway. Inside I could be grateful for the fact that the two bedrooms were on opposite sides of the apartment, each with its own bathroom. In the living room, where you normally saw a couch and an entertainment center, my dad had tables and chairs set up for chess games. Much of the table space was empty. My father still had three correspondence games he was finishing up for the quarter. Next quarter the tables would be completely full again. The ongoing games of the moment were clustered in a corner near the window where the light was good in the late afternoon. Opposite those games, in a corner by itself, was the chess set my father had set up for us to play. It sat undisturbed for the first three months, aside from the occasion or two my father had moved the pieces to dust them and the board. I reminded him I didn't play anymore and he said it was intended just for fun, but he understood. If ever I changed my mind, nothing need be said or explained, I had only to make an opening move and the game would begin. He hadn't yet given up that I would start a game, and I suspected as long as we shared the apartment he would never put it away. No one showed patience at the board like my father. No one at life either.

Lots of people speculated about why I withdrew from chess. Long time analysts said the pressure got to me, that being raised to be a chess genius had made me incapable of handling the extracurricular stresses of the professional arena. Takahashi joked with everyone who asked him,

giving a different theory each time. He tried to contact me a couple of times to ask if I was okay, but I never responded, never even acknowledged I had received his letters. In an interview with Weinstein, they asked him about me, which would have astounded me before I retired. He dismissed the question as sensationalist. A few other articles were printed online, and I got phone calls via my father in regards to tournament invitations and requests for interviews, but I turned them all down. My father was also hounded for interviews and confirmation about my story and whereabouts, but for whatever reasons of his own he refused comment. The media attention ended abruptly after September 11th, to my relief. Shortly thereafter long time sources of international funding for decades and half-century-old events dried up. In the two and half years following my retirement, whenever I was mentioned it was to highlight how prescient I had been in leaving before the money did.

This was clearly borne out in what happened to Takahashi. Because of my absence Takahashi had thrived as the new, best American player, but the money that normally would have sent him to represent us in every major event was now gone. It took him twice as long as it should have to become a grandmaster, playing only in US Championships and major Opens, and even though he was everyone's favorite pick to win the American championship again that year there was no confidence (as in no money) that he would be a candidate for the much-rumored world championship tournament being organized in Sweden. It would be longer still before he would be competing internationally on a regular basis and only a few voices dared claim he would make waves for American chess again. After 9/11 America's interest in international sports, especially chess, had dried up, and like me the rest of the country seemed to wonder what was the point in supporting something in regular decline since Fischer had bailed in the late seventies. It was bad enough I stayed informed as I did, but living with my father it was almost

unavoidable. Besides, I still took an interest even though I was no longer directly involved. Another person I followed regularly was the Sixth. As expected he was sweeping up minor international circuits and there were rumors he was getting the big invitations next year: Madrid, Reggio Emilia, and even Moscow. What was also significant was the increase in Badulov's influence and notoriety. He had spent the last two years criticizing the ICF's moves and expenditures to unify the titles, as the past two attempts had fallen through. Cranmic was not the champion Weinstein had been, and the ICF title had already changed hands twice since Patel won it in early 2001. No consensus could be reached, despite my father's efforts, and the money was not there, as Badulov warned. Upon his return to America, my father couldn't afford to travel as he used to and so had gone back to training and tutoring chess students as well arbitrating at the Las Vegas club for a regular fee. His recent commitment to correspondence chess, another means of revenue since he couldn't afford to play in Europe or across the country, meant he wouldn't take the time to hold an exhibition, which could have made him more money, and faster at that. He was scrupulous about maintaining his focus professionally.

As for me, I kept just as busy as my father. Part of my occupation was in keeping my chess activities secret. I was grateful for the patience my father instilled in me because his arrival in Las Vegas and eventual aligning with the chess club would have been disastrous for me if I had joined the day Charles told me about the club. Instead, I waited until my father was ensconced with a regular schedule before I made my own forays. I only ever played in the skittles area, avoiding the rated tournaments and official events. The hustlers and money players were regulars, workmanlike in their play sticking to time controls and opening systems that worked best for them even though it sometimes cost them a mark who wanted variety. I expected to be recognized immediately, but nobody did that first summer into the fall that I made a name

for myself as a shark. A large part of my anonymity I attributed to Takahashi who was now the sole and dominant American chess star. A smaller part of what kept me unrecognized was my change in appearance. As a professional, young and ambitious, I wore sport jackets and collared shirts, kept my hair short and my face clean-shaven all at my father's insistence. Too many young masters and grandmasters, Takahashi included, preferred a grunge aesthetic to their appearance, something my father found deplorable, but that I now finally embraced. I traded in my clunky '70s military-issue glasses for contact lenses. I grew a goatee after seeing how Sandhib wore his, and I let my hair grow long and bushy. I saw a picture of my father once with a huge bush of curly black hair on his head, before his hairline receded. He said he was very young and misguided, and hoped I would not make the same mistake. I couldn't see the mistake in skipping a haircut now and then. All of those changes along with my weight gain no doubt made me remarkably different from the photos of me taken before Italy. The only change in my appearance my father commented on was the contact lenses. He had never worn them himself, and he believed they weren't worth the trouble. "Glasses won't dry your eyes out," he reminded me, "and they help hide your eyes from your opponent." I countered that I wasn't playing anymore, and that reading with contacts was easier on my eyes than glasses. Because I didn't have a car I walked down to the corner of my street from my apartment to meet Charles when I wanted to go to the club. He had been going sporadically, but when I offered to teach him some tricks to help his money playing he was fine with giving me regular rides. Because he sometimes went to the club without me I never let him come up to the apartment for fear he might see my father and recognize him, forcing me to explain myself before I was ready.

One afternoon in the middle of fall I got an e-mail from Charles who was going to the club that evening and wanted to know if I was interested. It was one of my father's nights at

home with one of his students, so I was indeed interested. Father had been tutoring a number of rich boys from North Las Vegas, members of private school chess clubs who could afford my father's rare talent, but learned what was essentially scales and chopsticks in their lessons. My father's newest pupil, though, intrigued me. I hadn't seen her yet, but my father had dropped hints that she was a prodigy from back east, some place like Indiana, and that with a little practice and study she could be state or even division champion. I had planned my evening that night to see her when she arrived for lesson with my father, but I couldn't turn down Charles' offer and the chance to make some more money that week. My other emails were club and school related. Alex and Wang, two chess club students, wanted to know if I would be coming tonight because they had worked out what they thought was a technical novelty in the Sicilian, Najdorf. If anyone had seen it before, I would have. There was also a rumor floating around of a girl joining the club, which was still big news if one was out of the scholastic scene. Henry, the club director, wanted to know if I would be available for a simultaneous exhibition, which I knew immediately meant he had finally recognized me skulking around the skittles area. It also meant that he had probably discussed it with my father. Or perhaps Henry had found out from my father, hearing him talk about me and then making the connection of why the young, heavy-set man he had been seeing over the summer was so familiar. Either way, my cover was blown and I would have to face the club and, worse, my father about what I had been doing this past summer. The final email was from my British Lit. professor letting us know class was cancelled but that we needed to finish Eliot before resuming class next week.

I sent a reply letting Charles, Alex and Wang, and Henry know I would be there tonight (although, like a good chess player I kept my reason for doing so a secret). I then went to work

reading *The Wasteland*, drawing my mind through the labyrinthine prosody so I could avoid thinking about chess and my inevitable confrontation with my father.

* * *

Wang and Alex were excited to see me and wasted no time setting up the board to show me their technical novelty. They played through the opening perfunctorily and then paused, asking what I would do. I considered the position for a moment, seeing exactly what should be done, but asked them to show me what they had cooked up.

"It's ingenious, really," Alex said. He pushed up his glasses all the way to the bridge of his nose with his middle finger. I reminded myself to tell him that he should get laser surgery like all the serious players, if he could afford it, to avoid the distraction. He also needed any advantage he could get to live a normal life.

"We spent weeks on this," Wang said. His story was a lot like Takahashi's, only he was Chinese instead of Japanese. And he had seen more horror than Takahashi had. His mother and sister had been raped and tortured by officials in the provincial government before feeling to Taiwan and then America. His father lived with certainty that he and his infant son would face retribution for their escape, but they didn't. Three years later they got out of China and were reunited in San Francisco. It was amazing to me how Wang transformed that tragedy into a powerful motivation over the board. He played like his life depended on it, and it won him some spectacular games.

Their TN was a good one, a knight retreat that counts as a waiting move, entreating white to overextend his kingside pawns in what would prove to be a fruitless assault. I quickly found the refutation, though, a waiting move on white's part that should create an equal position and put the onus back on black to create anything useful. Alex cursed under his breath and Wang

hung his head quietly, but I told them to cheer up. The best I could do was equalize against their move. The variation might yield fruit further down the line.

"Hey, did you hear about a girl joining the club?" Wang asked.

Alex and Wang were both thirteen and their anticipation was both shameless and refreshing. They were also the sad stereotypes known as "chess geeks." I had tried urging them to become friends with Ernie and Slash, two other teens in the club who appeared to lead normal lives outside the 64 squares, listening to heavy metal and stealing the odd beer out of their fathers' coolers. I had tried telling them it wasn't healthy to study and play as much as I had, but if it didn't involve calculation or stories about Patel's rapid play they wouldn't really listen. I could tell by the expectant look in their eyes that if this new girl did show up tonight they would play useless games, the both of them.

"Are you telling me, Alex that you would give up your lovely Anastasia for some nameless girl you haven't even met yet?" I laughed, knowing about Alex's long-standing crush on Anastasya Myskina, a native Russian like his father. She was as beautiful as she was deadly at the chessboard. She had her own website you could visit to play over her games as well as download pictures of her endorsements and publicity campaigns. She was one of the new generation that knew the value of marketing herself to make a living, turning what was normally a weakness in her gender into a great strength. Such an approach was becoming the mark of a top class chess player, which echoed for me words I had heard directly from Badulov. For the boys at the club it was a great joke that Myskina's website was Alex's homepage.

"Anastasya will always be in my heart, but until I get a visa or dual citizenship I'm afraid I have to settle for the girls here, much as it pains me."

“There’s no way the new girl will go out with you, Alex,” Wang says, shoving him reproachfully. “What would she want with a dork like you?”

“Shut up, Wang. You’re the dork. You still play the Petrov!”

“It’s a solid defense!”

“It’s boring is what it is!”

I left them like that, enjoying their rivalry that would soon be transferred to tonight’s game over the board.

I caught Henry as he was entering the names of tonight’s attendees for the monthly tournament match-ups into his laptop.

“Savvy!” Henry said. He looked up, cheerful to see me, and shared a warm smile with me. “I’m so glad you came. Can I interest you in top board tonight?”

“No games for me. I came merely to arrange a simul for the end of next week. Not too short a notice is it?”

“Not at all! Everyone will be thrilled. I’m thrilled. It’s been five months since your father joined our team, and it’s been a splendid arrangement for us, as I hope it has been for him. May I ask why you waited so long to be part of the club?”

“I guess I’ve just been tied up with classes and shaking the rust loose from my game. You might have noticed me in the skittles areas during the week.”

“To be honest, I didn’t at first, but your father knew you were here. He was the one who said you were interested in an exhibition.” Henry went back to entering in names and arranging the night’s pairings. I found it interesting he took that moment in the conversation to break eye contact and focus on the screen before him. “It would be a boon for us, since your father has

turned me down every time I ask him. We used to get Spassky out here in the nineties, back when we could afford him. You should have seen the crowds!"

"I think my father has all but given up on-the-board play," I said, fighting my every impulse to interrogate him about conversations he'd had with my father. "He's working harder than ever to earn his correspondence title now."

"As if he needs another one," Henry said with a chuckle, and then cut it short. It was no secret at the club that my father was a full-fledged and semi-famous GM or that he was more than a little disappointed that I had given up on earning mine after my "retirement."

"Anyway," I said, "I was thinking we should hold a raffle for two spots in the simul. I hate having to charge twelve bucks a head, and this way two guys have a shot at participating even if they can't afford it."

"Sounds great. What shall we say? An informal blitz tournament in the skittles area the weekend before?"

"Sure," I said. I was about to ask him when my father had told him about me, but tournament regulars were arriving and queuing up to discuss the night's draw with Henry. I saw Sandhib among them and he nodded at me, smiling that I was in the club area for the first time.

I spent the next half hour wandering the playing area as more guys showed up and some of the members played warm up games before the night's matches. Finally, Henry was ready and made announcements. He introduced me as an international master and a former contender for the American championship, but also mentioning I was retired, for which I was grateful. He asked everyone to welcome me to the club, allowing brief applause before letting everyone know about the simul against me next week. He would accept payment through next Thursday and on site the Friday of the exhibition, but for two dollars extra. He also said that this Saturday the club

would hold a blitz tournament to determine two seats that would be given free in the simul. He explained anyone could sign up, but they should only do so if they couldn't normally afford to pay for a luxury like an exhibition. He ended by listing the pairings for tonight's round of games, as well as the time controls and the usual disclaimer that informal blitz and post mortem study should be conducted in the skittles area.

Everyone found his opponent and board, sat down, shook hands, and then started the clocks. I walked around the playing area with Henry as an unofficial arbiter and mentally recorded all 17 games being played. I was delighted to see that Alex had used his technical novelty in his game and it had gained him an advantage since his opponent (an eight year old with a rocketing rating) had fallen into the trap of extending himself. Wang, however, had gotten in trouble. He was always overly protective of his queen and the current position found it cut off in its own corner. Now his opponent, a former Yugoslavian master who had the distinction of once beating the world champion Tal in a simul, was attacking with his queen and demolishing the fortifications around Wang's king. It looked as though the Petrov Defense was going to fail Wang for the first time in two months.

It would not be an easy blow for him to bear. Chess players lived and died by their repertoire and whenever it failed for inexplicable reasons the shockwaves sometimes took months to recover from. Wang had done nothing wrong or different from dozens of other games he had managed to win and draw using the same defense. What had happened was Ljubov had finally discovered Wang's weakness with his queen. But it was a psychological weakness, not a tactical one. When chess is one's life, like it had been with me, one couldn't help but draw parallels. I knew how much Wang loved and suffered over his mother and sister and what happened to them. That care was apparent in the way he fawned over his queen, and in the

attention and precision he used to create positions that would make his queen an unstoppable force against the lesser male pieces. Wang was unique in the sense that he knew none of the legend or the joy of the queen sacrifice.

In chess, there is no greater move and no greater thrill than to sacrifice your queen for an unstoppable attack that checkmates the enemy king. In every generation of chess players each grandmaster had his immortal game in which he brilliantly and unexpectedly sacrificed his single most powerful piece for that greater prize: immortality. The queen sacrifice is not just about winning, as some people have said or believed, but about creating that most unique and unforgettable of moments when the game transcends and becomes something finer, something more lasting. Ironically, to sacrifice your own queen, you must know that it's just a game, not life, and that if you fail there is always another game and another opportunity for greatness. I hadn't been able to make that separation, though, between chess and life. At least not until I had separated myself from it. And if I couldn't explain that chess wasn't life to Wang where he was now, how could I expect him to understand the ease that should come with sacrificing his queen? I couldn't help him if he was on the inside and I was on the outside.

All of us found our concentration disturbed by some cheering coming from the skittles area. The Las Vegas chess club was located on the sixth floor in a medical conference room that was shaped like a knight's alley of attack. That is to say, it was shaped like an L with a partition separating the general playing area from the skittles area. Long conference tables were set up in parallel rows with four hard plastic foldout chairs per table. Fluorescent lights hummed overhead and on one of the dry erase boards in the corner was a detailed account of visual analysis during an autopsy. Just another post-mortem analysis. The skittles area was a mirror version of the general play area, but it was around the corner, behind the partition covered in the same material

as the carpet we walked on. Everyone knew that you were supposed to be quiet in the skittles area while tournament games were going on, the partition did nothing to block noise, so something truly exciting must have been happening. Henry walked over to me and asked that I go back there and settle them down.

I walked around the partition and saw the small group huddled in the corner. I already knew what was causing the ruckus.

Between the rag-tag collection of men and boys, burnouts and fresh faces, I could make out the face of a teenage girl at the table playing blitz against my biggest competition for resident hustler, Mikey. The girl's face was round and full, but free from blemishes. She wore her hair tucked up into a baseball cap and she wore a dark gray jogging suit. It was unattractive, but looked comfortable. Her eyes were clearly focused on the position in front of her, and her hands moved very quickly over the board, but gracefully like the little ballerina that twirled and gamboled on an old music box of my mother's. In one of my few memories of her, my mother showed me how it worked, that it was magnets that allowed the ballerina to move like she did, and I thought to myself in that moment at the skittles area that this girl had a magnetic quality of her own. I couldn't help but follow her hands and her eyes as she played desperately to draw her doomed position.

Another minute and it was over. She was checkmated on the back rank by a rook and knight combination. Everyone cheered again and a few bucks exchanged hands, while the girl just sat there stone faced, staring at the board as if there were still calculations left to be made in a finished position. She looked up, caught me staring at her from across the room, and smiled at me. I surprised myself by smiling back at her.

As I made my way over she reached into an old, beat up fanny pack around her waist and pulled out the money she owed to Mikey, and handed it to him across the board. He accepted it unapologetically and without mirth, and then asked like a consummate businessman, “Who’s next?”

He was out of luck, though, since everyone huddled around the girl as she stood up and moved away from the table. Each wanted their own game with her, a few smart enough to compliment her tactics in the game. At that moment Henry showed up and broke up the testosterone mob, leaving the girl and me standing there staring at each other.

“I’m Xavier,” I said, holding out my hand. “But everyone I like calls me Savvy.”

“What do they call you if you don’t like them?”

“Xavier.”

“Nice to meet you, Savvy” she said. Her eyes never wavered from mine. I looked down and grabbed her hand firmly in mine and shook. Her handshake was firm and warm. I was pleased to find it feminine as well. “Your name sounds famous. Is it?”

“Yeah, depending on your definition of famous.”

She smiled. “I’m Dana. I moved here from Cleveland a couple of months ago.”

We stared at each other for a second, both of us smiling again, when Dana said, “Is there a place around here where we can get a bite to eat? I’m not picky and I’m starving.”

I didn’t bother to calculate it. I said, “Sure.”

Post-mortem analysis is a serious chess player’s occupation. It’s impossible to become a better chess player unless you can learn from your mistakes. This sounds easy enough, just like life you might say, but unless you make an obvious blunder under time pressure or due to

distraction you often lose a game without knowing what you did wrong. At the grandmaster level some players lose without making a single mistake. That's where post-mortem analysis comes in. You stand over the board, score sheet in hand, and you start from the beginning, playing over the entire game. Traditionally you do this with your opponent. He offers his insight, his experience, and his variations to what he could have played and what you could have played. But post-mortem analysis should be done all the time, both at the board when you lost and at home in your spare time or in your head while you sit at a bus stop. You might fear the discovery process. It often involves seeing where you are deficient, what you haven't achieved yet. Worst of all, you occasionally discover that it's the exact same thing you should have learned before. And for some, they learn they will never get any better than they already are.

I was reliving another kind of post-mortem analysis, telling her about my life as I walked her down the street to a Carl's Jr. It was the only place to eat I knew of within reasonable walking distance. Inside we ordered burgers and jalapeno poppers. We sat at a booth that had a checkerboard top. Jokingly, I pulled out a small set of pieces I carried with me to the club and set up some positions from my favorite games I had studied. She laughed and asked me how long I had been playing chess. We shared our childhood stories coming to the game, being coached by our fathers. I eventually did all the talking, getting into my tournament wins and traveling across the country to compete. She wanted to know everything, so I recounted the two championships and the year that lead to my break with chess. I told her everything except for Badulov's offer, my break with my father, and the final game that I threw, deciding my fate for the…whatever it was my life could be described as at that point.

"Why don't you work towards it again? It's obvious, the way you talk about it, that you love the game."

"Chess was my life. What about you? Tell me more about yourself. Did your dad teach you so you could become a professional chess player?"

"Not at all," Dana said and laughed. I found my concentration shattered in that laugh and I had to stop arranging the pieces because I was no longer doing anything coherent with them. "Actually," she continued, "my dad found his old board on accident when he was cleaning out a closet. He bought this ornate set in the Philippines when he was in the Navy. Anyway, I was an only child and my mom died when I was really little, so he had no one else to play it with. I was sucky at the beginning, but I got good after a while. He made me play every Saturday with him, which I think had a lot to do with not wanting me to go out with friends and stay home with him instead. Eventually I got good enough that I beat him every time. So then he suggested going down to the local club and I beat everyone there too. That was it for him. This was a sport I could do and he could be proud of me in. I hated outdoor sports, like volleyball and softball, but chess was nice because I could stay inside and not sweat. I hate sweat," she said. She tugged at her jogging suit and laughed again.

Before long she found out she had earned a woman's master title almost by accident. From there she competed in national tournaments. Her goal was to get a woman's grandmaster title and get a full ride scholarship into a major university overseas.

"I'm almost eighteen now and I want to get into a program before I'm twenty, you know?" she said, pausing to suck on the milkshake I had bought her. "Anyway, with all the international events held in Vegas and a lot of the top U.S. players having moved out to the southwest recently, we figured I could get a coach and get my norms without all the travel expenses. My dad doesn't have a lot of money, and I won't be able to go to college and support myself without a scholarship."

“This is becoming a great town for chess,” I said. “I can recommend a number of coaches, good ones who won’t charge an arm and a leg.”

“Really?” she said, her eyes brightening.

“Sure. My dad knows a few guys.”

“Why not your dad?” she asked.

“He’s a little pricey. He’s still a grandmaster, even if he doesn’t compete on-the-board anymore.”

“Couldn’t you ask him? You know, like a favor to me?”

I thought about it. By that I mean I thought about everything. It had been so long since I had had such pleasant dinner and company. Aside from Charles, I had only been spending time with the likes of Alex and Wang, listening to them argue and talk about the girls at their middle school. Dana was close to my age, and she was a girl, almost a woman, and she understood chess. I had never had a girlfriend, never even been kissed. I wanted to keep this going with her, and there was little to risk in promising to ask my father.

In chess, a gambit means making a sacrifice, usually a small one, because the return far outweighs what has been lost. I knew asking him for this might upset our delicate balance, but the chance to actually alter my position and live like a normal person seemed worth it. I also well knew that declined gambits always resulted in failure. The only way safely through a gambit is to accept it.

“I’ll ask him,” I said.

“Here,” Dana said, pulling out a blank score sheet and a pen from her fanny pack. “Let me give you my phone number.”

On our walk back to the club Dana asked me where my car was, and I had to confess I didn't own one. I offered to pay for a cab for us, but she laughed and said she owned a car and could give me a lift. She drove a faded yellow VW Bug. She asked me about my mother on the drive to my place, which made me pause as I hadn't thought about my mother in years until just that evening, remembering her music box.

"What makes you ask?" I said.

She shrugged. "I never got to know mine and I guess it's always made me curious about other people's mothers. If it's a sore subject for you or something…."

"Not at all," I said. "I never got to know my mother either. She and my father divorced when I was three. My father always speaks kindly of her, respectfully, but she's never tried to contact me in all these years. I get the feeling, though my father denies it, that she didn't want kids and didn't really approve of my father playing chess for a career. She had a career of her own, he said, and they divorced amicably. I think she's living in Houston."

"Sounds like a sore subject to me," Dana said, though I detected no judgment in her statement. Still, it demanded some kind of response.

"I only have a couple of memories of her. My father took care of me. He used to tell me all the time she would call, but she never did. She probably remarried and even has new kids."

"You've never bothered to find out?" Then I detected judgment.

"Why would I?"

"Sorry," she said. "It's my issue, not yours. Can we continue some other time?"

"What do you mean? This discussion or…"

"I was thinking just this, hanging out together." Her expression was still serious, but there was an edge to it. She was trying to be easy going and friendly, but we were still in a sensitive place for her.

"This is it on the left," I said, indicating my apartment complex.

As she pulled up to my building she said, "I am sorry. I hope I didn't cross a line or something."

"That's what I thought I had done. How about we call it a draw and start tomorrow night fresh."

"So it's a date, then?" Her smile made up for everything that had passed in the car and more.

"Only if you don't mind driving."

Inside, the kitchen light was off, which meant my father had retired to his room for the night. The kitchen and dining room were clean, and though the light was on under his bedroom door, there was only silence on the other side, which meant he didn't want to be disturbed. If my father were just reading he would have the radio on or be listening to Tchaikovsky or Prokofiev. Silence, when the light was on, meant he was deep in analysis with either his current games or running variations from past games through his computer. It meant a troubled night for me, but my confrontation with him would have to wait until the next day.

My father was up before me as was his habit and I spoke to him as he had his eggs and coffee at the kitchenette table. He ate politely in silence while I explained that I had spent the past summer playing chess. He accepted this with a nod as he forked another cluster of egg. I explained that I was simply making money at it, playing for bets, and was now preparing for an

exhibition at the end of next week. He accepted this too, again without speaking. I told him I had no interest in returning to professional chess, and that it was nothing more than a diversion that made me some money. My father grimaced at that and finished his coffee. The update about my life allowed the segue into how I met Dana at the club the previous evening. I took extra care to relay her ambitions and her money problems, and then topped it off by explaining we had a date tonight. It was a brilliant combination executed with all the precision of a double bishop sacrifice.

My father just scratched the bald spot on his head and said he would think about everything I said and we could talk later. His patience infuriated me, when all I wanted was good news to give to Dana when she picked me up for dinner. In that brief moment I imagined how easy it would have been to leave a man that infuriating. Nothing seemed important to a man who could show such disdain for other people's immediacy. I reeled then for I had never imagined anything from my mother's perspective before. But I attributed it to nothing more than my conversation with Dana and the rough night afterward and put it out of my mind.

At dinner I opened first by summarizing the discussion with my father and then relaying his indeterminate reply. Dana smiled, optimistic that he would agree, and then asked me about him and his life as an international chess player. It was an uncomfortable subject for me, but talking as with the night before I found myself exulted by it. I had forgotten the great benefit of sharing a lived post-mortem with another person's insight.

The subject casually drifted to my own experiences, and I told her how growing up I loved to read almost as much as I loved playing chess. I started with chess authors first. I was barely in the fifth grade when I read *Fischer Teaches Chess*. And when I was two years ahead in my class attending high school I read all 769 pages of Reuben Fine's Basic Chess Endings, my

father's copy so old that it had a smell of its own, the cover was faded to the point where I couldn't tell what color it had been, and best of all my father's notes, graphite depressed into the margins sometimes refuting Fine's hard work, other times exclamations of the most brilliant approaches.

I also shared with her how my father encouraged me to read other kinds of books. I started with the Miltonic poetry he read and memorized alongside his opening repertoire, but soon gave it up for Shakespeare, Moliere, De Montaigne, Cervantes, anyone from the Renaissance I could get my hands on. By the time I turned thirteen I would sneak Faulkner and Hemingway along with my chess texts with me on the national circuit and read them in my hotel room until early morning. I also had the great fortune to discover great storytellers among the brilliant chess minds. My favorites were David Bronstein, who could enthrall with stories of Cold War terror, playing chess behind the iron curtain or delight with a humorous account of buffoonery at a bar after a tournament, and my namesake Xavier Tartakower, who was perhaps the greatest chess wit that ever lived. My favorite of his chess quotes, "It's always best to sacrifice your opponent's pieces," was an epigram pasted to the top of my computer monitor back when I checked my own games against the newest chess programs. They were also men of the world, wining and dining in historic cities and rubbing elbows with political and athletic big shots, all the while appreciating the culture of their times and knowing what it really meant to be men. For the first time I truly felt like them, not only in their wit and storytelling, but also in actually living a natural life. A full life. And telling Dana all of these things made me realize how I had missed their significance when I had first read them purely for their chess knowledge.

On successive nights leading up to my simul we talked more and more. All we ever did was go out to dinner, sometimes expensive, sometimes cheap, so that we could spend hours

staring at one another across the table. We were always casual, not making a big deal about the time we spent together. We were becoming good friends, which Dana said she was grateful for, not knowing many people in town. Whenever I saw her she wore her hair tucked up in the same baseball cap—a gift from her father, it had originally been a gift for her mother, but she died before she could receive it—, but I cared more about the interest she showed in me, and the way I could talk to her like with no other girl.

"Shall I treat you to dinner again tomorrow?" I asked.

"Sure. When I pick you up, I'd like to meet your dad. Show him, you know, what a nice girl I am." She smiled and batted her eyelashes. "Tomorrow's no good, though. I want to take part in that blitz tournament at the club."

"Which one? The one for the free seats at my simul?"

"The very same," she said and grinned.

"You don't have to do that," I said. "You could have a spot on my say so."

"That's really sweet, but wouldn't that be weird? Besides, I already feel guilty about asking your father for coaching lessons."

Chess players, even girl chess players, were often too proud to ask for a favor when they had been beaten and humiliated. It meant reliving your loss through that whole situation and whenever you thought of it afterward. It was my theory as to why so many chess players crack. What we do is based so much on memory and repetition we never have the luxury of repressing our worst experiences. For me that last draw against the Sixth had become bittersweet, the source of my escape out of a liftetime of chess, but also the end of a whole phase of my life that I felt consumed by. I'm surprised more players don't snap under the pressure.

"Well, if you'd rather earn it, I understand."

"Thanks, Savvy. I really appreciate the offer. Now, tell me about meeting Patel!"

The rest of the night went as usual, but as she drove me home I couldn't help but wonder why she wanted to get in on the simul against me, and why she didn't just ask me for a game, if that's what she wanted. It wasn't what I wanted, the idea of any kind of contest between us, placing competition between us. Yet with both of us being chess players, it also felt inevitable. There wasn't a single person from my past I hadn't played against. My father's colleagues and friends, all my American teammates and rivals, and the endless games my father and I shared between us. I had even played Charles finally, and Henry after the exhibition had been announced, not to mention everyone at the club in the skittles area for money. And I had beaten them all. I didn't want that for Dana and me.

The next night, that Saturday, I saw her win game after game in the blitz tournament. She had come dressed to kill, no jogging suit with old sneakers and beat up fanny pack. Her red hair (and it was red, not chestnut as I had originally thought from the few dark threads that sometimes trailed from under the cap or the dark roots above her neck) was no longer bunched up under her baseball cap. It hung free over her shoulders and down her back, styled so that it wisped gracefully and shimmered under the light. She was wearing a lot of makeup, and her lips pouted out in a sensuous, blossom red. Her cheeks had a rosy color and the shade across her eyes seemed to speak seduction. Her clothes were also astounding. She wore a tight top with spaghetti straps that bunched up her ample cleavage to conspicuous display. Even more, her black dress slacks seemed to be form fitting so that her curvaceous ass, hips, and legs would be as equally accentuated as her bosom. She wore black stiletto heels that had a web of straps and showed small, delicate feet. Her fanny pack was replaced with a designer purse that she hung on the back

of her chair. Her hands moved with the quiet speed I had seen almost a week ago, but the rest of her turned to cold, beautiful stone as the tournament wore on.

As much as I tried, I couldn't help but analyze all her games in my head. I remembered Nezhmetdinov's rule that he who analyzes blitz games is stupid, but the beast of chess perfection chained in the cage of my skull wouldn't allow me to pass over her moves without analysis. In every game she started with the advantage, pressing meaningful attacks and creating numerous threats, until she came to a point where she froze in her movements, in her calculations, a deadly choice as her precious little time eroded down to seconds, but then it came, the crushing move. Though she had only moments left each opponent resigned out of awe as much as defeat.

In the end, only two were able to resist Dana's complete onslaught: Ljubov (who hadn't bathed or changed his suit in weeks according to the visual and olfactory cues), the Yugoslav master who had once beat Tal, and a new guy who Henry said had been institutionalized twice for obsessive-compulsive disorder. Dana finished second place as result, losing those two games, but winning a seat in my simul.

As everyone gathered around to congratulate her and ogle ineptly I went over to the snack stand Henry set up for every tournament. I wanted a cup of coffee, and a man standing there with his own cup nodded to me and said hello. He introduced himself as Dana's father and shook my hand, squeezing it hard as I learned military men did.

"Dana's told me a lot about you," he said.

I was off balance; Dana hadn't told me he would be there. I managed to reply, "Then we're equal because she talks about you every chance she gets."

He stared at me, his eyes flickering up and down my body. It was a chess player's stare, no doubt about it. He was surveying me like one of Dr. Lasker's traps in the Queen's Gambit, or a nasty fork he was about to be stuck with. He had a simple, honest look to him.

We chatted until Dana came up to us. She smiled for her father, but the weight of her eyelids told me that she had exerted herself to win the blitz tournament. Our very best players hadn't even participated.

I offered to treat her to dinner after all, on her father's permission. He held up his hands, one still clutching the cup of coffee and said, "Grownups will do what grownups will do." He thanked me for talking with him and told Dana to give him a call when we were done. He shook my hand again and left. After he was gone her face lost all its energy and mirth and her eyes were emptied of the usual light I saw there. I wasn't sure if it was the effort or the lost games, but she looked utterly defeated and I couldn't help but remember my own condition at the end of a round at the US Junior Championships.

Eventually, as boards were rolled up and put away and the members filed out, Dana softened and finally let me take her to dinner. Just before, she spoke to those who walked by us, including Henry, pretending not to hear me when I mentioned her coaching situation. I told her I had good news, planning to tell her that my father had agreed to coach her on weekends for a pittance, provided she do some research for him during the week. In such a position she would have to reveal that she had already secured coaching on her own, proving to me that she had been keeping it from me. Instead, she asked me not to be mad and confessed that she had contacted my father on her own and gotten him to agree to coaching her. I was stunned at first, both by her initiative and her subterfuge. When she asked what my news was I had to make my own confession that she had already found out, though I had hoped to surprise her. She was

audibly thrilled about it, but I explained that doing research for my father was like reading Old English letters for a doctor of linguistics. She didn't care, since she'd be researching at a university soon, anyway, and could use the practice. She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek, unable to close her mouth properly since she was smiling so wide.

"If there's anything else I can do for you, let me know," I said.

"Two things," she said. "But I'll only ask one now. The other is kind of like a technical novelty. I want to surprise you."

"TNs are usually not good surprises," I said, but smiled to let her know I understood what she meant.

"Name the first thing," I said.

"Buy me a milkshake?"

I spent all day Thursday preparing for the simul. It was mid-October and autumn had cooled Las Vegas down considerably. I had completed assignments for classes early and arranged time off with my instructors and locked myself in my room with my computer, refreshing myself on endgames. The endgame is the most delicate and potentially dangerous time in the whole contest. It is also the thing all chess coaches teach their students first. You cannot master chess unless you can master the endgame. With a mastery of the opening or the middlegame you can go far, even compete in international tournaments as I have, but eventually you will meet someone as good as you are and then it comes down to the endgame. There doesn't even have to be any mistakes in an endgame to lose it. If you are not prepared, if you make the wrong decisions in the first moves of the game, it can translate into an inevitable loss in the endgame. I have seen grandmasters play brilliantly until the endgame where they missed an

opportunity on their tenth move to move a pawn one square forward and now, forty moves later, that pawn on the wrong square loses them the game. I rarely had opportunities in my day to employ my extensive endgame knowledge. So many of my peers in the youngest generation mastered the opening to avoid such encounters, but on the occasions that I did reach an endgame I shone like a star. I had to be as prepared as ever because in a simul, where I would be playing thirty to fifty people, many of them would get to the endgame with me, which they had been unable to do before. And since their study would be fresher than my own I had to be ready to beat them there.

On Friday I woke up early and was surprised to find my father standing over his correspondence games. His right hand was characteristically placed over his mouth, and his left arm was providing a shelf for his right elbow to sit on. I disturbed him only to ask if he wanted some of the instant coffee I was making, which he silently declined.

I drank my coffee quickly as I stood over the chess board he had laid out for us. He had just dusted again because the varnished pieces reflected brightly in the morning light. I picked up the white king's pawn and moved it two squares forward to start our game. Who knew when it would end? My father might take days or even weeks to reply to my first move. Knowing him I had to book up on king's pawn openings for the next month to compete. I went over and studied his games over his shoulder. I didn't say anything about the game I had started, but I patted him on the shoulder on my way out to let him know his correspondence play had improved dramatically in the last month.

The worst thing in the world to do before a big game, or in my case a simul, is to spend all day studying chess. You burn yourself out and you're no good for the actual event. So I went to the art house theater and saw an old Gene Hackman caper film, *Night Moves*, then gave

myself four hours at the library to read a Tevis novel about pool sharks. It adequately soaked up the time, and the next thing I knew I was at the chess club watching as Henry, Alex, and Wang set up the boards for the simul.

There were already over fifty people there, and still more trickling in. It was the biggest simul given since Grandmaster Evans visited six years before, according to Henry, though he had drawn twice as many as I had. A former American champion will do that.

I had told Henry on Thursday that I wanted Dana to have a seat on the end, in case she came dressed to the nines, because I wanted everyone concentrating on their game. He gave me his best, officiating grin along with a knowing nudge in the elbow. She hadn't arrived yet and I got nervous, wondering if maybe she had decided against playing me and what that might mean.

The time finally came when Henry clapped his hands and told everyone to take their seats for we were about to begin the simul. I had given up any hope of seeing Dana when she walked in at that moment. She was dressed as she had been at the blitz tournament, which is to say she was voluptuous and alluring but in a tight blue dress this time, so Henry guided her to a seat on the end table in the skittles area around the corner.

I stood in the corner of the L between the two areas and informed everyone that they could play as white if they wished; they needed simply to spin the board in front of them around. Although several people took advantage of my generosity many paid me a great respect, undeserved, that the top player gets white in a simul, and I had the benefit of being white for three fourths of my games. Dana, however, took white for herself at her board.

I can't remember all the games, usually. Afterwards, they are at best a blur. However, this time they were a blur while I was playing them. I kept finding myself stealing glances back at Dana as I made my way down the line of boards. I could not believe how beautiful—but that

isn't quite the best word—I couldn't believe how alluring she was, nor how this fact had escaped my notice every night until the night of the blitz tournament. If it weren't for my significant talent and years of experience I would have been distracted and unbalanced in my games. My other opponents weren't as fortunate as me. Dana's bright red hair was like a beacon that drew the attention of almost every person in the skittles area and they played poorer than their counterparts around the corner out of view.

Not a man in sight could resist that magnetic quality that seemed to radiate out of her illustrious form. I had no idea it could be charged up so powerfully. And why this day? I couldn't wrap my brain around why she would do this today, when I was her only opponent.

One by one, each of my male opponents began to fall. A few of the seasoned ones, who were my father's age and who had burned out like my father, or never fired up in the first place like me, managed draws like always, but they were close draws. And still my game with Dana continued on without reprieve.

She had chosen to open with her queen's pawn. Without considering the long-term consequences I entered into a Nimzo-Indian Defense, since that was what I had been studying most heavily before my retirement. Before long the game became more and more familiar to me, until finally, with only twelve boards left for me to finish, it hit me. She was replicating a game of mine against Takahashi from the final round of the US Junior Championship. She was building up to the position that would give her an unbeatable advantage against me just as Takahashi had done before I swindled him with my draw offer. I didn't understand why she would do it. Did she believe that she could hustle me? Was she naïve enough to believe she could navigate the game to the final position that would defeat me? I knew she was smarter than that, but then why resurrect this game against me?

Our game was the only one left and it was almost at the end. I took my time between my moves to let her double check her memory and the variations I might spring while I reflected on my own life. Was I really such a pathetic shell, such a has-been prodigy gone south that she thought she could win this way? Had I fallen so far out of touch with the game she thought I wouldn't remember or care? It was then I realized how much it hurt me to see this game again under these meager circumstances. I had once played against some of the brightest talents and most accomplished players in venues around the world, and now here I was with a room full of rejects, might-have-beens, and wanna-bes who looked up to me but also saw me as one of them. And if I lost this game it would be all over the internet, a brief resurgence of interest to remark only how much further I had sunk from the game.

What Dana didn't know, what nobody knew but my father, was that I had seen the game clearer and more completely than Takahashi did. Remember what I said about chess players reliving their worst losses every day? In post-mortem analysis, one of the ways we cope with our failure is finding improvements. Each of us finds the way to turn back the clock and say it could have turned out better so that we can go on with our lives and not be broken down. A little over a year after I ducked my loss against Takahashi, I found a way to win that I had missed. It was in the exact position that lay before me on the board between Dana and me. I had missed it because I had been distracted by the draw, the possibility only of not losing. And I hadn't been aware of Takahashi's ignorance to his own advantage, the precise play that was necessary to capitalize on the position regardless of the response. Now though, knowing it was coming, I could play my own queen sacrifice in the current position and force a win before Takahashi's plan could even be realized in this sensual, seductive girl. All my life I had looked for my own immortal queen sacrifice to win the game and ensure my place in history as one of the great chess players, and I

finally had it before me. I calculated my future, returning to competitive play, attaining my grandmaster title, and rubbing shoulders with the world's elite. In my calculations, though, I also saw Dana and my relationship with her. To play competitively, to be back in my old life, there would be no more time with her. No more hob-knobbing at the club or chess hustling either. The end of my college studies as well. But had any of those things led me anywhere? If I started playing again my father would want to work with me, become my trainer again. We would travel together and share hotel rooms and he would introduce me as he always did to the best players he knew, my idols and heroes. But that was taking the road back, and not the road forward, wasn't it?

I thought of Takahashi, America's brightest chess star, how he wouldn't hesitate to sac his queen and defeat his opponent, his enemy. He would have done it to me, had tried to do it in each of our now historic encounters. I had hesitated and willingly ruined my chances for a life and happiness in the only pursuit I knew. And if I had been more like him I wouldn't have hesitated. It's not that he wanted to ruin me; it's just that the consideration would never have entered his head. Win at any cost and crush your opponent, no matter the consequences. I had his number, and if I returned I would supplant his destiny with my own.

I had learned, painfully, the consequences of such an approach. In the final analysis, with the board in my vision, with the position like a grotesque Escher drawing outlining the crude inversion of natural law, I had to decide whether I had learned anything from my mistakes and losses and if I could at last help myself.

I played my queen sac and watched for Dana's reaction. She could be a poker player with the way she quietly and without reaction calculated her lost position and then turned her king over in resignation. I almost jumped as the whole club, which had been standing behind and

around us, simultaneously cheered when I had won. A few had recognized the game, too, and asked me when I came up with my improvement. Henry broke up the mob, thanking everyone for coming and handing out books and clocks to those who had managed to draw me. Dana stood up, her face like red marble, flushed and stone still. She left without saying anything to me. I was about to follow her out but everyone who wanted his books and clocks signed surrounded me. My signature was quick and abrasive, my stare fixed on the door out of which Dana exited. That is, until Alex said he was going to post my win on every chess message board. I smiled and said, "You can tell them I'm back."

Chapter 3

My father's entrance was eerie, as if staged. Telling Alex to spread the news I was back, sharing the announcement with everyone at the simul, had sent waves of clapping and questions throughout the crowd surrounding me. A moment following my declaration my father stepped through the door as I stared at it, giving my back a stiffening chill. He must have seen Dana walk by as he made his way down the hall from the elevator and I wondered if he could tell by her face that she had lost. I envied that he might have seen the break of emotion in her face she had withheld from me.

The timing of my father's entrance was matched in disquiet only by his presence there in that space. His stance was stiff, his arms crossed sternly in front of his chest. Staring at him, I realized I had never seen him at the club even though he had been a part of it longer than I had. So careful were my machinations to keep him unaware of my dabbling back into chess that we had never once crossed paths in this room, not even after he had learned of my history there. He stood patiently as my hands worked over books, boards, and magazines with pen and signature. I should remark that his size accounted for my own height, yet he always seemed to me a bit taller than I was, always managing to look over the top of his glasses down at me. To understand the complexity my father's anger took, you have to know that I was never "in trouble" with him even though he gave me such looks. Those looks always ended in conversations of mutual understanding, or that was my father's goal at least. I tried to imagine he was happy to hear I was back, but then he could also be furious that I took nearly three years away.

I signed every last clock and chessboard I could lay my hands on and then talked to Henry for a few moments, delaying. The whole time my father stood by the doorway, staring at

me. I felt doubt then about my decision, and about not discussing it in the open with my father, like an adult, before moving forward. I reminded myself I had progressed on my own counsel.

My small talk with Henry ended and there were no more players filing out for my father to eavesdrop on, so I walked over to him and attempted a smile. In that moment, seeing him look at me in his quiet, unassuming way with his eyebrows relaxed and resting like sleeping caterpillars on his brow, I wished I had never agreed to the exhibition or reconsidered anything. I felt like a teenager again, about to be lectured over the merits of strategy over tactics.

"I was researching some of Keres' games this morning, from his postal days," my father said. He was always this way, cordial and civil, especially when he was upset. I could tell by how relaxed those bushy eyebrows were, sitting on his face.

"Anything useful?" I said. It was a good question in that it was an honest one. I had been curious about his recent correspondence play, whether he liked the change in format, if he felt it suited him better. It was also a question whose answer I thought might give me leverage with my own situation, a comparison in finding one's way through new territory.

"Yes," my father said, "old games are the best resource for new ideas," to which he paused. It was the lilted pause, like a line of verse unfinished, where I knew a "but" was coming, even though I knew he never said "but."

"…However," my father continued, "A player's history can sometimes be more beneficial to anticipating the future. You will recall that Lasker retired twice from chess, but came back each time."

Leave it to my father to play brilliant countermoves in dialogue as well as over the board.

"Both instances were when he was world champion," I said, knowing this detail was significant to my father's point.

"I am glad to see you, too, have come to your senses. However, I question your timing. Have you been completing the necessary preparation for your repertoire? Are you even aware of the tournament schedule for the next three months? The US Championship is in February and you haven't even reactivated your rating yet. If we are to make the most of the time remaining this year then you will have to suspend your university studies."

"Stop, Dad," I said. "I've had almost three years to think about the World Junior Championship, and my reasons for wanting to retire when I did." To respond to his use of the plural first person, I added, "You won't be my coach and manager this time."

"Savvy," my father said, and then I knew he was more hurt than angry by what I had been doing these last months. "I know you are a grown man. I have known it for a long time, longer perhaps, than you have known it yourself."

"You could have treated me that way," I said. I allowed that my behavior most of the time warranted scolding and my father never stooped to that level, but he also never shared his plans for me, his evaluation of me as a person. It was the first time I had ever heard him call me a grown man. "I'm looking for something very specific here. It's not something I expect you to understand or share, okay?"

My father broke eye contact, looking down; his eyebrows knitted together in the classic tell that he hadn't expected me to say the things I had just shared. Immediately I became fearful of what he might say in response.

"I know you're here because of the exhibition," I said. "You thought I'd come out of retirement, and you were right, but it wasn't so that I could go back to the way things were, me cooped up in a hotel room or glued to a computer every single day." My memory of the hustler in Venice came forward, but I ignored it and focused instead on my meeting with Badulov.

He looked up at me, his eyebrows relaxed again.

"Savvy, what do you believe will be different upon your return? The work remains to be done, whether I am there to assist you or not. The schedule, the funds, the contacts must all be addressed, and doing it yourself will only add to this burden, not take away from it. What do you hope to gain by returning?"

"I don't know," I said. "Why don't you tell me what it's all been for?" I had been leaning forward, anxious, but the worst was over now and I leaned back, confident that we wouldn't be arguing. "You've seen how I've been living, really seen it firsthand. What can I do with my life after a career in chess? I hustle for money, bum around with kids and burnouts, and read books for classes, earning a degree I don't have a clue how to use. What were all those years studying and playing for? Tell me, because I would like to know."

"I was training you to be a champion, Savvy. It's an enormous responsibility, but one you have the talent to shoulder." He paused and scratched the bald spot on his head that grew a little bigger and caught overhead light a little better each year. "Your life alone, away from what I spent years teaching you, has only shown that you are not yet ready, in spite of your talent."

"I know you're still mad about that. You're still disappointed in me."

"Whatever your reasons, the fact remains that you could have won the championship. You should have won. I explained to you that you would have to accept the consequences of your decision. You do not even realize the damage you have done. You have done damage to yourself and to chess across the world."

We still stood at the doorway to the playing area. Henry and his good friend Pierre, an arbiter, talked at the tables behind us. I became acutely aware that we were not having this

conversation alone, and it surprised me that my father spoke of these things in front of others. Then I thought that maybe he didn't believe it was a private matter.

"What kind of damage have I done?" I had been well aware of my father's disappointment, but I had not seen my choice to retire as impacting anyone but me. I had freed myself of a self-destructive obsession. If anything, I thought I had given opportunities to Takahashi to be undisputed American champion, to the Sixth to be the European sensation he was becoming. My father had been able to focus on his administrative capacities for reorganizing the world championship. Everyone had benefited. My decision now to re-enter the chess arena did not mean I thought I had made a mistake, that there was damage I had to undo. I was simply ready to make another attempt on my own terms.

"Only now do you ask this question?" my father said. His face contorted in a way I had never seen before. I realized it betrayed his impatience, his capability to be impatient in fact. "Have you not seen its effects already?" It was clear he wanted to say more, but then he held up his hand and said, "This is neither the place nor the time to discuss this." Only Henry was left now, Pierre having filed out a moment before. Henry was ready to lock up and was waiting a polite distance away.

I paused to consider what to say, and Henry took advantage of the opening I provided and interrupted.

"Excuse me," he said, "but Savvy and I have unfinished business for the day." He smiled at my father and then turned to me. My father nodded. "Of course, of course." He made his way out.

"This is one of the best simuls we've had in the fifteen years I've been doing this, Savvy. The kids want someone new, someone to join the ranks with Takahashi at the top." The way he

said it reminded me of something I had read of Badulov a year ago, saying it was great rivalries, the combinations of players that made chess popular. What would Fischer have been without Spassky and the Russians? What would Weinstein have been without Borgov? At home, I was Takahashi's main rival. In Europe, I challenged the likes of the Sixth and all he represented of our rising generation. After three years, I could finally see the variations of advantage that Badulov had hoped to exploit when he visited my hotel room in Venice on the eve of my last round of the world junior championship. He was a grandmaster in his own right, but it was in the political arena, manipulating prodigies and talents like pieces for his own gain.

Henry quickly but efficiently counted through the cash and receipts in his money purse and then pulled out the checkbook he used for chess club business. "I'd appreciate it if you'd wait until Tuesday to cash this, give me a chance to make sure I've deposited all our earnings from the week."

"Actually, Henry," I said, "I have a proposition for you. Would you be interested in sponsoring me for some tournaments this month?" He gave me a funny look, but nothing about it said he wasn't interested.

* * *

Back at home I informed my father of the specifics for my plans to play competitively again. We were in our familiar positions, sitting across from one another, but this time separated by the small kitchen table. He shook his head. "I think it is irresponsible to undertake a schedule without any preparation of material, finances, or support."

"What you really mean is that I should have talked to you first. You're upset because I made this decision on my own."

“I am concerned,” my father corrected, “because I know how difficult this is on one’s own. Despite my personal grievances with the Botvinnik School, they were correct about many things. The most important thing upon which they were correct: teamwork. Who will be your coach? Who will manage the business of your tournament fees and registration? Or are you so capable now that you can do everything without assistance?”

“I’m not trying to be Fischer, Dad. It’s not like that. This is about finding my own way, not about being afraid of anyone.”

“Regardless of his reasons, Fischer set out for himself as you intend to now.”

“Do you honestly think I will turn out like him? You said yourself I’m a grown man now. Do you see me going crazy? I think I have handled myself pretty well in my retirement. Better than I thought I would anyway.”

“I do not want you hurting yourself again. Perhaps those who suggested that I pushed you too hard to compete in the World Junior Championship were correct. Even I am capable miscalculation, and if that is true it was a blunder that cost us all. It might be that it is the game itself, instead of the politics, that you cannot handle. I blame myself, Savvy.”

“Don’t do that, Dad. Don’t make this about you.”

“Yes, of course,” my father said, but it disquieted me that he didn’t elaborate.

“Dad, it’s my move to make here. It’s up to me to see to if it’s the right one or not. I’m not asking you to coach me or manage me, but I am asking for your support. Do I have your support?”

My father shook his head, but not in answer to my question, and stood up from the table. Our conversation adjourned.

"Savvy, you know I will always love and protect you as best as I am able. But what you are asking me I cannot answer today." He turned and went into his bedroom, closing the door gently behind him. He did not wait for me to say anything else. There are very few second chances for a chess player within the game itself. There are no wild card seats or last minute qualifying events. On occasion a popular or influential chess player would be seeded into the next big tournament by grace of some great feat or accomplishment that demanded such treatment. On the much smaller field, within the sixty-four squares, the only second chances available to you are the ones you create for yourself.

One such second chance is the transposition. At the start of a chess game, whether black or white, but usually as black, you have no control and few ideas over what kind of opening will be played against you. If you are not expecting or have not prepared the proper opening you are already at a disadvantage that only gets worse as the game progresses. In such situations you have to know how to transpose from one opening, your opponent's opening, into your own, which you have prepared for. Mikhail Botvinnik, the first Soviet World Champion in a long and powerful line of them, was a master of transposition in the opening. Many of his best students, those who became world champions themselves, had been rigorously trained in both major openings as white: the King's Pawn opening and the Queen's Pawn opening. I'm talking about an ability as incredible as ambidexterity and as powerful as wielding a sword in each hand. The range of defenses one had to be ready to use was doubled. In order to face the young and studied challengers, many of them his own pupils, Botvinnik had to control the situation not knowing which opening would be played. His solution was the quiet, the seemingly useless 1…e6. In such a harmless first move Botvinnik was actually giving himself the best way out. He was a master of both the French Defense and the Nimzo-Indian Defense and no matter what white played in

response to such a harmless move he could transpose into either of his pet openings. Botvinnik was the king of second chances in all sorts of ways. He was also my father's teacher for over a decade.

* * *

Going to the Tucson Open, my first tournament in just over three years, really was like starting all over again. The simple feelings, the tension that tugged at my muscles and tendons when I turned my head or lifted my arms, were new and different from what I had felt ten years before. Where once I traveled everywhere with my father, here I drove to Tucson by myself. I had earned my driver's license the year before, just after my twentieth birthday. The car was an old loaner from David, my first roommate, who had recently purchased a new hybrid. He was happy to loan it to me for a few weeks, and if I liked it enough he said he'd sell it to me cheap. To me, the best feature of this nine year old hatchback was the tape player in the console. The tapes my father had made over the years carried on for long hours, providing a welcomed comfort as well as refreshing my memory of our training days together and my taste for victory at tournament play. There was plenty of compliment from the Arizona desert through each phase of the day with my father's deep, lugubrious voice as he listed match ups between Soviet players he had studied under and played against, narrated games played decades ago at the height of Cold War analysis, and recited variation upon variation. For the whole of the ten hour drive his voice kept me company, and the ideas of his research and preparation were of such substance it was as if he sat next to me in the car during my entire trip. But I was alone when I finally followed the printed directions to the playing hall, a low, one-story community center just outside of downtown Tucson. And I was alone when I paid the submission fee and signed my name for all six rounds, not taking advantage of the bye they offered. It was also odd to pay for

my chess federation membership renewal, which I had never had to do before. I had to ask the tournament director, a short man sporting a bushy beard with gray streaks in it, where I could find a cheap hotel, and he asked if I had inquired at the number listed in the tournament information of their website.

It occurred to me that I had never had the chance to realize what a lonely experience it could be to travel and compete on my own. I felt it sharply when I saw the younger players there with their fathers or both parents. Many of the older men participating were regulars to the area or had played in the tournament in years past. Just as it happened in the Las Vegas club, men shook hands, chatted, and stood in small huddles over skittles games being played before the start of the first round. A couple of masters and at least one other IM, like myself, were signed up to play in the top rating section, but I didn't recognize a single person. As usual in small opens, the TD called everyone to attention, thanked us for being there, explained the usual rules and the particulars for this tournament, and then the TD and assistants handed out the first round match ups by section and started our clocks.

I had feelings of nostalgia for learning the ropes in my first encounters. Kids I saw in the beginner section were learning as I had that a tournament director was a TD, that a grandmaster was a GM, that a tournament was a tourney, that a simultaneous exhibition (usually held by a GM after a tourney at the TD's discretion) was a simul. They also learned quickly about ratings. The higher your rating was the better your title. You were class A or below at first, then an expert, a master, an international master (called IM of course), until finally you were rated high enough to be a GM. The average player usually starts out in the D class, his rating between 1200-1400. When I first started I was an A class player, almost 2000. A grandmaster often plays well over a 2400 rating. And the very best players in the whole world were 2700+ in rating.

Other things took longer to learn like the different kinds of tournaments and the different kinds of players one could face.

My first opponent was eleven years old. She had blonde hair so long that I guessed immediately that it was her mother's idea to keep it that length. That much hair was a burden too heavy for a child her age to want. I wondered about her desire to play chess as well. She told me her rating, which was expert, and I guessed she was under-rated at that. Thankfully for me, I guessed that she was not versed in aged, esoteric games and so I checkmated her in a variation of the Ruy Lopez that Smyslov had unleashed upon Pachman back in 1946. She didn't seem to mind. Her head bobbed affirmatively to alternative punk blasting through the earbuds of her iPod as I smothered her enclosed king.

My game was one of the first to finish, so I grabbed a coffee from the concession bar out in the hall and asked the TD where the pay phone was.

"Don't you carry a cell phone?" he said.

Just outside the center I fumbled with my change in one hand, holding my coffee in the other, the phone receiver balanced between my ear and my shoulder. The automated voice in my ear repeated its instructions of coin insertion every five seconds.

I called my father and he answered on the second ring.

"Hey, Dad," I said.

"You arrived in Tucson without incident?"

I looked behind me at the small parking lot, the barren mountains on the horizon, and heat waves that made the picture of blasted Arizona undulate wildly.

"I just won my first game. I have two more today and then three tomorrow before I drive back. I don't remember ever playing so much chess at one time, but I must have when I was like twelve."

"I cannot talk much longer. I am leaving the city for New York in three hours."

"That's great, Dad. Blitz phone conversation."

"No jokes, Savvy," my father said. He cleared his throat to expunge the sound of disappointment. "It is important you stay focused on where you are and what you are doing."

"Remember, Dad, no coaching, all right?"

"Savvy, I am still your father," he said, and then went quiet. He was still upset with me and wouldn't listen when I told him I was on a pay phone. I had to put more change in before he spoke again.

"I have some people I want you to call upon your return. I will leave their names and how best to contact them in your office. Do not delay."

"Who? Why would you do that? I'm not even calling about that. I called to see if you had seen Dana recently and if…"

"No, that is all, Savvy," my father said and hung up. He was furious. Probably as much with himself as he was with me. He was mad because he wasn't with me at the tournament. I remembered how he took me everywhere with him, no matter if we were in New York, Atlanta, or even at home in Lone Pine, California. He rarely let me out of his sight, except at the playing halls, and now I was out on my own without him. But probably in his mind he had abandoned me and not the reverse. He was sitting with the black pieces for the first time and it was his son's turn to make the first move. He was furious at his own amateur response.

I tapped the kill switch on the phone and swallowed the rest of my coffee whole while looking into my hand to see how much change I had left. The TD stuck his head out the door to tell me the next round pairings were up. I pocketed my change and went back inside.

In a Swiss style tournament, like the one I was playing in, you are paired after the first round with opponents who closely match your score and rating. As you continue to do better, your opponents become more difficult. If you do worse, your opponents become easier. Eventually you face opponents of equal standing. This is normally good for players like myself. I had the highest rating of all the participants and my next opponent, though he won his first game also, was still rated two hundred points below my rating floor. I crushed him in an uncommon Sicilian defense, his strategy for the tournament being to take his opponents out of preparation and theory. It worked in dragging the game out until the first time control, but my advantage was insurmountable once the dust settled.

My third opponent was the resident master I had noticed talking to the TD all day. They almost looked like brothers. The master had a gray, well-groomed beard and a smile he shared easily with anyone who cared to give him eye contact. It was odd for me to stare into such a friendly face I didn't know. It was a clear signal that I was bush league again, playing in a small town tournament with unrated amateurs and lower rated experts. If it had been an actual grandmaster sitting across from me his eyes would have radiated the cold intensity of a marble statue. Impenetrable and immovable. My current opponent was simply there to have fun.

The TD made the announcement that the last round of the day had begun and it was time to start our clocks. I tapped the trigger on my clock and opened with my king's pawn. Alekhine, the 4th World Champion, once wrote that certain openings as white were dangerous because they commit him before he has even discerned black's intentions. I recalled my father reading Dr.

Alekhine's lecture out of his collection of great games and adding his own insight, that the king's pawn opening was one of the most famous examples of what the former world champion had talked about. I looked down at my scoresheet, where I had already written in my first move and looked at my opponent's name: Dennis.

I came to know Dennis well over the course of the game. He smiled over his position like an idiot, winking once when I caught him recognizing a trap I had set for him. In the middlegame he had the annoying habit of standing and commiserating with the other players, talking about his game like it was just for fun. It had been a long time since anyone had made me feel the way I did. The plastic coffee cups began to pile on my side of the board, one seemingly for each piece I had captured. I was distracted enough by the game that I kept getting a new cup without even finishing the previous. Near the end, I poured all the different remainders into one cup and downed it all in one frantic chug, my right eye turned to continue staring at the board. I wished secretly that Dennis had actually mentioned some particular of the game in his off-sides chat so that I could disqualify him, but of course it was all casual.

The light outside was finally gone when I resigned. In spite of my superior talent, I had misplayed the whole game from the opening move, and Dennis was more than twice my age with a lifetime of experience to recognize every trap, sense every feint, and complicate each threat so that I could never build an overwhelming advantage. By the endgame I was blitzing my moves, and he had played probably ten thousand games more than me so that his responses to my pawn moves were almost muscle memory to deploy. I was incredulous at the final position, but I had learned enough about Dennis by that point to know he could close the deal. I looked at no one as I made my way from the table out into the Arizona night.

I rode in the shuttle the Howard Johnson provided and tried not think about tomorrow's games. The lights of Tucson at night streamed past me and I couldn't help but think how much darker than Las Vegas it was here after everyone had gone to bed and the stores had closed up. My discomfort in the shuttle arose from the small space, the abrasive fabric against my hands and the smell of innumerable people who had smoked, spilled coffee, and sweat through their clothes and into very lining of those seats. In Spain, at night, my father said he could walk for hours with the smell of sunburned clay and the sea all around him and see the lights of bars still taking in wanderers. The next thing I remember, the guy driving the shuttle ceremoniously announced our arrival, and I said thanks without giving him a tip.

In my room were two double beds set up facing the low bureau with the television set centered on it. Between the beds sat a small nightstand of the same cheap material as the bureau and the headboards. Had I gotten back to the room sooner I would have laid out my practice set on the table next to the singular window in the room. Instead there was only a tiny notepad and a cheap ballpoint pen of a waxy color with the hotel logo, phone number, and internet address printed on it. My mind drifted to my father's stories about Spain, the details of staying in hotel rooms with full bars and mini-refrigerators, soft and thick bedding colored deeply like the mountains or the sky at night. There was no view of Tucson from my room, only the parking lot and a low retaining wall with a dumpster shared with a Jack in the Box next door.

I reached into my pockets and dumped my key card, wallet, and loose change onto the bureau. I also unwadded my game scores and discovered I had forgotten to take my last one from the game I had lost. I had even forgotten to sign Dennis' score sheet.

Grabbing the pen and notepad from the table, I sat on the interior side of the bed closest the window and copied down the score from memory under the yellow glare of the nightstand

lamp. I couldn't forget it if I wanted to. I glanced at my watch and at the phone as I copied frantically in my unreadable script. I wanted to call Dana and my father but I could feel my loss, all the errors and inaccuracies, changing and metamorphosing into what I should have done, so that I couldn't break away. When I finished I pulled my practice set out of my vinyl tote bag and set up the game, playing through the score for the evening. I caught some mistakes I had copied into the score and fixed them, but then as I played through further and further I found I had begun playing a new game based on the incorrect moves. It took me hours to reconstruct the game and by then it was too late to call my father back or to call Dana.

I reclined on the bed and stared up at the ceiling. The pillows were flat and lumpy so I threw them to the floor and laid the back of my head on my intertwined hands. I tried to calm myself. I focused on my heartbeat and tried to slow it consciously as my father had taught me to after a lost game. He said the body and mind are linked, each feeding off the other and each feeding into the other. If I could calm my body I could calm my mind and vice versa. One was always susceptible, so both were. When my heartbeat wouldn't slow I focused on my body, keeping it still, not even blinking until necessary. Instead of calming me it emphasized how alone I was, and how alone I felt.

My first tournament on my own and all I could think about was talking to Dana over dinner or my father here in the room with me going over my games. Why didn't I buy Dennis a drink for beating me? He deserved a celebration for beating a titled opponent. Or even better he could have bought me a drink. Except I don't drink. And what would we talk about? His life in the Tucson chess club scene, players he beat, his dreams for chess, and how his family feels about that. Beyond that, though, I'm not sure what I would say or how it would progress. And would it even matter if we never saw one another again?

Where were my friends? My family? Where was my life? The questions marched in familiar rank and file up and down. The image replayed once, then again, then in a series. It wasn't long until the ceiling dissolved and the chess board of marching questions dominated my vision.

* * *

I awoke to a single ray of light piercing a crack in the curtains. At first I didn't know where I was, then I looked down and saw that I had fallen asleep wearing the same clothes from yesterday. It hadn't taken me long to fall into old habits. As I looked at the clock I was thankful my window faced the east; it was two hours before the start of the day's first round.

I, showered, dressed, and grabbed a cheese danish at the free continental breakfast, after calling for a shuttle to pick me up at the front lobby by 9:00am. I could have driven myself, but it was better to make the most of the crummy hotel and give myself as much time to prepare for the day's chess as possible.

How did I prepare? I went about it mysteriously. I had no coach or trainer to work off, my father was not there with me. I had to concentrate on what I planned to use for the last three rounds and I had to work on positions from memory. I tried to recall every game Tal had played using the Nimzo-Indian Defense. When I found I couldn't remember more than a dozen all the way through I switched gears and thought of all the Sicilian, Najdorfs grandmaster Geller had ever played. I felt better when I lost count of the number of his games I could remember.

I arrived just in time for the first of the final three rounds. Most of the younger players were already seated at the north end of the room where all the lower boards and sections were set up. Despite my loss yesterday I saw my empty seat at the first board table. I had black against an IM who was fidgeting in his seat and checking the clock every few seconds, either to make sure

it was working or that it hadn't started yet. A few other players from the top boards were still milling around and chatting as the tournament director clapped his hands and asked everyone to sit down. I signed in at the front desk and walked directly to my seat. My opponent half stood with his hand extended. He wore a gray and red striped sweater and his hand was icy when I shook it. He didn't make eye contact, and by that I mean he wouldn't make it for very long, his eyes flicking all around, but always making a stop at the board before shifting to something else.

I got comfortable in my chair, leaning back and folding my hands in my lap until the TD cued us to start our clocks.

"What's your name?" my opponent asked me.

"Kowalski," I said. He wrote down my name on his score sheet, stopping twice to ask for specific letters. As he wrote, he looked up nervously at me.

"I'm Stanley," he said. "Last name is Stanley. My first name is Greg."

"Nice to meet you, Stanley," I said. "I'm Savvy. I wish you luck."

He grinned, but in an unpracticed, pained way. I knew his kind well. I expected a long hard game ahead of me, but I also knew when I first saw him that I would ultimately win. When I spoke to players like Stanley I marveled at the breadth of their knowledge and the depth of memorization and analytical abilities. But chess players are people too, and subject to nerves, ticks, and tells, just like in Poker. Players like Stanley possessed all the knowledge to beat me, but lacked the experience of competitive play and dealing with an unpredictable and adaptive opponent. I saw him trouncing players even rated forty points above him, but against someone like me, a seasoned professional, he would play like a patzer. Even before we started I knew he would second guess good moves, or even book moves. He would look at my score sheet as I wrote my moves down hoping for some insight into my thoughts. He would play safe, solidly,

positionally, hoping for an early draw. That's when I would play tactically, wildly, sacrificing everything I could. The trick to beating an opponent like Stanley was to play the man, not the board. As long as I paid attention to his tells and not the position I would dominate him for the entire game.

The TD double-checked the sign-in list and then said we could begin. Stanley and I shook hands again (his hand somehow even colder than before) and then I started the clock.

He opened with his queen's pawn, hoping for a familiar book system for which many solid positions could be attained. I put him to the test immediately by gambiting my king's pawn almost as he let go of his piece. He tilted his head slightly, but noticeably, and stared at my free pawn, which not only left my future pawn structure in ruins, but also could not be won back easily or immediately. After ten minutes of what should have been an easy response, he played his king's pawn opposite mine, hoping to transpose into the less solid but more familiar Center Game. I declined again and gambited another pawn. When he played again, this time after fifteen whole minutes, I knew I had him. The game progressed slowly and my early time advantage proved a necessity later in the complex positions that followed, but eventually I had won the exchange on both his rooks, and with an extra pawn there was no point in continuing. He extended his hand across the board in resignation and I shook it, noticing that his hand, after three hours of play, had grown hot and sweaty.

I looked up and saw the other two masters I had yet to play watching the end of our game. One had his arms folded across his chest, his eyebrows scrunched together as he no doubt tried to find some saving move for white to prevent resignation. The other master was a teenage boy, probably Korean ancestry, with glasses and long unkempt hair. He had a small stack of

books under his left arm, which he had to constantly adjust his grip on. I stood up and stretched and asked the older master what we had in the way of lunch before the next round.

Before I left the table I remembered this time to sign my opponent's score sheet and I said "good game," to which he smiled, offering his hand to shake one last time.

"I should have taken your king's pawn," he said warmly and without regret. "You had no idea what you were doing."

"Not in that opening," I said and laughed in agreement. "You just get your norm?"

"Yeah, official last month. I won a tournament with three IMs in it and I nearly had a heart attack in the last game, since it was a must-win for the norm and it was the strongest IM I was playing against. In the end, his time trouble won it for me. I didn't have better than an equal game." As he spoke, I could tell he was only a little older than me and new at commiserating with fellow masters of his own strength.

"What brings you to this tournament?" I asked. We had begun walking to the double door exit, past which we had our choice of vending machines in the hall or a McDonald's a jog down the street for lunch.

"I'm down visiting my father while I'm on the West Coast. A kind of extended vacation. I'm also playing in the National Open in Las Vegas next month and thought I'd flex my new title. I could have cinched first for sure if I had taken that pawn." He didn't slow as we neared the vending machines, so I kept pace with him as we made our way outside toward the McDonald's. "You here for the same reason?"

"Sort of," I said. When faced with a choice I've always calculated the consequences of my decisions, both in chess and in life. How closely did I expect or want to acquaint myself with young IM Stanley? I had never been friends with other chess players my own age. The closest

friend I'd had before retiring was Takahashi and we had been clear rivals from the beginning, though we respected one another. And I, too, was playing in the National Open next month. Though we may not face each other on the board, Stanley and I would still be competing in the standings for top prize money. Professionally, it was still advisable to keep my distance.

And yet where had that gotten me in the last ten years? As early as last night I had lamented my loneliness, my lack of friends and family. I was struck by the fact that I knew none of the chess players at this, albeit small, tournament. If my goal was really transposition back into my old life I would have to be willing to make some unfamiliar moves, moves I had never made before, to reach the kind of position I was used to thriving in.

"I've actually been out of chess these last three years and I'm trying to get back in before the Open in Vegas. It's more than overcoming rustiness, though. I was lost without chess and I didn't realize it until just this summer."

Stanley nodded as we walked under the sun floating directly overhead. The McDonald's was indeed a jog, but well within view. We would have plenty of time to eat before the next round started. I learned IM Stanley was a computer programmer, a managing tech in fact for web design, who worked for a firm out in Florida. Chess was his hobby for years through school, and with ample time being single he was able to devote time to study, improving his rating, and gaining titles. He joked that being single was financially sound since he had a very nice condo on the Ft. Lauderdale beach and the real estate wasn't cheap. I asked him about the chess scene in Florida over our lunch and he told me it was the land of chess opportunity. Next to New York and maybe Las Vegas it was the best state for a chess player to live and play. He usually didn't have to travel to face top competition, but his work could take him all over the country and he

was treating himself this year to the National Open since he was both an IM and had saved up four years of vacation time.

"It was either that or one of the European Opens or Aeroflot and I would be even more outclassed there than here."

"You're an IM now," I said, patting his arm. "You're one of us. You deserve to play with the top boards."

"I sure don't feel it today."

"How long have you been registered with the USCF?" I asked. We had stood up and made our way out. Stanley paused from answering me to order a cookie.

"Oh, only about two years."

"That's part of the problem. You've been playing most of your life, but you're still acquainting yourself with the tournament scene. Do you have any support?"

He waited until we crossed the first street to answer. "Oh yeah, but not the kind you probably mean. I can't afford much in the way of coaching. My support is all digital. I've been training for five years on the best chess software in the world. I've memorized variations that would make grandmasters' heads spin. I didn't play much in college when I should have been. I had all this momentum from high school and I let it rust while I coded and worked while finishing my degree. Only recently, since I registered, have I been playing. If I get an opening going that I've prepared I almost always win. But days like today, with that you pulled? I seem to fall apart."

"See, you're missing out on the psychological element of chess. Opening prep and memorized lines are great, but they only take you so far. You'll hit the wall fast at this level and

won't get around it. It didn't help, either, that I could read all of that in your face the way you carried yourself. I could see it immediately, could feel it in your hands when we shook."

"I get what you mean. How do I overcome it?"

"Practice," I said. I stopped at the crosswalk and turned to look at him. "Training, too. The only trick is to become aware of your actual limitations. I knew our game was going to be tough even though I also knew I would win. I didn't kid myself I would beat you in a miniature. But I knew if I made it tough for you, complicated the game to my strengths, I would win eventually, and I was right."

"But that was your superior experience, right? You've been trained by professionals. What could I do against that?"

I shook my head as we walked, the community center growing larger before us.

"There's always someone who will look better on paper, because of rating, or experience, or training, but they're still human. Chess can be a battle of wills, with the stronger will winning. Calculation and good moves are essential, yes, sure, but don't ever forget the human element."

"I've read grandmasters who say those things," Stanley said with a touch of awe.

"They should, I learned that from one."

"Who? Takahashi?"

"My father," I said.

We had arrived at the entrance, the sun only starting to arc downward. We would be sitting down and starting our clocks in minutes, and as we walked I didn't want to get caught up talking about my father, so I interrupted Stanley and said, "Here's some advice for your next match. You've probably seen and memorized more openings than anyone else here, myself included. Try trapping your next opponent in an esoteric opening. Something old, something

only one grandmaster from the fifties used to play. Choose one of Larsen's pet openings. The point being, if he falls into the opening you have him. If he varies, you know the responses to punish him. Play to your strengths, and don't assume his countermoves are better than your prep."

His nod was slight, almost as if he didn't hear me.

"Hey, I'm going for drinks after the tournament," he said. "Will you still be here or are you leaving right after?"

"Drinks it is," I said and clapped his shoulder. "Remember, play to your strengths, exploit your opponent's lack of knowledge early."

The last two games went quickly. Not because I annihilated my final two opponents (though I did beat them both) but because I found my mind wandering after I finished calculating each variation. As my opponents stared and struggled with the complications I created, I found myself thinking of what Stanley and I would discuss after the tournament. It felt good to coach him for his penultimate game (which he won just as I suggested, in a line of the Nimzo-Larsen), and I thought about offering to train him for the National Open, in spite of the conflict of interests it would pose. It was just the sort of thing my father would advise me against if he knew about it.

That led me to thinking of what I would say to my father when I called. I wanted to tell him I was sorry for being so angry with him, that I was angry with him to begin with and I had let it come between us. But that would lead me to telling him that my break with chess had been my break with him, and since my return to chess on my own, I was enjoying it, finding fulfillment from it, in ways I hadn't experienced working with him. I wasn't ready to tell him

those things yet, wasn't sure they would even be true in a month when I would fighting against grandmasters in Las Vegas.

And I kept imagining Dana there with me. I imagined she had come unexpectedly, unasked for, the promise of sex and companionship radiating from her. But I realized that in the time we had spent together I still didn't know very much about her. The loquacious, ambitious girl I shared milkshakes and fast food with was hardly the same alluring woman I had dueled at my simul. The only thing I believed about her was that she wasn't trying to scam me. At least, not a straight scam. I had hustled enough to know the difference. Yet something had been on her mind; something had made her replay that game with me, but whatever it was, whoever she was, I wouldn't know what it was for certain until I asked.

As the light outside grew dim and kids packed their boards and clocks away, finished early to either glory or disappointment, I made two decisions. As my final opponent was deciding whether to accept my sacrifice or continue pushing with rook checks I was weighing far different matters.

I was returning to thoughts of Europe and the international chess scene. By playing here in Tucson I had reactivated my rating. My first place in the top section qualified me for the National Open in Vegas. If I placed first there I would petition for a seat at the US Championship in Atlanta. I would be a coach to Stanley, if he was interested. I saw in him someone to befriend, and someone I could pass something onto, which felt good and exciting. I'd find seconds to help prepare me for the championship, not a coach. I was done with someone instructing me; I was ready to instruct myself. I also knew at last that I was done being alone. I didn't know what Dana and I would be, but I was determined to figure it out with her. Whatever relationship we had, friends or colleagues, intimate or professional, I wanted her with me. I was going back to the

World Junior Championship. The American champion was always guaranteed a spot, and this was my last year to be eligible. I was going to fight and win to get there, and I wanted Dana with me. I never traveled alone when I was younger and I didn’t want to travel alone ever again.

Chapter 4

After the long drive home from Tucson, I still expected to see my father waiting for me even though I knew he was long gone. The apartment was quiet and dark. I turned on lights, my computer, the coffeemaker, and the stereo. When I finally opened my suitcase in my room, I saw a note taped to my computer screen.

In New York for a couple of weeks. Will call when I am able. Please contact these people as soon as possible:

What followed were a half dozen names with telephone numbers and email addresses. My father had taken the time to circle the preferred contact method for each name.

My father could never bring himself to sign any note or letter he left me with "Dad" or "Your Old Man." At the bottom were his initials in his slender Russian script.

I sat at my desk and checked my email and caught up on the news and forum chatter.

Once I had a cup of coffee in my hands and I had responded to inquiries made about tournament participation and deadlines, I called Dana.

She answered out of breath, "Yeah?"

"Dana, it's Savvy. Can you talk?"

"Bad time. I'll call in ten." Then she hung up.

I reclined and swiveled in my chair, alternating between blowing and sipping on my hot coffee. In three weeks I would be competing at the National Open and I was feeling excited again, the first time I could recall since the last US championship in which I had participated. I recognize now that it was not excitement that I had felt when I had flown back from Italy to start

college, or when I had first decided to come back at playing chess. That had been a much deeper feeling. I had felt desperation, trying to change my life from the empty and emotionless routine I felt caught in. Even though I was grown, my own father finally saying so, I knew my father was also observing me, watching my every move in and out of his home. He perhaps had tolerated my living alone and my attending the university to stimulate and distract me. His experience, his intuition had told him I would come back to chess, and he had been right. There was more he didn't know that would cause him grave concern. I didn't feel confident yet that I could convince him it was right for me. I couldn't convince him I needed to play chess again, on my own, until it was done. Only now, after a full tournament, was I starting to feel the old excitement and thrill and plain need to be at the board again. The heart, a giant muscle in perpetual motion, can never atrophy, and yet it felt then like my own had.

The phone beeped and I found my father calling, not Dana.

"Savvy, I am working on some projects here. I might fly to Europe as well."

"Working on what?"

"Focus, Savvy. How did you perform in Tucson?"

"I won," I said, and couldn't help but smile to myself.

"Any losses?" He barely whispered this.

"Just one," I said. In the instance of those two words a silence followed that was filled with the chasmous vision of my cheap hotel room and every stick of furniture therein. It was a sterile and removed feeling, but I dismissed it when my father spoke again.

"It is to be expected after your time away. I am proud, Savvy. You have retained what I have taught you."

"I'm playing in the National Open in three weeks."

"I know. You have much to do before. Pay your entrance fee early. Be sure to contact the director a week in advance. By then he can familiarize you with venue, registered grandmasters, and…"

"Dad, I'll handle it."

"These are not trivial details, nor am I speaking to have you dismiss my time or urgency."

"What I meant to say is that I know these things are important, and while I appreciate your concern you have to trust that I will do these things myself."

My father sighed, but didn't press further. Finally, he said, "Have you called anyone from the list I left?"

"I just got home. I haven't had time to call anyone." I was certain he would grumble if I said I called Dana before anyone else.

"Call Alek first. You remember him. He is expecting to hear from you tonight, tomorrow at the latest. He will explain why you must contact the others on the list."

"Why can't you tell me?"

"I have already spoken longer than I planned. I must be going."

"Wait, Dad," I said.

"Goodbye, Savvy," he said. "Do not forget to contact Alek first." And he hung up.

He had forgotten to give me his number and I was about to redial back with *69 when the phone rang in my hands.

"Savvy?" Dana said. Her breath was full and her voice deep. It sounded as if she was still winded.

"Dana, are you all right?"

"Sure. Nothing. I was almost killed a few minutes ago. Car actually jumped the sidewalk. Missed me by an inch, tops. Had to call the police. You know."

"Dana, I…" In that moment I was blank. Her call had surprised me when I was focused on my father, and then being told she had almost died had jostled something in me that I wasn't prepared for.

"I'm fine, really. Sorry to scare you. Haven't heard from you in a while."

The next thing I said popped out like a revelatory move found over the board:

"I threw my last chess game against Petrosian, you know, the Sixth. I threw away a grandmastership and my whole chess career when I was eighteen."

I started counting the seconds that went by without a response. I wanted to take it back, play it off as a joke, but I didn't know how to do any of that. I had never prepared myself for a conversation where I said something without thinking. Something beyond personal, a fulcrum to my past.

"We don't have to outdo each other, you know," she finally said.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I shouldn't have said anything."

"It's okay. Look, the cops are on their way over. We need to talk. Can I call you tomorrow?"

"I don't know," I said. My instinct was to put some distance from this conversation, from what I had said. I needed time to think and plan, to remove myself from impulse. "I'm preparing for the Open in three weeks," I answered. "I have no idea what this entails and I have to get started. Maybe next week." I realized I sounded apologetic.

"I guess it can wait, huh?"

* * *

The weeks leading up to the National Open were a setback. I didn't return Dana's call, and I didn't call Alek or anyone else on the list my father left me. The only person I called that first week was David to thank him for the loan of his car and to buy it from him. I also didn't go back to the Vegas chess club, and I even stopped answering the phone, letting the machine capture any messages. I saw Charles and David on campus when I went to class, but otherwise I found myself back in self-imposed isolation. I had reasons for this, but it still felt like I was moving backwards rather than forward. If Stanley were in town I would have called him, but he was in California visiting with his father before the Open.

Part of my rationale was to get back in shape. Winning a small tournament in Arizona against local and state masters was one thing, but winning the National Open against assorted grandmasters was another entirely. In Tucson I had fallen asleep without removing my contacts between game days, and it wasn't until the tournament was over that I figured out why my eyes were burning without reprieve. I kept the goatee, but I cut my hair, went back to wearing the glasses, and I bought a rowing machine since there were no parks to walk and it was too dry and arid anyway to be outside for any length of time. I also said goodbye to Taco Bell, Wendy's, and Kentucky Fried Chicken. The day after my last talk with Dana, I went to the grocery store and bought a month's worth of food and a small book of simple recipes. While I taught myself to cook, while I rowed every day, while in the car on the way to and from classes, and in my room while I studied and read, I listened to my father's old tapes analyzing the best games from five decades of the Soviet school of chess. Then I began recording my own tapes, analyzing recent games by Takahashi, the Sixth, Weinstein, Patel, Cranmic, and Gellman.

I ignored the solitude and enjoyed how empowered I felt living alone for the first time in my life. When I exhausted my father's tapes and made my own, I was finally coaching myself. I

owned a car, I could make six different kinds of salad and five varieties of soups, and I lost twelve pounds in three weeks of exercising. When I called David and Charles to tell them I needed a day to relax before the Open they both knew exactly what to do. They got me drunk and took me to a strip club, the Knight's Palace. I was bemused by their reaction when I told them I had never had a drink before or seen a stripper. They took it as sacrilege that I had lived in Vegas for three years without defiling myself, even though I had only turned twenty-one just before summer. Intoxicated, I succumbed to logorrhea and shared my fears of addiction, failure, rejection. I told them stories all chess players learned, of masters who drank themselves to death, who lost their sanity from the pressure, and who were married and divorced often. They laughed, said it happened in all sports, and ordered more shots for me. An Indian stripper named Petal took off my glasses and chewed on the ends while she danced across me. Because of the similarity of their names I asked if she knew about her country's world chess champion and she winked a yes. The next morning, hungover in my bed alone, I cried. Had she been Dana, perhaps any pretty girl who genuinely liked me, I would have slept with Petal and lamented waiting so long to feel something so marvelous and natural. Melancholy aside, I was ready to face the Open.

The first good omen was my bumping into Stanley at the registration table.

I had found that I was on the accelerated schedule, which meant I only had to play the last two days of the Open, but I would be playing five games the first day and four the next with no byes. This had ensured I'd have a few extra days to prepare after my partying. Stanley was on the regular, full week schedule with only three games to play for these last two days.

I asked how things were in the programming business, not knowing much about it, but wanting to make small talk before the first round. I was relieved when he actually directed our chat to chess.

"There are a number of GMs here," he said. "You think you might make a GM norm?"

I had scanned the list participants and had noticed plenty of US and Russian Grandmaster names, but the idea of scoring well enough for a norm had not entered my head. Nothing much had been able to enter my head since the morning I woke hungover, which had been the point. I didn't realize until that moment how much I had looked forward to becoming a grandmaster before Venice. It was like examining the back of my knee in the shower for the first time in years and discovering an old scar I had forgotten about. It had always been there, but I had never been in a situation where I had to acknowledge it.

"With a little luck it won't matter," I said. Stanley smiled as if we were sharing an inside joke and he started strolling with me.

It was the fifth year in a row that Bally's hosted the National Open in Las Vegas and it was always held in the main auditorium. I had been there once before with my father, when he played as part of his American return series. He had tied for second and made a nice bundle of money on top of qualifying on tie-breaks for the US Championship that year. I had not been playing in opens by that point and went only to see the tournament and because my father often didn't use seconds for preparation anymore. I knew he would let me help him with some of his endgame study.

Normally, the Bally's amphitheater auditorium was where former celebrities gave motivational speeches to Amway clients or software expositions filled the enormous floor space with booths and wandering programmers. During the National Open the space was separated into

three distinct areas. The main entrance was fortified with sign-in tables and booths for joining simuls, GM lectures, and side competitions. Beyond was the vast field of table rows, with scattered chessboards already set up. Beyond that to the far end opposite the fortification of sign-in tables was the main stage where the top six boards were set up on individual tables. Behind them was a big screen where the top six boards would be displayed. Centered in the front of the stage was a podium where the TD would make announcements and eventually hand out the awards and cash prizes. In less than an hour the auditorium would be packed with chess players of every age, ethnicity, size, shape, and gender. Like much of the rest of the casino there was no aspect or feeling of time to be aware of. The bright white lights high overhead glowed ceaselessly and without a single flicker.

"I guess we're toward the stage today," Stanley said.

"Have you ever competed here before?"

"This is the biggest open I've ever attended," Stanley said. "I've never felt good enough to be at one of these before."

As we navigated the table rows a gray and scruffy GM made his way towards us. I recognized him when he smiled.

"Savvy! Your father said you were back!"

"Alek," I said, shaking his hand. "Stanley, this is Grandmaster Aleksander Wokzscek. Alek, this is a friend I made in Tucson, IM Stanley."

"Any friend of Savvy is a friend of mine," Alek said. He had gained almost sixty pounds since I last saw him and his hair had thinned and grayed almost completely. His face was like the rock shelf of a sea cliff. It looked as if more bone resided in his head than flesh. Still, he smiled

warmly and joined us as we made our rounds and watched some of the younger competitors play warm-up blitz before the first round.

"I'm sorry I never got around to calling you." I said. "My father must be furious with me."

"I cannot say." Alek smiled to show there were no hard feelings. "You understand your father better than I, I think. When last I spoke to him he did say that he was going to Europe before the new year."

"Oh really? He told me he might go in just a couple of weeks."

"All of it just business, I'm sure. I never imagined your father giving up playing for organization and politics. It just didn't seem like him."

I shook my head and said, "He hasn't given up playing. He never did give up when it came to the board."

We had reached the stage and we stood in a three-pointed circle.

"I read rumors only of your return, but saw and heard nothing. You are back, yes?"

"Yes, I'm back, Alek."

"GM Wokzscek," Stanley said. He had been following our talk unobtrusively, but it was clear from his stare that he had been restraining himself. "I've studied your games from the eighty-eight US Championship. How did you know the French Defense would secure you so many wins?"

Alek chuckled. "Because, my dear boy, I had never used it before!" He put his arm around Stanley's shoulder and the two started walking along the length of the stage. I knew that Alek was regaling him with stories of his most famous sacrifices ("every one unsound!") and

meeting legends in their own time, such as Reshevsky and Najdorf. He was one of my father's closer friends and they had some memorable games together as well.

What Alek would not talk to Stanley about unless asked, and what Stanley would not think to ask about in the first place, was Alek's imprisonment in a Soviet prison for six years. If you found Alek's picture online at a chessbase article about defecting chess players, or maybe at a player database that collected his games, you would see a man that you absolutely could believe had lived under the most brutal incarceration. His weight, his early steel gray, and the shape and size of his arms and shoulders made him look like he was the main tough in his cellblock. He even looks like he may have worked at the prison beforehand, breaking limbs and whipping backs before his own methods would be turned on him. I have seen a picture of Alek staring down an opponent as if his very appearance could win him a game.

But such things about chess players are illusory. At the board Alek is the most vicious he could ever be at life. True that many games were won in fierce style, but his venom was never for his opponent. Instead, it was the position, the pieces on the board that he unleashed his wrath on. And there was so little to unleash. Away from the board Alek was the most gentle and sincere man I had ever known. He had been unable to marry and had no children of his own, so he treated me as his own son at every opportunity. At least, I like to think that is the way he treated me.

Of course I imagined that he wouldn't spoil his own son, instead taking him under his wing as an apprentice to life, not chess. When I was fifteen he stayed with us for a week before leaving with my father to an event in Madrid. He never once let the subject of chess come up while he was there, even though they were both competing. He would only let me talk about chess to relay my victories, which he would cap off with, "Then let us celebrate!" and we would,

by his taking us out to dinner in Little Ukraine and then walking along the shores at dusk talking of decades past.

The night before they left for the tournament Alek and I sat outside in the patio of a small café. I remember there was no fence and no border to separate the tables from the sidewalk and the beach beyond. Young men rode by on bicycles wearing shorts and no shirts and women walked by in twos and threes in their heels, clicking on the concrete as they strode. I watched all this because Alek was staring into his coffee, unwilling to speak except to say he didn't want to discuss his plans for the tournament with me.

That night, I was already on my third cup, but Alek had barely touched his, even though he had told the waiter in Spanish to add something to it. I didn't know what, my language skills being far inferior to other talents, but I could guess. We had been inseparable his whole visit, but earlier I had suggested we use this last day to take a break from my father and enjoy some male bonding time. It had been a joke; of course I was more interested in discussing his plans of the tournament and my own to play in the US Championship. He had smiled, but it wasn't conspiratorial or mirthful as his usually were. Instead it was a half smile, as though he remembered something he had forgot. He said, "Of course," and so we went out together. Afterwards, at home, there was a phone message for him from my father. He read it quickly and quietly, then folded it and put in his back pocket in a way that made me think of wiping grease off on one's trousers. Something in his face and the half smile earlier made me drag him out to the café, which he let me do easily.

"Don't tell me you're going to offer my father a draw early on," I said, trying to pick up a conversation earlier.

"Savvy…"

"You can still be friends, can't you, even though you play a serious game?"

"Savvy, please…."

I turned away and went back to watching the street. The sky was red, with clouds of gold and orange hanging over the western sea. I wished we were in Linares, both to see Weinstein play and to have a view of the hills and the sun setting. Here, the crowd of people and structures reminded me too much that I was in America.

He whispered something to himself in Russian.

Alek might have been addressing the empty patio or the wind for all I could tell. I knew a little Russian, enough to ask for an arbiter and where the bathroom was, but not to understand what he said. But the feeling was clear and I was surprised that I could recognize it. It was like algebraic notation; the same in any language, but meaningless without the passion for chess. I ignored what Alek said and finished my third cup.

"Savvy?"

I said nothing and watched as one lone woman walked unsteadily on her clogs across the sidewalk. She was making her way to our café and she carried two bags, one on either shoulder. In her hands looked to be a brochure or a map. Her family missed her. Her husband was at home and inexpert at making dinner, unlike my father. Her children were asking when she would be home. The oldest would be a boy and the younger a girl. They would be dressed as she was right then, in blues and greens, the boy wearing a hat. They were across the country in a house where the sun had already set. But then I just stared at her and thought about tomorrow when my father and Alek would fly to Spain, oblivious to her life and feelings as much as I was to Alek's.

"Savvy, I've had enough coffee. Let's go back."

I saw that he had downed his cup. He paid the waiter and we left.

What more could I have done? I was fifteen then. I was lonely and confused about things I hadn't even yet acknowledged. He was not anyone I could talk to.

It was that day that prompted me to eventually ask my father about Alek and he told me everything, including his time in the Soviet prison and the years that immediately followed. In many ways I learned to think of Alek as an isolated queen's pawn. Defenseless, abandoned, forging ahead on his own with capture his more likely future than promotion. Such a pawn as the IQP is feared and shunned on the board. Some strong masters have been known to resign when trapped with one. My reaction can only be traced to my namesake's declaration that an isolated queen's pawn strikes fear and derision across the board. There was nothing to say.

The last day of the Spanish tournament Alek played on when everyone else drew, including my father due to a forced repetition. He deflected and pinned and sacrificed, only to find his remaining pawn isolated and unguarded two squares from promotion. His opponent captured with ease and won the resulting bishop and knight checkmate, which was a technical lesson of the highest order.

Afterwards they collected their prize money and flew home, just as celebratory as if they had won themselves. Alek seemed determined to laugh the whole flight to the point that my father thought someone would call a stewardess, but no one ever did.

But I've become a bad guide to the world of chess. We have left Alek and Stanley walking the length of the stage, with Alek's arm conspiratorially around Stanley's shoulder, and I was making my way to my table. How does one control a memory? And what is the memory of a memory? In chess I find myself not only remembering important games during a tournament or a key position in a final round, but I look back at those tournaments and rounds and find myself remembering the memories I had. Whenever I play the Nimzo-Indian now I not only recall the

important world championship game Cranmic drew against Weinstein, which my father saw live in London, but I remember each Nimzo-Indian game I played and the recollection of the world championship game. Is memory like a root system? Does it tunnel and expand through one's mind, until finally the very bedrock of someone's psyche or unconscious is burrowed through? I sometimes think I have turned my mind to a dark purpose, unable to remember things from childhood and adolescence, but I will still remember that Cranmic-Weinstein game because it has found its way deeper into my brain than anything else.

It is an idea I never considered when I was a teenager and when my father and I were on more conversational terms. But as a young man I would give anything to hear his thoughts on the subject, only to find that both of us had built up impenetrable fortifications of silence, with careful deflective moves in place should the barrier somehow be breached.

Instead, like the games rooted in my memory, I have only what my father has already said to consult and aid me as I move forward. One thing he told me, which was of the utmost use at that moment when I sat down to my table for the first round, was that competing in a national open was like a visit to the zoo. He didn't mean to disparage the crowd of players that usually attends, though it did prepare me for the confluence of odors, apparel, and noises I was to encounter every time. By zoo he meant the menagerie of openings and defenses that would almost never be played in another, more professional chess tournament. I have seen Orangutans, Pterodactyls, Rats, Hippopotamuses, and even the elusive Grob at opens. Amateurs and locals relied on the surprise and shock to gain wins and draws over superior players, and often the GMs and IMs would play them too in order to block the bookworms or intimidate unorthodox players.

Despite the uncertainty and difficulty of playing large open tournaments, they were still the best way to make money and, in cases such as mine, with nine rounds and grandmasters from

at least three different countries in attendance at this event, I could earn an invitation to the biggest tournament in the country, but only if I won. And if I finished in the top three, I would still have enough money to tour Europe for the summer, but I would be much harder pressed to win a seat at the World Junior Championship.

So I forgot about Alek, my father, memories, and all else until only the board in front of me remained with the pieces moving as if by the touch of dismembered hands.

* * *

My games went quickly, with plenty of gaps in time to allow for stretching, lunch, and light conversation with other players or Stanley. It wasn't until the end of the last round, though, that Alek came up and took me aside from the rows of tables.

"How out of it have you been?" he said.

"My father tries to keep me in the loop, but I've been preoccupied the last six months. What is it?"

"Reunification," Alek whispered. I had grown half a foot taller than Alek and with his head tilted down he looked up at me with his brown eyes, a little glassy from the whole day of play.

"Yeah, right," I said, turning away so I could get coffee and some donuts for my late studying that night. "I've already heard all about it. Everybody has."

Alek shot around in front of me to block my way (he was still wider than me) and I saw that his eyes weren't glassy, but instead they were concerned and also something else. Excited? Anticipatory? "There's more," Alek said. "In particular one thing to interest you."

"Me? I've only just started playing again; I'm making stakes here, not on the world chess stage. No disrespect, Alek, but you're going to tell me something that affects me? That I haven't heard yet?"

He nodded. "Because I know more. Not only from your father, but from Keene, from a lot of different places. I have some family that escaped to Israel. Friends of Gellman."

"What about the Belgrade agreement?"

Alek shook his head, his eyes closed like a child, and held up his hand. "That's just the thing. The Belgrade Agreement is dead. Cranmic has conceded everything. ICF will control the title again. It's going to happen."

I couldn't believe it at first. Then I patted Alek on the shoulder and motioned for him to follow me. It didn't matter that one of the most important matches in the history of chess was about to be played, I still had to prepare for my early day tomorrow and couldn't afford to stand around talking about it.

"Are you sure Cranmic conceded?"

"Copies of the contract have been all over Chessbase and the journals this morning," Alek said, keeping up with my stride easily. His legs were much shorter but they moved with a speed that unnerved me sometimes. My father always insisted the two of them sit somewhere if they were to talk at any length.

"So were copies of the Belgrade Agreement when it was signed," I countered.

"That was before. That was Weinstein. Cranmic has conceded everything!"

The statement was simple and unremarkable, but I had lived years being told and believing that it couldn't happen. It was like any ordinary object you could pick up every day,

except the day you are asked to bring it into the other room and you find your hands are covered in grease.

"Why would he do that?" I said.

"There are rumors from both sides. It is obvious, of course what Petrosian and Badulov want. Their interests are Luzhinov's interest."

"More conspiracy theories, Alek?"

"I apologize if you don't agree. I will remind you some have suffered for not paying heed to rumors and what people will do for greed and power."

"Don't pull that on me, Alek. You know what my father would say if he were here. You could have left Poland at any time and been safe."

"My only point was that I try to stay as informed as possible. I do not want to be surprised again in any situation. I was naïve before."

"What could it possibly have to do with me? If it's reunification, then it's the Sixth versus Cranmic. Even if history doesn't repeat itself, Alek, and you know it better than I do, you were there, I don't have to tell you I have no part in it. Even if the match falls through."

He pulled me back against the high ceiling wall. "It won't fall through. Cranmic and Badulov have invested more than you may think, but that's a later matter. I have news from Kalmykia. The candidates' matches for the next cycle are in jeopardy. If they fall through, several of the candidates will boycott, including Gellman. Do you see what I'm saying?"

I nodded because I did indeed know what it meant. Anatoli Luzhinov was the president of ICF and of the Russian republic of Kalmykia. He had funneled millions of his own money and his country's into world chess. It gave him near limitless power as a dictator, demanding

whatever terms and specifics of a chess match under ICF auspices that he chose. Two years ago, when he had held the World Cup Tournament for the World Championship in Libya, several Israeli GMs, including Gellman, had been unable to secure passports or safe transport of their staffs and colleagues. Major competitors such as Patel withdrew from the event in protest. Despite the charges of Anti-Semitism and corrupted backdealing, Luzhinov held the tournament anyway, and with so many major players missing, the way was paved for little heard of Rasimranov, an Uzbekistani, to win the World Championship. At the time of his winning he didn't even hold a 2700 rating.

If Luzhinov could do such a thing once, he could do it again. And that meant open seats in the candidates' event, for those willing to submit to ICF's whim. But I still saw no chance. I wasn't even a GM.

"It may to go the young up-and-comers, but they will all be grandmasters, Alek; not me."

He shook his head and lowered his voice even more. The soft whisper was frightening in that I had only one idea where he learned the need to speak with such quiet.

"I'm telling you this now for two reasons. You still have time to qualify as a grandmaster. Win this one." He pointed his finger down to the floor of the convention center. "This year looks to be the highest ranked US Championship since the time of Fischer, and you will qualify. Afterwards you will have an automatic seat for the World Junior Championship. The winner there will be top choice for the last seat in the Candidates. Think of it, Savvy." He put his arm around my shoulder and looked out with me at the tables, which by that point were only half full as many of the games had finished and the players gone to enjoy whatever time they could steal before the second round. The players, whose faces were consternated and statuesque with frozen pangs, took on a quality of stalks of wheat left in the wake of a mad mower. And in a single

thought I was that mower, cutting long crooked swathes through this field, swinging around widely to catch the errant curves that had escaped my earlier pass. As I looked at them the players continued to stand and scatter, until the entire field was culled and empty. Alek and I stood alone among the empty tables and abandoned checkered cloths. It made me feel small that Alek had so completely guessed my plan for the next seven months, and been able to reframe it to include qualifying for a world championship cycle. I had planned modestly when I thought I was being grandiose in my ambitions.

Saying nothing, I nodded and Alek continued with me through the empty center out into Bally's casino.

* * *

I was able to block out everything about my conversation with Alek during the second and third rounds, except for the lawnmowers. When the lawnmowers ceased, my thoughts went back to Dana. I couldn't let such thoughts distract me, so I went back in time to my father's lessons. He had taught me to clear my mind through objective interpretation. The value, worth, and feeling of something came only from interpretation of objects viewed independently. If I could learn to look, to stare at an object for what it was, like a table or a wall or a chess position, and realize it without interpretation, I could internalize and understand it completely. It also had the additional effect of melting and flattening out all other thoughts and feelings, leaving a cold, calculating center of perspective.

I focused on the pieces, the heavy weighted, black and white thick plastic. The round shapes of the pawns' heads. The perfect edges of the king's cross on his crown. The stark contrast on the vinyl board. Before long, my games were over, the Open was over, and I had tied for first with five other grandmasters. Best of all, I had gone undefeated.

I had earned my spot in the US Championships, which was in Atlanta. If I won there, if I became the American champion, then I went to Europe, to the World Junior Championship. I had made a much bigger move than a simple piece on a chess board. I had advanced in my career, in my personal stake for what had now become the future of all American chess. I had done this on my own, and it felt amazing to know this before my father did, without him standing over me or behind me waiting.

Yet I found my mind turning again in objectivity's absence, back to Dana and what we would say to one another, if anything was left to be said.

Chapter 5

Dana stood in the doorway to her apartment. It was the first time I had ever been to her place. All of our dates before this meeting involved her picking me up in her yellow Bug. She stood only a few inches shorter to me, which let me see into her eyes, even though she wore her ball cap and the bill shaded her eyes from the porch's single overhead bulb.

She wanted to know where I would take her, but I asked her if we could talk inside. I had not trusted myself to discuss anything at length over the phone, and so only asked that we meet to talk.

She looked back over her shoulder past the faded white door she had almost pulled closed behind her, through the sliver-sized opening into the flickering light and sound of the inside. She turned back to look at me and closed the door, shrugging her shoulders.

"I don't feel comfortable letting you in until we've talked. Okay?"

"I guess we could go to my place."

She sighed. "Do you see how that won't work either?"

"Sorry," I said. I almost told her I couldn't concentrate properly in her presence, but thought better of it. "Taking you to dinner is out the question, too. This isn't a date." I had meant it as more of a question.

"Actually, Savvy," she said, "I'd rather you show me Vegas. I've lived in this city six months but I feel like all I've done is study and work. What I've actually seen of it has only been when we're together, you know? But I want to see more. Can you take me on a tour?"

"The whole city?" I had never been asked to take anyone on a tour of Las Vegas before.

"As much as you can show me."

After a moment's thought I said, "We can take my car this time."

"I have to admit, it feels a little weird seeing you here, knowing you're driving. I was actually kind of enjoying my autonomy." I must have given her a funny look because she actually gave me a small smile and added, "I appreciate you taking a turn this evening."

We walked side by side to my car. I unlocked the passenger side door for her and then opened it, waiting courteously until she had pulled her feet up and in before closing it for her. Inside, I let her pick the radio station. She had told me before that chess tapes were distracting to her, and I didn't listen to much music to know what was good or what she would find appealing.

As I drove to the Strip, Dana would occasionally glance over at me. I resisted the urge to ask what she was thinking and focused on what I had been preparing to say. The idea of chess exchanges had been consuming my thinking ever since I had told Dana about throwing the game against the Sixth. It's a simple principle in chess, the exchange. You trade pieces, swapping material back and forth equally for some long-term gain. When you're ahead, exchanges help secure your advantage. When you're even, exchanges simplify the position into a dead draw. When you're behind, exchanging the last of your material sometimes creates an opportunity for stalemate, a draw where your king is trapped, but untouchable. I knew enough to know I wasn't ahead, take that however you like, but if I was on even footing I could simplify things with Dana by telling her everything and then put the onus on her to answer the questions I had about who she was and how she had come into my life. I would finally understand some of the events about her that up to that point made little to no sense.

Dana finally asked where we were going and I told her I was taking her to the Stratosphere.

I told her that dumping the game, walking away from my chess career had not been a joke.

"Jeez, Savvy. I wasn't really almost killed. I mean, sure, the car jumping the curb like that scared me to death, but I'm really okay. I wasn't expecting you to reveal some deep dark secret in return." She stopped and then looked away. "You sound serious about this. It's creeping me out." She pulled on the door release and stepped out. I followed her, keeping pace as we exited the parking structure, my hands in my coat pockets against the late winter wind, leaving three to four feet between us.

"Why would you tell me something like that? I mean, why then?"

"I'm not sure. You said you had almost been killed and I…"

"I just said…." And then she stopped. We had reached the south sidewalk of Vegas Blvd, and people were passing us now both ways. She looked up into the night sky. There were no stars in Vegas at night, certainly not on the Strip, and so her gaze began flitting between the lights of the Sahara and the tower of the Stratosphere in the distance in front of us. "I was right there when this crazy person just shot their car across the sidewalk while I was walking. I just said what I did on the phone because I was pissed and this damn city is so strange. And you calling when you did, almost out of the blue, right when I had been thinking about you. God, I was so distracted I thought at first I had stepped out into the street. It was good to hear your voice then, and so frustrating, and I just spoke without thinking. Obviously you know what that's like."

I pulled my hands out of my pocket and shrugged.

She was still looking from casino to casino when I pointed to the Stratosphere.

"That's where we can see everything," I said.

* * *

It was fifteen bucks apiece to ride the elevator up, an event in itself, and we had to share the car with twenty other people, most of them tourists. We said nothing and actually got separated by an overweight couple who were both going bald. I looked over at Dana during the three-minute ride but she avoided my eye every time.

Finally, as we filed out, we made our way to the edge of the Sky Lounge where people could stand or lean against the railing and look out the observation windows that encircled the whole floor. From our vantage point we could see all of Las Vegas, and by walking a few feet we could have the whole 360 degree view. Despite the number of people that came up in the elevators, our particular floor of the observation deck was sparsely occupied.

"You must think you're pretty clever," Dana said.

"What do you mean?"

"I said I wanted to see the whole city, and now here I am, with the perfect view. Very sly."

"Honestly, I hadn't even thought of that."

"Jesus, you don't know the first thing about flirting, or fighting either, do you?"

"I don't know what you want me to say."

"I'm sorry, Savvy, but I really don't get you. After the simul when you left to Tucson without calling me, I thought you'd never speak to me again. I was driving myself crazy, but then you called, dumped this huge secret that I didn't ask for, so then I think you must have been going crazy too. But then you don't call when you say you will and you win the National Open, and yes I was there, but did you even bother looking for me? I watched you both days, but when

you won, I figured it's over with us. But then you called me yesterday, now here we are and you're being sweet and honest and I can't tell if you care about me or if you're just messing with me. I truthfully can't take it anymore. Aren't you mad at me or something?"

"For what?" I said.

"For the simul. Are you even the same guy I went out with?"

"I am, I…" I didn't know how to finish. "I wasn't expecting to talk about the simul."

"What were you expecting to talk about?"

"What I had told you. Maybe why I had told you."

"Maybe why?"

"I'm not sure I know myself why I said anything."

"That actually sounds like it makes sense." She stared at me with a softness in her eyes for the first time since I had picked her up. "Well, go on."

"How much do you know about my life?" I said. "How much did you know before you actually met me?"

Dana shrugged and then leaned further on the railing, resting on her elbows. We had a panoramic view of the Strip from our vantage point. The corridor of glass, lights and moving cars and people gave the effect of watching some technological artery of the future pulsing golden and shining red.

"I knew as much as anyone else who could read and had a computer. You were the next great American prodigy. Takahashi had only come on the scene, and your father was this great grandmaster, training you to be better than even he was." I bristled at that, but let it pass uninterrupted. "You didn't get more coverage outside of chess news because your dad was an immigrant, but everyone inside said you were the next big thing. Your father had trained under

Botvinnik and now he was your coach. It played up the ‘royal family’ aspect of your situation. It also helped that your dad wasn’t crazy like other chessplayer dads, and that he managed you civilly, unlike that guy Badulov. Everyone was shocked after your debut at the World Junior Championship. You earned your IM for coming in second, and everyone was sure you would be the youngest American grandmaster since Evans. And then…”

“And then I dropped out,” I finished. I was impressed; she had known more about me than I thought. Of course, she could have been reading up in the last month.

Dana didn’t go on, but she did stand up straight and started strolling with me around the observation floor. As we passed the Sky Lounge I stopped to buy her a pretzel and then we moved on.

“So what did happen? Why’d you quit?”

“I’m not sure I can tell you that,” I said. “Not yet. But I will tell you what happened after.”

“You don’t have to,” she said. “I don’t even know why…”

“I want to tell you, Dana. And I think you have something to tell me too. Think of it as an exchange.”

She bit into her pretzel, but said nothing. I continued as we strolled.

“You may know this now, but back then nobody knew that my relationship with my father was difficult. I was miserable. Something happened to me in Venice, something eye-opening. I couldn’t see the point in playing chess anymore and my father was furious. It was made worse by the fact that he remained stuck in England for two years, you know, after Nine-Eleven. I didn’t care, though. I used to argue with him all the time about my play, but by then something had happened to me. Up to the championship I only cared about winning, about chess,

but then I felt different. A switch inside me had been turned off. Everything white had turned black. What I'm trying to say is that I had an awakening."

"So you moved to Las Vegas?"

I nodded. "It didn't happen overnight. I thought about going back to California, moving back to Lone Pine, but I had graduated already and been accepted at Las Vegas where I had originally planned to pursue chess as well as my degree. I thought I was embarking on real life by being out on my own in the big city, going to school. I wanted to change things for the better. I wanted to do something important with my life, and I had decided that chess wasn't it."

Dana said nothing but continued to nibble on the pretzel, looking out at the city.

"I was so excited after my win against Takahashi, I was elated. I had never beaten him before. I only ended my losing streak to him the previous year at my first US Championship. When I won, when I had the last game to play to become a grandmaster, I thought about my future, about what it would look like to be play for the world championship and compete as nothing but a chess professional. I didn't like what I imagined, and it was later confirmed by someone I hadn't even asked."

"Who told you what it would be like? Your father?"

I told her about my meeting with Badulov the day before the final round. What he had intimated and promised me, what the future of chess would be if I worked together with him, and how I rejected him.

I was surprised when Dana snorted into her pretzel wrapper.

"Are you kidding me?"

"No," I said. "I'm not."

"You drew a won game against the Sixth because Badulov was going to make you world champion? He promised you a mountain of money and fame and that's why you quit?"

"And that's funny to you?"

"Yes!" she said and then laughed with release. "Jesus, Savvy, I thought you had been paid off, or maybe someone threatened you! You hear about this stuff sometimes, especially with all the things Fischer used to rant about. But you take what this guy Badulov says and turn him down only to give him and his player the prize purse and the title? Seriously?"

"You make me sound like an idiot," I said. "If I had known you would react like this I don't think I would have told you."

"I'm not saying you're an idiot, but you have to admit that's extremely goofy. Didn't you at least tell your father what you were planning?"

"I didn't plan it exactly. I found myself worse in the game, and then the Sixth tried to trick me into playing, and I saw through it, but I played on anyway just because I wasn't going to go along with anything that weasel Badulov said." I stopped there because there was one thing more that I hadn't told her, had not told anybody, though my father had assumed he knew. She mistook my pause as being overcome with emotion, which in fact I was to a certain degree.

"Savvy," Dana said, putting her hand on my arm. "I am sorry."

"It's okay, I guess," I said.

"No, it's not okay. If I had told you something…something personal and important like that, I wouldn't want you to laugh at me. Really. I just…this is all so weird. You were so normal and kinda nerdy when we first met, you know, a good friend. Now you're telling me all of this and you're different somehow. It's weird and it makes me nervous."

I nodded. To the west the lights of Las Vegas's residential district glittered like a beach with huge grains of sand twinkling in the night.

"I guess I am different now," I said.

"It doesn't help you've changed your style so much in the last month. What's with these glasses? I thought you got rid of them. I like that you've lost a little weight, I noticed it right away when I first saw you at the Open, but what's with the stiff shirts and jackets, even when you're not playing? I liked your hair long, too, and now it's so short."

"That's not all that's changed," I said, but didn't elaborate about the drinking or the strip club.

"You just look…I don't know, more serious. More grown-up. When we first met you felt like you were my age, and now I feel like there's this distance between us. Some of that's my fault, though." She grimaced and threw her pretzel away.

"Look," I said, "I've never told anyone what I'm telling you now. I don't know how to act the right way. When we were going out, I treated it like a date. I know the right way to act on dates. I've spent a lot of time since my retirement learning how to act, how to be a normal person. I have ways I act around friends, around family, around a girlfriend. It's like telling myself a story about someone else, how he talks and acts and thinks, and then I become that person."

"Okay, that doesn't make me feel better at all."

"I'm just trying to explain how I've tried to change after chess."

"Change from what?" Dana said.

At that moment the overweight couple with matching bald spots passed by us, pointing at the landmarks along the Strip.

"Do you see that couple?" I said.

"Yeah. They look like my grandparents."

"Even the matching bald spots?" I said. Dana snorted again, but tried to cover it.

"Before my retirement, before that last round game, I would have been very haughty when I looked at them. I always felt like I knew a secret that no one else knew. What I could do in chess, what I could do with a hopeless position and just seconds on the clock, only a few in the world could replicate, and they were the very best of all time."

I felt Dana watching me as we continued our stroll and looked out at the lights of the city.

"Now, though, I look at them, and I feel it is they who know the great secret. They have lived a normal life, one with family and friends who have shared in real joy and suffering. They know something about life I have never known and I sometimes feel I will never know. They have lived the kind of life that I read about all the time but have never experienced."

"If that's true," Dana said, "then why are you playing chess again?"

I shook my head and stopped. I leaned against the railing and stared out at the end of the Strip, the opposite end from what we had been staring at.

"It's all I know how to do, to this day. And I thought…"

"What?"

"I thought that I could create a balance doing it on my own, connect my new self with the old one if I started playing again."

"But aren't you worried?"

"That I'll…I don't know, collapse? I guess I figure it's a risk worth taking. I don't worry about anything except being an old man and still envying that couple we passed. Is that odd?"

"I guess not. Aren't you scared that you'd fold in another situation like that?"

"I'm not scared. And I didn't fold. That is, I didn't succumb to pressure. It was a conscious choice. But I guess it's a good question. What if I'm faced with the same choice again?"

"Have you talked to your father about this?"

"He's gone."

"Gone? Ever heard of the telephone?"

"He's in New York. Organizing something, I think."

"And you're upset he just left you when you've started playing chess again?"

"No, I asked him to leave, actually. That is, leave me alone, told him I had to do it on my own. But then again…" I stopped and looked at her. "I think he's testing me too."

Dana looked at me as if she had just blundered her endgame.

"What is it?"

"What you just said, about your father, what do you mean 'testing you?'"

"He's known things without letting on, about my hustling at the club, about the simul. He's also been pushing things with me. Between his showing up at my simul and then leaving like this under a cloud, it feels like the old days when everything was a test with him. Why?"

The look on Dana's face worsened and she said, "It's time for my half of the exchange you talked about."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you remember our game at the simul?"

"Of course I do. You gave me the most trouble of anyone there. You almost beat me."

"Was it at all familiar to you?"

"Of course it was. It was the game I almost lost against Takahashi at my first US Championship."

"Didn't you wonder why I played that game?"

"Sure, but then I won and then my father was there and then…. Dana, what are you saying?"

"Your father told me to play that game against you."

"What?"

"It's worse than that. You thought you got me lessons with him. Well, you didn't. My father had already found him and contacted him before you and I even met."

"You were the girl," I said, seeing it right then as she spoke. "My father told me he was training someone

"He agreed to teach me and give me references for my scholarship applications. He was willing to work for next to nothing, but he said I had to do some things for him in addition to the research."

"He told you to play Takahashi's line against me?"

"He didn't tell me anything about it, he just said you would get it, like a joke."

"Why would he tell you that?"

"That wasn't all. He told me to get to know you, that you were lonely. I thought it was ultra creepy at first, but he said you just needed a friend, someone to talk to you. And when I met you that night, the night you announced the simul, you were nice and did seem lonely. Christ, I know a thousand girls back home who could tell me what to say right now because this has to be the plot of every romance movie they've ever seen."

"You dated me on my father's say so?"

"No! God, I'm sorry I didn't tell you any of this sooner. It was just weird, and I wanted to stay on his good side. His coaching, his letters could mean the difference in schools for me, the difference in a lot of things. And I figured it made a kind of sense. Everyone had wondered what happened to you. You've been out of it for three years and even I was curious to get to know you anyway. And now you're back again! It's like American chess might actually come alive again for the first time in thirty years."

"He told you to play Takahashi's line against me?" I asked again. I couldn't help but stare at her in disbelief.

"If I had known what had actually happened, what would happen, I never would have done it."

I nodded but still stared in what I can only imagine was my wide-eyed disbelief.

"Is your father really testing you?"

"My question first," I said.

"Ask anything," she said. "I feel like such a shit. I'd do anything to let you know that I'm not just a bullshit artist." She laughed pitifully at herself. "I guess that's what a bullshit artist would promise, isn't it?"

"Why are you here now, with me?"

"Because I'm worried about you," she said. "Because I haven't been able to stop thinking about you since you left for Tucson. Because if I didn't meet you and come with you here I'd have gone crazy. Do you believe me?"

"I believe you enough to answer your question truthfully: I don't know. I have to admit that after twenty-one years I don't know him at all. If anyone did it would be someone from the old days, like Alek or…well, someone like that." Again, with Dana, I found myself thinking

vaguely about my mother, living somewhere in Texas, if she was living at all. But that was a distraction, something pointless to pursue. Someday I might contact her, but not about this, not about my father.

"Huh," Dana said. "Who's Alek?"

"A grandmaster who trained with my father in Russia. They were both born in Ukraine under the Soviet regime, and they both have family back in Poland. When my father defected back in seventy-eight they put Alek and a couple of my father's closest colleagues under house arrest for a few years." When Dana blinked without responding I clarified that they were put in a gulag.

"Wasn't Stalin dead by then?" Dana said.

"So was Khrushchev," I agreed, "but Brezhnev was still part of the same circle, he used the same tactics. They all eventually got out, from both the gulag and the Soviet Union. Alek even managed to win the Soviet Championship one of the years he was in prison. He tells it as a great story." I mimicked his high pitched delivery as best I could, saying, "In prison, you have nothing but time to think about chess! It is marvelous!"

"When did Alek escape?"

"He didn't escape, exactly. They let him out after six years, once they lifted the ban on boycotting tournaments that invited defected grandmasters. The first international tournament they sent Alek to, my father helped him defect. That was the year after I was born."

Dana smiled and inhaled sharply. "He must know your mother, too."

"He knows both my parents very well. I've never asked him about my mother. My father either, though now I think it's about time I should."

Dana turned away from the view and grabbed me by the arm. “You should ask him about both your parents.”

“I have one opponent right now that I need to study. I mean, getting my mother involved in all of this would be counter-productive. I don’t want to see her right now, and she has had nothing to say or offer me for most of my life. Look, we can talk about her later, I promise, but right now I have to stay focused.”

“Why would you say it that way, about your father being your opponent?”

“I can’t help but think of everything through chess. My father hates it that I do that.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t think I like it much either. If you think of people as opponents you’ll pretty much always treat them that way.” Dana turned away from me and walked on ahead to the down elevator.

In the car, on the way back to her apartment, we sat in silence. I was fine. That is to say I wasn’t uncomfortable in the silence, but I decided to say something to her. I realized I had hurt her in a way similar to how I once imagined my father’s patience hurt my mother.

“I’m sorry about what I said about my father being an opponent About both of my parents being opponents.”

“It was pretty cold. Cold and heartless.”

“I’m sorry.”

After a moment to think she said, “I’m sorry, too. Really. I still feel like I owe you after everything that’s happened.”

“What if we did something for each other?” I asked.

“Like what?”

"I'm going to Atlanta, to compete in the US Championship in two months. If I win, which I think I can, then I'll be going to Dos Hermanas to play in the World Junior Championship, to get my grandmaster title. From there, Alek thinks I'll be first choice for the next world championship cycle. I want to take you with me."

"Where?" she said. "Atlanta? Spain?"

"All of it. Everywhere."

"Are you serious?"

"How often have I been joking this evening?"

"I can't go with you to Atlanta," she said. I could tell by the strange way she said it that she would have given anything not to say it.

"Why not?"

"Because your father has bought me tickets to fly to New York for a couple of months. He's training me at the Manhattan chess club, and I'll researching for him. Something big, but I don't know what yet. He wouldn't say. I'll be back after the US Championship is over. I'm sorry."

"Don't be," I said, though I probably sounded angry, my own voice strained. "I said there was something we could do for each other, and this is the perfect opportunity for you to do for me."

"What do you want?"

"I want you to spy on my father for me."

"Savvy…"

"It's not as dangerous as it sounds. Really, I just want you to take advantage of any opportunities that arise. If he leaves his desk or his materials unsupervised, then look through

them. Don't take anything, it's not like I need evidence. I just want information." I had been thinking carefully about this since before the evening began, planning it like an opening variation, and it felt natural to explain what she was to do. "If he has you use his laptop, take any chance you can get to search and read through his files. If you don't get time to read, email stuff to yourself to send to me later. I'll have an address for you to send everything to, something new my father won't know about. Chances are he'll show you most everything anyway. He has complete faith in the power dynamic between you two. Trust me, I know."

"It feels a lot like you want me to do to him like what he had me do to you."

"Are you saying you won't do it?"

"No," she said. "No, I'm not saying that. What I am saying is that I don't like how familiar this feels."

"He's planning something, Dana. He always is when it comes to me. I need to know what it is. If he think it's better I don't know he won't tell me if I ask him. I need you to find out what he's planning for me. He trusts you because you've done what he's asked. Are you still telling him things about me, when he asks?"

"He never really asked me. He would mention you, in passing, and then I would volunteer what we talked about sometimes. I stopped after the simul, of course. He and I haven't talked about you since."

"Whatever you do, don't lie for me," I said. "If he asks about me, tell him the truth. Tell him what we talk about if you feel comfortable. If he catches you reading anything, looking through his stuff, don't lie. Tell him I put you up to it. Tell him I found out about what he put you up to you and I threatened you. Tell him to talk to me. Do you think you can do that?"

"I'll do the best I can."

"Then you'll come with me to Spain, and whatever comes after." I tried to sound upbeat about that, but I was still coldly calculating what Dana might find in spying on my father. I pulled the car onto Dana's street and slowed down as we cruised to her apartment.

"Before anything else happens, I want to make something clear," she said. "I want to say it out loud."

"What is it?"

"I'm not your girlfriend. I'm agreeing to spy on your dad, and to go with you to Dos Hermanas, but I want to make it clear that I am not your girlfriend. I don't want you expecting anything else from me, okay?"

"If you're coming with me to the World Junior Championship then I am going to be asking you for more than that."

"It's not fair asking me that. You know I want to see Europe, be where you've been. You know I want to make up for being a shit to you. But that doesn't give you the right…"

I interrupted her by pulling the car over and killing the engine.

"I want you to come with me as a second."

"As a what?"

"As my official second. I met a guy in Tucson, a guy named Greg Stanley. He's talented, one of the best bookworms I've ever met, and he's got killer software and the hardware to run it. I'm bringing him as a second with me to Atlanta. I want both of you prepping me to win my grandmastership at Dos Hermanas."

She sat there for three minutes, staring out into the night of Las Vegas before finally whispering, "That's so huge. I'd be…but how do you know I'll be any good to you?"

"You said yourself you'll be training with my father at the Manhattan Chess Club, the most prestigious chess club in America. I want you to win your WIM title while you're there. With my father training you, you can do it easy before you get back to Vegas. When we fly to Spain you'll be titled and more than qualified. I'm not sure I'll be able to afford you by then, but we'll work something out." I smiled easily for the first time that night. "What do you say to that?"

"I don't know what to make of you. You're unlike anyone I've ever met. Why would you do that for me after what I've done, what I've said? You know this means everything to me. What do you get out of this? I mean, really. You don't need me to beat those guys. You probably don't even need this Stanley guy. Why do you want me with you?"

I said, "I don't have to be alone then. I don't want to be alone anymore. I hope you understand what I mean by that. No girlfriend stuff, promise."

"All right, fine. It's a deal."

I started the car again and pulled toward her apartment.

"When do you leave for New York?" I said.

"A couple of days. Why?"

"I want you to meet Alek and Stanley before you leave. Get to know the team."

"And then?"

"And then we get to work."

Chapter 6

On the plane ride to Atlanta (five hours in the air, with three hours lost to receding time zones) I couldn't help but think about Duke Karl Von Braunschweg. He was half of a famous consultation team that battled the legendary American master Paul Morphy in a Paris opera house in 1858. You see, Duke Karl knew that the world famous and unstoppable American prodigy was a sucker for the French opera *Norma*, so he sponsored a production that the New Orleans native couldn't turn down. He then visited a close friend and fellow chess patron, the French Count Isouard, and together they conspired to ambush Morphy in the Duke's own private box before the start of the opera to challenge him to a game. As royals, one German, the other French, and as lifelong chess players, they figured that together they could take down the best in the world and thereby gain chess immortality. What they hadn't counted on was how their immortality would take shape. Morphy was annoyed that he had been talked into a game and they made him sit with his back to the opera he had gone to see. He promptly beat them in seventeen moves.

I thought about that story, one of many my father had told me, and played over the game in my mind on the trip, because I felt a bit like Duke Karl going to visit the Count. I needed a consultation if I was to outmaneuver my father. It was becoming clear to me that he was somehow manipulating my comeback into chess, but to what end at the time, I didn't know. He had been ambivalent when I told him I would be playing again, but on my own. And he had acted concerned when I finally made my comeback known. But had his concern been just that? An act? I could easily see my skills at projecting normalcy, when I felt lost and isolated, coming from an unconscious observation of my father's own lifelong practice at playing the actor. And then Dana informed me he told her to play Takahashi's line against me. It was a brilliant

deflection move, putting all the suspicion on Dana as a hustler while it was my father all along hoping to provoke a reaction out of me. But I couldn't say what reaction he hoped to elicit. Why had he chosen that game rather than the thrown win from my last round against the Sixth at Venice? Was it a warning against failure? Was he testing me to see if I had learned from my mistake? Did he consider Takahashi was a tougher rival than the Sixth? Had he considered what might even happen to me, facing such a charged game from my past? The answer that had the most profound effect on me was that he did it simply to see what would happen, an idea that weighed on my brain like a block of ice whose tendrils of chilled water filled my bloodstream and cooled my heart deeper.

The morning after I drove Dana home from the Stratosphere, I called Alek and Stanley to confirm they were still in town and could meet Dana and me for dinner. When they asked why, I explained my plan, not only of my schedule this year, but of how I wanted them involved, working collaboratively with me and Dana. They were delighted, which surprised me. Only during dinner and the long discussion that followed did I understand that each of them felt lucky to be included in what Alek prophesized as the comeback of the new century. Like Fischer before me, he saw me returning from obscurity not only to light American chess on fire, but to unite the world championships under the American flag. Dana and Stanley had smiled widely through his oration and it was hard not to get caught up in his passion. I laid out my plan for them, detailing Dana's training in New York for her next women's title, Alek's role as my manager handling the logistics of my schedule and travel, and Stanley's immediate support as my second for the US Championship. Greg was flying back to Florida, but that was just a seven hour drive up to Atlanta for a week's work and pay. In the intervening two months before we saw one another again he would be corresponding with me and developing my repertoire through

his software and research. Alek lived in New York, and so would be providing assistance to Dana when she was there, and working contacts for me when he was traveling, which was often for him. As for me, I didn't divulge any details, but I assured them I had a mountain of work to do in order to be ready for February.

"What about Christmas?" Dana said.

I didn't have the heart to tell her I hadn't ever celebrated Christmas with anyone other than my father, and I had not even done that in years.

The last time I had flown alone was from Milan back to Las Vegas by way of DC. I made the best of it by reminding myself there was no one to travel with me. Alek was meeting me at the airport and Stanley was driving up the following day. Dana had been in New York for two months with my father, sending me reports once a week, which usually consisted of details concerning her progress in the Manhattan women's circuit and what my father was teaching her. I was more interested in the latter, particularly because there was a contrast from the way he had trained me in my youth.

The last email Dana sent before I left informed me she had put in the paperwork for her WIM and she would be at the airport to pick me up when I arrived back in Las Vegas as the US Champion. The last part was a conciliation on her part as she had worried about my conviction to win a string of championships on my way to becoming a world challenger. She reminded me that no one before had ever won a national open, a national championship, and the World Junior Championship in succession before, and to operate on only one schedule as if I would was setting myself up for failure. I told her I would strategize with Alek upon my arrival in Atlanta, but to expect good things until then.

Her concern had touched upon my own fears. Takahashi was participating again in the US Championship, and he had boasted that he would be clear winner by a two-point margin this year, marking his first time being sole champion. My only win against him had been more of a fluke in a lucky position than my out playing him, and now he was a grandmaster, with three extra years experience playing against the world elite. Before, my only avenue against him in an event was to draw him and earn points against weaker players, and even then it often wasn't enough as evidenced by the last time we both played the championship in Chicago. Now, in Atlanta, I was going to be one of the bottom two rated players. To truly guarantee victory I would have to beat Takahashi and beat him decisively to send a message to the other competitors. If I could defeat "The American Hiro"—as he touted himself in the press—then I could beat anyone else there, grandmaster or not. Yet my chances for success were still based on too many variables. My repertoire was solid, tested, and flexible against novelties. I was in the best shape of my life, having lost all the weight I had gained over my three years of retirement, and I was rested and focused. In fact, I had never felt more certain of what I wanted and how to accomplish it in my life. All of those things were essential, but they weren't advantageous. My best shot would be to face Takahashi in the first round, stun him immediately with a loss and paint the color of my domination as early as possible for the rest of the tournament. The pairing draw wouldn't occur until tomorrow evening, however, and I had to expect the worst: I would face Takahashi in the last round, where he would be in the lead and undefeated and my only chance to unseat him in the standings would be a win. I was confident I could do it, but it would require the most work and my toughest nerve to pull off. I also needed word from Dana about my father. She had managed to copy a number of files from his laptop, but hadn't had the opportunity to send or read them. All she could tell me was that it was a new book my father was

writing. She arrived back in Las Vegas the first day of the championship, so I was concerned I wouldn't have any answers to quiet my mind until after I was already in the thick of it. The last thing left to chance was the timing of all this.

What had prompted my earlier musings about Duke Von Braunschweg and Count Isouard was the idea of a consultation, and that was the final piece to making this a successful trip. I had to consult with Takahashi himself, but I had to do it with plenty of time before our game. I surmised he wouldn't feel too chatty with me if I beat him, when his input was most essential. Likewise, he would no doubt be gregarious if he defeated me, but then everything I planned to get from him would be worthless, at least in terms of my longterm plans. I had to talk with him before our game, and early enough that he wouldn't be on guard. I needed his candid input, and that's always a tricky proposition right before a game with someone. If I got my ideal pairings, we would play our first round game against each other in less than 48 hours, giving me almost no time to set up a useful meeting. If I got my worst-case scenario, I'd have a whole week to arrange the proper meeting with him, but then what information we shared might jeopardize my match with him. Of course, all my plans were dependant on the idea that what Takahashi could tell me would benefit me. The whole situation was complicated enough that I looked on my prep meeting with Stanley tomorrow with a feeling of reprieve, even though we would be reviewing two hundred hours of chess material in about six.

The light outside my window was gone as the sun set behind us. It had been bright day when Charles dropped me off at the airport and by the time I met Alek at baggage claim in Atlanta it was night out and cold. He gave me a big hug, asking me about my flight and grabbing my suitcase before I could reach for it. If my father had been there he would have said something about my letting a man his age carry anything for me. I didn't want to stifle Alek's good nature,

though. He was clearly thrilled to see me since he couldn't stop smiling, and by the way he was talking he wanted to rush through all sincere pleasantries so he could inform me about the championship.

"I am very glad to see you already wearing a coat. The winters down here are surprisingly cold."

"The cold doesn't bother me," I said. "Must be good Ukranian genes."

"And Polish!" Alek said. "This is splendid, Savvy. I only wish your father could be here with us. It would be like new times, the three of us together."

"I'm sure he'd like to be here too," I said. My first thought was to make his comment pass as quickly as possible, but then I reconsidered and changed tactics. "Alek, do you think my father should be here?"

"He's your father, he wants only to support you in all your ambitions."

"That's not what I asked. Would it be better if he was here with me now?"

"Only you can answer that. Me, I am very selfish. I love your father, I love you. To have you both together to talk, to play, to drink and perhaps find some ladies would be heaven for me. These things we can do without him, but then we are without him. Do you see my perspective?"

"I do, Alek. Thank you for your honesty."

"You are very different from him now. Even though you look more like him than ever." Alek tapped my glasses for emphasis. I had recently switched to thin wire frames, only to find out from Dana a few weeks ago that he had done the same. If I shaved my goatee, I'd probably be his spitting image, minus the bald spot.

"Different how?"

"Your father is satisfied with his own opinions, even though he will entertain others'. You are both, however, very stubborn when it comes to your feelings. But then, so is everyone else in the world, yes?"

We made our way to the shuttle that would take us to the Hilton, just six blocks down from the state university hosting this year's American Championship. Alek dumped my suitcase in the back and we sat together behind the driver as he took us quietly onto the freeway.

"What was all this talk of a Plan B in your last email?" Alek said.

"Dana is worried I won't finish first ahead of Takahashi. She said no one has ever won a national open, championship, and world championship consecutively before. She has a point. I'm very good, Alek, but I need a plan B if I want to come out of this year with a shot at the world championship cycle."

Alek disapproved, waving his hand in front of his face. "Women are alike because they expect the worst. Usually because that is what happens to them! But we can discuss if you think it best."

"If she's right, and I don't win the championship, what are my chances of getting in at Dos Hermanas this year?"

"I would say none. Each year the funding shrinks, and so the number of players sponsors can afford to include shrinks also. I believe they are only accepting the top most players under twenty-two years. You would need to be American champion at least."

I sighed in frustration. The fastest way to become a grandmaster and to enter the next cycle was to win at the World Junior Championship. It would be easy to win there against players with less experience and talent than myself, especially because the Sixth and Takahashi would be absent. But I had to get through Takahashi before I could seek that victory.

“What if we put together our own event to drum up support for a world candidate? Like a match. Weren’t there elite and youth exhibition matches all the time back in the seventies and eighties? I could challenge Takahashi or even the Sixth to a match, and if I won it I could get some major backing for both my grandmaster title and a seat in the next cycle.”

“It is a fine idea, Savvy,” Alek said. “But it also displays your lack of context. There’s no money in matches anymore, unless it is for the world championship, or it’s a blitz match. As you know, blitz will not help your cause.”

“What if we made it a tournament, then?”

Alek laughed deeply. “Not you nor I nor even your father has that kind of money.”

“Wait,” I said. “What if it’s small, a four-man tourney, me and three other guys, three of the best from my generation? How about then?”

Alek paused and mumbled to himself before answering. “I suppose it could be done. You would still need a lot of money to entice the talent you want to compete. Takahashi won’t play for peanuts, and I know you want him there.”

“Who do you know that has that kind of money?”

“Badulov does. That is, he could find the sponsors for you, he could make it happen. But you understand what that involves?”

“I do,” I said. “I have to make it worth his while.”

“It is the best solution. He represents young Petrosian, who would be a benefit to have, and he recently signed a young Swede, Mittelstrom, who they say will be a grandmaster before he is fifteen. He is very exciting. If you could convince Takahashi to participate then the two of you would make the perfect opposition to his two charges. East versus West, Europe versus America, there are a dozen ways he could spin it for the sponsors and his own benefit. It would

be a glorious contest, one even Boris Bad could not pass up." Alek smiled, caught up in the fiction he was constructing.

"Can you make that happen?"

"Yes, once I contact Badulov to discern his interest and begin the arrangements if necessary. You should talk to Takahashi. He does not know me and has no reason to listen, even if I am representing you. I know this young man's reputation well enough to know he will want you to convince him, if, that is, he is interested in being convinced."

"Actually, that's perfect," I said. "I need to meet with him anyway. This four-man tourney might be just what I need to get his input on something else."

"Oh? You seem now much like your father. All of his chess dealings, every one of them was a major project and he juggled them all masterfully."

I ignored him and asked if he could contact Takahashi's manager and put me in touch with him.

"I will immediately," he said and then opened his cell phone.

Takahashi agreed to meet me for drinks in the hotel after the opening ceremony tomorrow afternoon. I would have preferred to meet him first thing in the morning, but it was expressed through his manager that Hiro was not an early riser.

My hotel room was big and actually looked like something a professional would stay in on a business trip. In addition to the wide screen television there was a spacious desk and adjoining table, which would give me plenty of space to spread out my board and prep materials. There were also more lamps and switches for lights than I had ever seen assembled in one room. Most importantly, there were two double beds as Stanley was going to be my roommate starting tomorrow. If I won the championship, I would be able to afford a room for each of my seconds,

but at the moment I was still burning through what funds I had left. The last thing I wanted to do was ask my father for any money.

I knew tomorrow was going to be a long day in spite of the fact I wouldn't be playing. I unpacked quickly, set up my board and materials, and then collapsed on my bed, still clothed.

The next day went slowly. Alek was at my door with large coffees and a box of donuts at 8:00 am. We got to work, reviewing my repertoire, discussing strategies for the line-up of players who had been invited or qualified for the championship. I asked Alek about the venue, the layout and the size of the playing hall. He had talked with the directors and arbiters, asking all the necessary questions, when he had found out something interesting. Badulov was there, in Atlanta. He told them that he was there scouting, which was probably true, but it was also likely he was at the championship to scout me. A comeback story was just the sort of thing Badulov would want to ride the coattails of, and if it looked like I would win and he signed me for something before I was crowned champion, the percentages would be even sweeter for him. I wasn't interested in Badulov's management, but if he thought I was then it might keep his interest in a tourney Alek would pitch to him.

By one o'clock it was time to head to the university campus and prepare for the opening ceremony. When entering into the top tier of American chess there are a lot of people to meet the first day of a tournament. You converse with your opponents and their seconds and their managers. You greet the officials, the sponsors, and the directors of American chess. There's the chess journalists as well, but I noticed when we saw them in the auditorium that their number had shrunk in four years from when I last attended the American Championship. I was surprised to see almost everyone had a laptop, typing furiously during the ceremony rather than recording

what we said with cameras or other media equipment. One person, identifying himself as a reporter for the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, was actually writing short hand onto hard copy. Considering how much chess journalism had moved online I shouldn't have been surprised, but all the technological updates in just the past four years made the chess world seem smaller and more trivial. Badulov was there, shaking hands and talking to everyone, so I noted it with surprise when he veered clear of my corner of the table.

Each contestant drew a number when it came time to sort the pairings of players. Takahashi picked first being the highest rated player there. He drew the 1, giving him the perfect photo opportunity.

"Believe it, baby!" Takahashi said. "Proof in the pudding, right here."

I was crushed when I drew the 10. It meant Takahashi would be my opponent in the first round.

"Tough luck," Takahashi said after the director announced my number. "I'm not happy about it either. I hate must-win first rounds."

"I hope this doesn't put a damper on our talk later."

"Right, the bar later. Guess neither of us is getting soused." He smiled and slapped the side of my arm hard. I hated that he tried so hard to act like a jock when he looked like such a stoner. He was wearing a blazer, but it was clear he hadn't shaved that morning, and his hair was shaggy and uncombed. His slacks were nice quality, but his tennis shoes were old and appeared to be coming apart.

The organizers seated us by number at a restaurant back at the Hilton, so Takahashi and I occupied opposite ends of the table. I wasn't interested in talking to any of the players except for him. The rest of the players were what I had come to think of as "my father's people." They were

all eastern European and Russian immigrants like my father. They had all become American citizens as he had, but seeing names like Onischuk and Shabalov, it was hard not to look at the roster and think you were attending another kind of Georgian chess tournament. They all spoke English, but not as well as my father and not without an accent like Takahashi and I did. In fact, he and I were the only two that had grown up in America, and I was the only one who had been born here. Even then, I wasn't a quite a kosher American. I was trained by my father, an ex-Soviet, and though he was a defector he was still teaching from Botvinnik's playbook. There wasn't the faintest hint of Fischer in my combinations or talent. As xenophobic as the country was feeling, it wasn't hard to see why we weren't getting any press, and why we were in Atlanta of all places. I remember my father talking about US Championships in Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago in five star hotels and amphitheaters that could hold thousands. It used to be the second most important national championship in the world after the Soviet Championship, and now we were ten guys getting ready to play nine games in a student center auditorium that we would be lucky to fill halfway.

They served baked fish and there were bottles of wine, but most players only had one or two glasses. The seconds and managers helped themselves more liberally, and it was then I noticed Takahashi's team at the end of the table. One of his seconds was also a second to the Sixth, I recognized him from Venice. Badulov's presence was completely explained. He wasn't in Atlanta to court my return, he was there to court my main rival for the crown. I lost my appetite and Alek helped himself to my plate.

"With fish there is no regret!" he said.

At the strip club, back in Vegas just before the National Open, David and Charles had ordered me shots of vodka, and that's what I ordered in the bar waiting for Takahashi to show up. I finished my third just as he pulled up a stool next to me.

"Whoa, Kowalski, how many is that?"

"Three," I said. I held up my hand for another.

"Maybe slow down a little." Takahashi ordered a beer, chatting good-naturedly with the bartender, telling him that a cutie he met in the lobby had told him they drink Sweetwater here and that was what he'd have.

"I'm too upset to talk sober. I learned a couple of months ago that I develop logorrhea when I'm drunk. You know what that is?"

"Yeah, I go to school too. Geez, Kowalski, what's gotten into you? I've been wanting to get together for drinks with you for years now, you finally hit me up, and now you're acting like an ass. It's a nice change from having a stick up your butt, but you could think about other character changes that win you more friends."

The bartender brought Takahashi his beer and me another shot. I downed it immediately and asked for a fifth.

"Shit, man, you are getting drunk."

"You really wanted to have drinks with me before tonight?"

"Sure. Ever since I first drew you in Dallas. Remember that? My first legit game to go over a hundred moves. I thought you'd eventually surrender, but you never did. It inspired me."

"We were both fifteen, Hiro."

"So? What's your point?" He winked and actually nudged me in the ribs with his elbow before drawing back long on his bottle.

"I didn't start drinking until November last year."

He laughed until he saw I was dead serious.

"No shit? That's sad, Kowalski. Next you'll tell me you're still a virgin."

"Yup," I said. "I have been to a strip club, though. Met a girl named Petal. When she told me her name, I thought of Patel. That's got to be sad, too, right?"

"Hey, what's going on? I mean seriously. You call me out of the blue, ask me to meet you to talk, which I do when I should be prepping for our game tomorrow, and all I'm getting is the melancholy follies. I'm not your shrink, but if there's something we can do for each other I'm willing to listen."

"You meant what you said? About wanting to have drinks with me before tonight?"

Takahashi sighed, chuckled to himself, and then banged his palms on the bar in a high tempo beat before turning his stool to face me completely.

"Look, I'm only telling you this because I think you will understand me, okay?"

My fifth vodka shot had arrived, but I didn't touch it. I looked over my shoulder at him and said, "okay."

"There's maybe thirty guys in the world that can hang with me at the chess board right now. That number was twice as big five years ago, and just you wait, a year from now—probably two—tops, only five guys in the world will be able to handle my shit. You hear me? I think maybe one of those five guys is sitting next to me at this bar right now."

"No kidding?"

"I've seen your talent. That move in Venice? Blew the top of my head off. I thought maybe you knocked something loose when you hit your head on the stone floor. Shit, I was convincing myself you would be in a match with Weinstein before I was top tier. I was that

jacked by you, by that damn game. You could have pushed me over when you announced your retirement at the closing fucking ceremony two days later! I thought then you were either crazy as hell or had balls bigger than basketballs."

"I should have had drinks with you sooner," I said.

"But neither of those was right. Right? You were scared of something. What were you scared of, Kowalski? Why'd you quit when you just about had the whole game busted open leaving us for chumps, huh?"

"I want to tell you a story," I said.

"Stories are boring, man. Never any action. Just tell me what scared you. Was it the Sixth? Was it Weinstein, having to face the best player who lived someday? I know the idea freaks me out still, even though Boris says he's retiring himself soon."

"Boris?" I said.

"Big Bad Boris Badulov," Takahashi said. He took another long drink from his beer. "He wants to manage me. He says it's time I become champion, not just of the States but of the world. In spite of his stunningly accurate prophetic skills, the guy's a slimeball. Like my dad would ever let him manage me."

"You'd get more money, more press. He might be able to make it happen."

"I make my own money and my own press. You should do the same, Kowalski. Now that you're back in the game. Besides, Big Bad Boris is a time bomb waiting to go off. Mark my words, the guy will royally screw the wrong people someday soon and then he won't have a pot to piss in, and good luck if you're connected to the guy."

"You sound like my dad," I said. "But he's not as vulgar."

"Your dad sounds like he has a stick up his butt, too."

"That's him and me in a nutshell. Stick-up-butt syndrome. It's passed down patri-…patrili…it's passed down through the father."

"Tell you what," Takahashi said. "I'll make you a deal. You tell me what's eating you, and then I'll tell you what's eating me."

"An exchange?" I said.

"Heh, that's a good one. I said we were making a deal. Deal?"

I nodded. "I quit because I was afraid of my father."

"Your dad? Why? Afraid of disappointing him?"

"No, I was afraid of being successful for him. I was afraid I would win everything, even the world championship, and he would still be there right beside me, looking down over his shoulder telling me what to do, what to play, even how to think. I would become world champion and I would owe him everything. When my mom left, he became my whole world. Chess was his world and it became mine. Everything I was and am was because of him, and I was afraid it would always be that way, my whole life."

"So you quit."

"That's right," I said. "It felt like my only way out. I was hustled in Venice, the day before our match.

"You? Hustled? Bullshit."

"The guy was good. Great. Maybe even a genius. Some Italian tramp with a board and cheap suit that didn't fit. But he was a grifter. He had a girl with him, and this man, his father I think, and after he took me completely apart at the board his dad, this old guy. Picked my pocket, stole my wallet. I didn't know what happened until halfway back to my hotel room. He was the

best I ever played and he took me for everything. What's worse is that I saw something about the world that I was missing."

"Yeah?" Takahashi said. "The girl was nice, huh? Big ta-tas?"

"They were perfect. She knew how to show them off, too. Looking back, after what I've been through, even I think I'm sad for not having figured it out when I did. I was pathetic."

"Well," Takahashi said, finishing his beer, "I would say you still are if you're sitting in a bar moping about it."

"Thanks," I said.

"I never said I'd make you feel all cuddly warm about it."

"So what's eating you?"

"The shape we're in. Guys like you and me. Chess should be cool. We're smarter than most people, and I mean like everybody else in this hotel, right? Maybe even everybody in this city. All this money goes to guys who can hit a tiny sphere with a stick, or guys punch each other in the face until one of them falls down. Where's our money? We work our asses off reading, studying, preparing, fucking *inventing* for chrissakes. Where's the money for that? Where's even the cool factor for that? I'd give up the money if it meant everyone in this hotel treated me like a movie star or even A-Rod. Something's got to change, man. You and I are going to do it."

"Who's A-Rod?" I said.

Takahashi spun me on my stool so that I was facing him. He grabbed my shoulder and put his index finger right in my face, an inch from my noise.

"Listen close, Kowalski. I'm going to be the biggest thing in chess, you hear me? But these guys here are chumps. Most of the guys across the pond are chumps too. If I'm going to make waves, if I'm going to get attention, then I need someone who will challenge me, who

brings out the best in me. That's you. So sleep tight. I want your best game tomorrow. That hustler in Venice will look like a patzer compared to what I've got for you. If you screw me, if you come hungover or throw some weak-ass drawing bullshit at me then we're fineeto, you hear me? I want to be pals, but I'm only going to be pals with the best. You're rusty, but tomorrow the rust comes off." He grabbed my last shot of vodka and downed it, then slammed it on the table. "God damn, that's hot," he said. He tossed some bills on the bar, patted my cheek and said "Tomorrow," in my ear.

I went up to my room, drank two bottles of water, and collapsed dead asleep.

Takahashi was as good as his word. Our game was the toughest I ever played.

Stanley and I had crunched dozens of variations in the morning before my 1:00 pm match, but Hiro was so unpredictable at the board it was hard to know what exactly to focus on. It didn't help that he had the white pieces, he might literally open with any possible move.

The first and second boards were centered on a small stage above the remaining three boards, a large screen behind them to show the moves of the games we played as we were playing them. There was seating for about six hundred people and I was surprised to see that the auditorium was almost full. Perhaps holding the country's national championship in an urban metropolis of four million people on a state university campus wasn't such a step back after all. Still, it would have been something to be competing someplace where thousands of people were watching us.

At my table, Takahashi was already seated. We shook hands and he said good luck to me, but once I started his clock he was all business.

He opened with his queen's bishop's pawn, leading into a theoretically dry but positionally complicated English. It had been very low on my list of guesses of what he would play, and if it hadn't been for Stanley's extensive preparation the past two months then I would have burned too much time navigating the delicate opening traps waiting for me in the game. Twenty-three moves in I found myself panicking, something I had not done at the chess board since I last lost to my father seven years ago. I stood up and went with an arbiter to the restroom so I could wash my face. I splashed my eyes and temples several times, alternating between cold and hot water, and then rubbed my face vigorously with the brown paper towels, giving my face a raw look that better matched my feeling. Water collected at the tip of my goatee and dripped slowly as I imagined the position of the board and what was coming for me in the next six moves. Takahashi had never played close to the vest before, but the restraint he was showing now was astounding. He had castled early, fianchettoed his king's bishop, and had not once touched his queen. He was saving her for something big. There was no way he would let her sit untouched for twenty-three moves unless he was under constant attack or building a majority in the center, neither of which had happened in our game. My plan became to uproot the queen at all costs. Whether I replanted her in a corner or exchanged her for my own queen, it didn't matter. I couldn't let her sit there comfortably until it was ready to strike.

Upon my return to the board Takahashi glanced up at me, but quickly returned his attention to his pieces. I made the move I prepared before exiting the bathroom and watched his face for recognition of my ploy. He thought for a long time, almost fifteen minutes, before committing to the line I had planned. Two more moves and I had his queen and mine off the board. I was a master of queenless middlegames, using the accumulation of small positional advantages to overcome material deficiency. It was in this position that Takahashi struck

unexpectedly and decisively. He sacked two pawns to draw my pieces out, and then he had me. I was forced to exchange both my bishops and a rook for his own pieces, and in doing so I ended up with two islands of triple pawns. I had almost three pawns in material advantage, but they were in each other's way, stopping up the advance of my pieces. Another ten moves and the last of the exchanges sealed my fate. In forty moves Takahashi had literally busted open my side of the board, leaving a gaping maw for his knight and rook to strike at my king, and there wasn't any way for me to save the game. If you hadn't told me whom my opponent was but played the moves in a board from the next room I would have guessed I had faced and lost to Weinstein himself.

I held my hand out to resign and Takahashi gripped it warmly.

"Good game, Kowalski."

"Post-mortem?" I responded. We played through the game together and got one of the techs to replay our analysis on the screen for the benefit of the other players and the audience. The other four games had finished early, all draws, and Takahashi and I ended up giving an extended lecture on middlegame strategy and counterplay through our post-mortem. When we finished, everybody clapped. I had never experienced anything like it. Takahashi took advantage of the moment and shook my hand again, putting his arm around my shoulder. I somehow managed to match his cheeseball smile and the clapping intensified before ending.

"That was amazing play," I said.

"Figures you'd say that," Takahashi said. "I learned it from you."

"Me?"

"Your game against Bolgotov in Dallas? You opened with that. He went for the early exchange of queens and you turned it into a bloodbath. Best game I ever saw played, bar none. Chump thought he could force a draw and you annihilated him. I'll never forget that."

I hadn't thought of the game in six years. I only remembered that my father had criticized me for letting my opponent dictate play so early in the opening. It never occurred to me that anyone else other than my father had been paying attention.

"You beat yourself today, Kowalski." He clapped my shoulder again and invited me to celebrate at the end of the tournament. I told him I'd think about it.

It was the tournament of Takahashi's life. His word was gold; he defeated every opponent he played, finishing with a perfect score at the end. I came in second. My only loss had been against Hiro.

What was even more surprising was how much of my repertoire and playing style he had adopted from before I retired. This led me to another conclusion of how he was right: I had gotten rusty. With Stanley's database of all my games we were able to track corresponding precedents to just about every opening he used, and he played masterfully, improving on every one of my own ideas (often my father's ideas that I had incorporated into the game) and playing superlative chess. The closing ceremony was a near madhouse, with fans spilling out the doors and lining up trying to see the phenomenon. The director congratulated Takahashi on winning "the exhibition" and joked that as the winner of "the real event" I should be given the championship trophy. Not since Fischer had anyone dominated an American Championship completely as Takahashi had. I was almost embarrassed to be mentioned alongside him except for the fact that he had used my games as a foundation to reinvent his play.

It made my proposition to him at his celebration easier to deliver. I argued we should team up and take Europe by storm, starting with an elite event against our number two rivals, the Sixth and Mittelstrom. Alek's talks with Badulov had gone the way I had hoped and he was on board to find the funding necessary to make the event undeniable in its prestige. Takahashi's participation was essential, but Badulov also demanded to be listed as co-organizer alongside anyone else who wanted the job. The tournament was going to happen. I just needed Takahashi to say yes.

"I think you heard me the other night," Takahashi answered. "This was exactly what I was talking about. We'll kick their asses and show them America is back to win."

"That's great, Hiro. I'll tell Alek."

"Just one thing."

"What's that?"

"It has to be after the World Junior Championship in May."

"Why?"

"'Cause I'm going."

I sat alone in my room. Stanley had time enough for two drinks with Alek and me, but had to leave before I went to meet Takahashi. I told him he was getting a raise for the work he had done helping me win clear second.

The disquiet I felt made it hard to lie down and sleep, even though I had to be up early to catch my flight back to Las Vegas. Before I had met with Takahashi to help him celebrate, Alek had pulled me aside with urgent news. I was invited to participate in the World Junior Championship in Dos Hermanas.

"How did this happen? I thought you said…"

"I know what I told you," Alek said, breathless. "But sometimes these things happen. You are going!"

"But it's unheard of! Takahashi won the championship, and he won it brilliantly. If they aren't inviting him surely some other champion…"

"It could be…" But Alek stopped before giving voice to his fear.

"What is it?"

"Your father may be responsible."

"My father? What makes you say that?"

"Everybody owes him favors. He has rarely collected on any of them until recently. It is quite possible he arranged this."

"But you're not sure?"

"The money is not there to take second place champions. It is unlikely, but perhaps your play stunned them into inviting you. You played extremely well and would have won if not for Takahashi. Such things used to happen in the old days."

"So did nepotism, according to my father."

"Yes," Alek said, shamefully.

"If it's the old days it smacks of my father anyway. Why does he keep interfering?"

"He is your father. And it is an opportunity. It is what you wanted."

"But I wanted to earn it myself!"

"You have, and you will. But also you must owe someone. Always."

I wished I could forget his words as I sat on the hotel bed. My bag was packed and sitting by the door. My things sat waiting to be transported across the country, compact and useless, and my brain felt very much the same way.

Chapter 7

In flight, cross-country to Dulles, I stared out the emergency exit window, out over the left wing, and imagined two things. The first was that it took weeks to travel between countries in the nineteenth and early twentieth century in order to attend a tournament. Each chess player had particular travel habits. Dr. Lasker refused to travel on Saturdays. Alekhine would not attend a tournament unless accommodations were made for his cat. Capablanca would not travel by plane even after it was fashionable to do so, and he wouldn't travel anywhere without his own personal photographer. These days a grandmaster hopped a plane with his team and his family (usually just a wife or girlfriend), a laptop tucked under his arm, and a few bad suits and jeans packed in a suitcase for the playing hall and the bars respectively. My second thought was of the Polgar sisters.

Chess romanticism often refers to a type of playing style some players exhibited in eras past and that a handful still flourish on the board today. The great romantic chess players of the bygone days were Morphy, Chigorin, Steinitz, Lasker, and Alekhine. They had hundreds of followers and dozens of imitators, but every generation the number of romantic players dwindled until only one or two today could be considered romantic. Spassky had been a romantic. These days the Sixth or even Takahashi were the closest one got to seeing sacrificial beauty and combinatory art. Bronstein, the great sorcerer, had warned that the computers would drain the magic out of chess and its players, and he was almost right. I didn't carry a laptop with me, I had my books, but the romanticism I was thinking about had nothing to do with playing style. I was thinking about the days of my namesake, when Tartakower joked with his friend (back when grandmasters could be good friends and not enemies or mere colleagues) telling Capablanca that he had to be wary of young women in the exhibition halls, for blundered marriages were worse

than blundered pawns. Or the time when a Czech master in Prague playing against Tartakower had been seized with a terrible illness and had to keep rushing to the bathroom in-between moves. Tartakower would wait until no one was looking, and then add five minutes to his opponent's clock so that the game might continue without a forfeit on time. It was eventually a draw and Tartakower had accepted in a much better position. At the end of the tournament a week later, Tartakower took his Czech friend out for drinks and then to the zoo where they tried to teach the chimpanzees to play checkers. It was a story Alek had told me back in my youth at a junior tournament in Omaha and I recalled having not understood why he told it to me since it wasn't that funny and it didn't teach me anything about chess. All of my father's stories about chess players had been instructional, and all of Alek's stories had been humorous. Only now, thousand of feet in the air with the world expanded below me did I wish I were taking Dana to the Prague zoo so that we might see if Tartakower and his Czech friend's chimpanzees had taught their offspring the game.

Beside me, to my right, Dana pulled her hair back into a ponytail. Earlier she had been watching the in-flight movie, using the five-dollar headphones I had bought her. She was with me in the official capacity of my second for the World Junior Championship in Dos Hermanas. I wasn't sure if I could afford all this—the prize purse for placing second in Atlanta had been great but not top money—but I knew my father could. It was both a comfort and a trial relying on him for that, understanding that for the first time it was a conscious choice on my part and not simply granted.

Dana asked what I was thinking. I told her, adding that it felt strange to be back doing the same thing again, but on my cognizance.

She sighed for effect and then said, "How long is it until we're there?"

"Another three hours," to which she groaned, and then I added, "and then we hit Dulles. When we change over the real fun begins. Ten hours transatlantic through Heathrow before we hit Madrid, and then it's an hour and a half bus ride to Dos Hermanas."

"It sounds like torture."

"Only to the undisciplined mind," I said and smiled ironically. As I had guessed, she said, "God, your father said the same thing during one of my lessons. I was just complaining as a joke but he was so serious, as if he was really telling me that joking wasn't allowed, not that I had to have discipline."

"He was telling you both. 'Good direction, like good moves, accomplish more than one thing,'" I recited.

"Don't tell me you're an encyclopedia of everything he's ever said."

"Most of it is useful, especially if you're creative about the context."

Dana laughed and then touched my arm lightly.

"I'm really excited you asked me to go. I didn't mean to sound ungrateful before. This is my biggest dream, to go to Europe, and it's already happening when I'm only nineteen."

"Is that why you agreed to come?" I hadn't looked into her eyes since we took our seats. I tried to lean back now and close my eyes while I talked in measured instances to keep myself calm and relaxed. After returning from Atlanta, I had been on edge—actually disturbed to the point of discomfort—and I was trying to minimize the outward display. The majority of the work I had done in the last three months preparing for the WJC I had done with Dana. Stanley corresponded with us daily, feeding us program lines and sharing database stats and games, but he wasn't able to get the time off work to join us in Spain. Alek was working closely with Badulov to organize the four-man tourney, and while he stayed in touch he hadn't been able to

contribute much to my preparations. As for Dana and me, we hadn't yet reconciled the angst that continued between us, even though she had agreed to come, and it put everything we said and did into question.

"That's an awful question. Maybe I came because I'm worried about you. Accomplishing more than one thing, remember?" I could tell by the slight change in her voice and breathing that she smiled when she said it. I smiled slightly back, but didn't open my eyes.

"That's my reason for having you along. You ground me, Dana. You remind me of the way I'm supposed to be, even though I'm not there yet."

"That's really sweet," she said, no longer sounding as if she smiled. "Is it true?"

"Yes, it's true."

"Then…there is another reason I came. It's the reason I stayed with you even after all the creepiness with your dad and the bullshit of my spying for you. I like you, Savvy. I'd be lying if I said I didn't enjoy your company. In fact, I'd be lying if I didn't say I missed the hell out of you while I was in New York. These last three months, working closely with you, learning with you, hearing you take my ideas and turn them into these amazing plans on the board, all of it has been fantastic. What's more, I've come further than I thought I would in such a short time. Letters for scholarships from your dad, my WIM title, traveling to Europe." The lilt was a sure cue that I had to respond. It was a big gambit. She had put her king out in the open. I could tip her over so easily, but what would be gained? Moreover, did I really think it was a ploy to make me expose myself again? I continued carefully.

"Being my second must be the knight fork at the end of the combination."

"I'd be lying if I said it doesn't look incredible. Why did you sign me on as your second? I can't do for you what Greg does."

“That’s a hard question to answer,” I said, debating with myself whether to share all my reasons.

I felt Dana lift up her arm off mine. She must have looked at her watch. “We have plenty of time,” she said.

I began by telling her that I had been serious when I intimated that I need her to ground me. My loss at the US Championship because I had let Takahashi rattle me, and facing the prospect of triumph or defeat in Spain without Dana there, forced me to acknowledge I cared for her more deeply than I had first suspected, a consequence my father had no doubt calculated and perhaps even orchestrated. I could trust Dana because her motivations were not the least bit driven by me, and so signing her on as my second not only gave me security about my own well-being, but also insured that she would be invested in that goal for her own sake. The simple thing I left unsaid: I needed her close, just so I could see her face and hear her voice.

“That’s the coldest, most heartless assessment I’ve ever heard a human being give,” she said.

“I’m sorry. I’m just telling you what I see and what I’ve accounted for. If it makes any difference, I want you to have that scholarship, and I want you to see Europe. You may not have had the best intentions toward me, but you still treated me better than I deserved, and I appreciate that.”

“And it serves your own interests,” Dana said.

I felt the discomfort balloon inside me for a heartbeat, but I pressed it down with an inhalation.

“Yes,” I said.

We slept for a while. When we woke, we were still about an hour from Dulles.

I asked, “How did your father feel about you coming with me to Spain? He must have been skeptical when you called him.”

“He was cool with it, actually. Sometimes he…” and then she stopped.

“What?”

“I just wish my father was more…different than he is. I can’t stand how understanding and cool he is with everything I do. Everything! I wish just once he would tell me I’ve gone too far.” She leaned back in her seat and then leaned with force when it refused to recline far enough.

“You don’t really want him to treat you like you’re twelve,” I said.

“No, I don’t. I don’t mean that at all. But you do understand what I really mean, don’t you?”

I shrugged. “You want him to be more like a regular father. You want him to care. Parents show they care by questioning, being suspicious, arguing with you.”

“That’s exactly what I meant to say. Is your dad like that?”

I stared at the back of the seat in front of me and shrugged.

“I’m not sure my concept of a regular father is correct. My father always treated me like I’m special,” I said. “But my talent was something that demanded work, responsibility, discipline. I never got an inch of anything my own, even when I won and realized my potential. At least, that’s how it felt at the time.”

“You think my father treats me like I’m special?” Dana said. “I feel like he’s afraid of me sometimes.” From my periphery I could see she had found the switch on her chair arm that let the back recline a few inches before stopping. Outside to my left, the light bouncing off the top of the clouds was dimming.

"It's not you he's afraid of," I said. "He's afraid that you'll leave him. Or that he will ruin your chances of being successful on your own."

I felt her turn and look at me, "How the hell would you know something like that?"

I smiled. "I talked to him about you."

"When?"

"Several times. The first time was the night I met him, when you introduced us."

"You bastard. He never told me after that you two talked."

"It's okay," I said, closing my eyes. "He didn't tell me much."

Beside me, Dana settled in and said, "Your father talked about you nonstop."

I sat up and turned to look back at her where she reclined in the seat. Her eyes were wide and the pupils large from the dim light and the nap she had taken. Her skin was blotchy from the flight, and the cap laid in a wrinkled mess in her lap.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"It was mostly about what you were like as a kid, when you first started to play. You know, proud parent stuff, nothing about the present really."

I swallowed deliberately and tried to sound calm and comfortable when I asked, "What did he say?"

She didn't answer at first and the only thing that I could think of then was my last conversation with Alek. We had been standing at the departure gate in Atlanta. I had let him drive me to the airport, and he was handing me the book my father had given to him on the Polgar sisters written by their father. It was one of the two books I carried with me on the flight with Dana. Alek advised me to do everything I could to prepare to win the WJC. It was important I not think about the possible conditions that got me my invitation, my responsibility

now was to make the most of it. He explained that I was accomplished now, and though I still had to love, honor, and obey my father, I didn't have to agree with him or let him steer me away from what I wanted for myself. I told him I still needed the grandmastership to have the opportunity to make something of my life.

"It is still chess, Savvy," Alek said. "It is deceitful, and combative, but you are its master. So what if your father is pulling strings for you? He cannot play the games for you. He cannot tell you the answer for beating Takahashi. This is your doing, whether you accomplish it or not."

I nodded and said I would be in touch once I got to Dos Hermanas. Now, through Dana, I had the opportunity to find out more about what my father thought and might be planning, but I wasn't sure if I wanted to hear it yet. There was already enough to think about with the World Junior Championship, and I hadn't had a moment's peace in the weeks after becoming America's vice champion. Interviews, exhibitions, and endorsements had filled all my time and it was only in the last two weeks I had managed to steal uninterrupted days to prepare.

"The real question is 'what didn't he say?' He must have memorized every tournament, opponent, and position you ever played. Whenever I asked for a date or your age he knew the answer and could go on and on."

"Did he say anything about me that was, I don't know, critical?"

"He said you used to have a bad temper. He also said you were stubborn and that you didn't study as much as he told you to. But he also said you had what it took to be world champion. He thought you were going to break Fischer's record for youngest grandmaster ever."

"He must have sounded disappointed when he told you I didn't make it."

Dana shrugged. It was a practiced motion, familiar enough to her that she could disguise any possible response with it. “I don’t think so. He spoke like you could still make it if you wanted to.”

“Did it sound like he wanted me to?”

Dana frowned at me and flipped her hair over the other shoulder. “Isn’t that a question you should be asking him?”

“I’ve tried, but he keeps deflecting it by saying it’s whatever I want. I want to know what he thinks about all of this.”

“Does it matter?” Dana said.

I stopped in the middle of a thought, of going through my father’s room—and his laptop if it were there—when I got back from the tournament, to let Dana’s question play out in my forward consciousness.

“What did you say?”

“Does it matter if your father wants you to play or not? He’s not stopping you, right? And it is your choice. Why is it important to you what he thinks about it?”

“I guess…” and I paused for a second. The truth slowly emerged from the back as all the other thoughts died pathetically in queue before it. “I’m afraid he wants me to make my comeback and he’s pushing me in that direction, testing me to make sure I won’t break again.”

“Then why don’t you quit?”

“Because I have to see for myself if I can make it, if I can accomplish this for myself without…without losing it again.”

“Then wouldn’t it make sense to have your father’s help, rather than suspecting him of stuff?”

I sighed and leaned back. She was right. But my discomfort did not abide. I briefly considered asking her to talk to my father for me. Then I realized how weird that would be, for me as well as for her. Instead, I said, “It’s a long way to Madrid yet. You should try and stay awake as long as you can before we start crossing the Atlantic. There will be little to nothing to do on the plane for over ten hours.”

“And you would know, right? Big international chess player has flown everywhere.”

“As a professional? Not at all,” I said. “This is only my second trip to Europe to compete.”

I kept Dana awake and occupied telling her stories about tournaments I had been to, and when that got dull I told her about everything I wanted to see in the places I visited when I had been competing.

“You mean you’ve never seen the Eiffel Tower even though you’ve been to Paris?”

“Well, I saw it briefly between moves on the plane before my father and I landed,” I said.

“I can’t believe that.”

Dana had been to tournaments in America as part of the junior and scholastic circuit, and her father had probably taken her to the Met, to the Grand Canyon, to Disneyworld, and to the Redwood National Forest. Or maybe he hadn’t but she didn’t feel like she missed out on anything because her real dream was to see Europe. What she didn’t know, but would soon learn at Dos Hermanas, was that we would be spending every hour outside the playing hall in my room studying and preparing for the next day’s game. Only at the end could we take an afternoon off to drink and walk around a little before flying back. There was still the four-man tourney next month to prepare for—Badulov had dubbed it the ‘Rising Stars Tournament’—and I needed

every day to make calls and try to pull some favors through the list of contacts my father provided me last year. I was even considering asking him directly for help.

"So what's in Dos Hermanas?" Dana asked as we were told to buckle for our descent into Dulles.

"I'm not sure. You mean sites to see?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah, I'm not sure. The countryside is beautiful."

"How many times have you been?"

"Six times."

"You've been six times and you've never even seen anything of the town?"

A flight attendant stopped next to us and asked Dana to set her chair upright for the descent.

When she was gone, Dana said, "Were you even playing at any of them?"

"Not a one. I was a chess tourist for all six of them. Two were organized and arbitrated by my father, and one time we went just to see Weinstein play. I was in the playing hall the whole time every year I went."

"That's sad," Dana said.

I turned and looked out the window impatiently before I said, "I got to see more and travel farther than almost anyone else my age. Chess was my life and I was good at it. I didn't feel once like I was missing out."

"Are you sure?" Dana said. "Did you really feel that way or you just can't remember not feeling that way?" It sounded harsh, but it didn't feel that way, and I also realized she could be right. I wasn't sure I was remembering correctly.

"Are you okay? You blanked out for a second."

"It's funny," I said. "I can remember every move of every game that Weinstein played at Dos Hermanas that year I went to see him, but I can't remember anything we ate while in Spain, or the smells of the place. I know I was excited because of how much I talked about the trip afterward. Yet while I can jot down all the game scores for you this instant, I can't remember a single detail about the room we stayed in, or what the countryside looked like. It's like my whole life outside of chess happened to someone else until my retirement."

Dana said nothing and we disembarked. We found our connection and waited to board in silence. She bought a ham sandwich from one of the cart vendors and split it with me. I laughed when she told me she was hungry enough to eat the whole thing but couldn't stomach eating old airport concessions. It felt good to laugh, even if for a second at a half-true complaint.

It was black outside the window when we finally boarded and took off, so I let Dana sleep finally. Watching her, I almost wanted to wake her up for the company, but it was more important she get her rest before Spain. We would sleep little once the tournament started.

As lights over other passenger seats dimmed and went out I turned both Dana's and mine on and centered them over my lap where I had the second of my two books open. Dana hadn't asked me about either book, which was a relief since I wasn't prepared to explain the Polgar book's being an insight into my father's parenting skills. On the other hand, had she asked about the other book, I would have smiled cunningly for effect and said, "It's my secret weapon." There was nothing secret about it, of course. It was a book by Tartakower, a collection of five hundred master class games from the 19th and very early 20th century. It had been published in 1932, so with over seventy years in print it had been read and studied by every grandmaster of my father's generation.

Yet, in the three weeks I had been preparing for my trip to Dos Hermanas, I had gone through my own books and my father's books and had come across Tartakower's omnibus and wondered how many players from my own generation had read all seven hundred and eighty-five pages and played through all five hundred games. Even more promising was my father's own notes I found inside the volume. They were ancient—pencil marks so faint they almost looked like natural impressions in the pages that had become stained over the decades. Over time my father had been building a repertoire and series of traps from Tartakower's notes and patterns, circling the games that properly exploited the ideas needed to make a run through a tournament, perhaps even a candidates tournament, with almost assured success. I had spent the three uninterrupted weeks locked away in my apartment, ignoring the phone (except when Alek called), and eating sparsely in order to finish and memorize the book in time for the tournament. I spent the rest of the flight, through Heathrow, going over my father's notes and my own as I reviewed the most important lines and positions I planned to use. As I worked I felt confident again, certain that I would be victorious. It felt like I was in control again, that I had the same command over my life that I often had over the pieces on the board. If I simply made the right decision I could accomplish anything. It had been so long since I had felt that away from the board, away from the playing hall.

Dana talked with airline attendants at Heathrow, listening to everyone's accent, excited what a diverse mix of people was moving through the airport. I continued to study my notes and avoided reading anymore in Lazlo Polgar's book. I had looked through it in breaks during my study of the Tartakower omnibus, but each time my concentration had shattered and my hands had turned cold. So many things Polgar had talked about teaching and instructing his daughters, and even the ways he instructed them, were eerily similar. Except there was a warmth there, and

a consideration behind the scientific study. My father would have made the better paternal scientist for pure, cold reporting.

On the short flight to Madrid I slept and Dana talked with the flight attendants and some of the Spaniards in the aisle across from us. She recounted these discussions with me on the bus ride from the airport.

"How far is it now?"

"Andalusia is about two hours away from here. I want you to take some time looking through this for me. The relevant pages are listed here." I handed her the Tartakower omnibus and smiled. "This is what I've been working on while you and Stanley have been compiling the analysis of Takahashi's database. I want your insight and your advocacy this evening before the opening ceremony tomorrow."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm reviewing all the games by the grandmasters who are in attendance these next two weeks."

"But you don't have a laptop."

"I do it in my head."

"How can you possibly do that?"

"I don't know, but I can. My memory is my best skill when it comes to chess. Some might say that's a great talent, however others might say great talent rarely brings happiness."

"I would say it's not all that great if you can't remember whether visiting Spain made you happy or not."

"I'm happy now," I said.

Dana's eyebrows shot up under the bill of her cap. "You are?"

"I am," I said, and meant it.

As the bus was pulling into Dos Hermanas I thought back to the one thing Dana had been able to find out about what my father was working on in New York. The files she had emailed to herself before sending to me, and what we reviewed after I returned from Atlanta, were the pages of a new book he was writing. From what I could discern, they were three chapters of an auto-biography. It made sense, he had lived in New York for almost five years before moving to California and marrying my mother. And many of his old friends and colleagues from the Soviet Union had defected to America and were living in New York still. He would want to locate his research for his own auto-biography in that city. However, the chapters themselves, while fascinating insight into my father's perspective on his own life, felt rushed and sloppy. I had never known him to write with so much impatience and such little focus. There was something else going on that the chapters were not revealing to me.

Dana tugged on my shirtsleeve and pointed across me out the window at some of the large buildings scattered out over the Andalusian hills. In a way, it looked like a chess board at eye level, with the pieces shooting up and down at the horizon. At the bus station, I read as I walked. Dana said, "Hey, you."

I looked up and saw a man in a black suit holding a white placard with my name stenciled in green on it.

"You are Senor Kowalski, *si*?" the man said.

"That's right," I said. "Are you from the *Torneo Organizacion*?"

"*Si, senor*. I have the car out front for you and your wife."

Dana snorted into her hand.

"She's not my wife, she's my second. *Mi segunda para eches*."

"*Ah, si, si, senor. Bueno.*"

He led us to the car, which was not a limo by any stretch of the imagination, but was large enough to be considered a high-end taxi.

Sitting in the back, Dana smirked and said, "That was pretty funny. I guess he had to say something, though."

I nodded while I tried to gain some idea of what was going on by examining the interior of the car.

"You didn't tell me there was going to be a car waiting."

"I didn't think there would be. Usually when you come to one of these tournaments you have to get a cab, unless you're being spotted an appearance fee like all the grandmasters."

"Do you know someone here or something?"

"I don't think so, not the way you mean. I've been a competitor, once, but I didn't make any inside contacts while I was here. Even if I had, I'm not a GM. I've got zero clout without it."

"Weird," Dana said.

The playing hall was one of the few in Europe that had extensive gardens and fountains along the perimeter of the entire property. Down the street, which was really up the hill, sat the Hotel Internacional where Dana and I would have been staying if I had won the US Championship. I had arranged shuttle service and rooms with a small hotel about two miles down the road. It meant less sleep, but I could no longer afford to live as I had when my father was my manager.

In the lobby, I recognized a few of the younger grandmasters milling about with their parents and coaches, pointing at the furnishings, the tapestries, the gardens outside. Among them was Mittelstrom, the Swedish wunderkind who was gunning for his grandmaster title at the age of fourteen. That meant Badulov was there as well. I was heading to the desk to register my name and write the check for my entrance when I felt Dana tug my sleeve and heard a gruff voice behind me say, "Savvy, at last you are here!"

I turned and saw Alek barreling toward us, arms outstretched and granite cliff face smiling. He picked us up, each in one arm, and hugged us to him, laughing as he did so.

"What are you doing here, Alek?"

"This is a surprise!" he said.

"That's what I'm supposed to be saying," I said. "Why didn't you tell me you'd be here?"

"Do not be so dense before your first international comeback. You saw Mittelstrom in the lobby. Badulov is here, and where he goes I go to insure the success of our Rising Stars event." He spoke with his hand up to his mouth, even though everyone around could probably hear just fine. He loved to joke.

"Did you enjoy your trip?" Alek said. "Spain is beautiful this time of year, is it not?"

"It's wonderful," she said.

"What brings you here with our young Savvy?"

"I thought you knew," Dana said, looking to me in confusion. "Didn't Savvy tell you?"

"*Da, da,*" he said, and then held his hand up to his mouth as if he hiccupped. "Such a beautiful lady, you made me forget my English for a moment. How did Savvy get so lucky?"

"I'm his second," she said, as if already practicing telling the scholarship committee.

“Brains too! You best be wary, Savvy. When you are my age you will better appreciate a woman’s brains as I do now.” He grinned and put his arm around her shoulder, squeezing her like an accordion next to his body. She smiled.

“Will you excuse me,” I said. “I have to register.”

“Savvy, wait,” Alek said. He released Dana and walked over between me and the desk. “There is no need for that.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your father and I, we talked at length. Your registration is handled. We have paid for everything. You must be at the ceremony tomorrow morning for the distribution of colors and your pairings. Here,” he said, handing me a room key, “this is for your room at the Hotel Internacional, and this,” he handed me a small black case he had had slung over his shoulder, “is something your friend Stanley wanted you to have while you are here. Your father and I chipped in on this together as well.”

“What? Wait a minute. When were you in New York? When did you talk to him?”

“Savvy, he’s in London now. That is where I flew in from two days ago. He gave me this and said I should give it to you for the tournament.” He handed me a case.

I took it and recognized it as a brand new laptop, the same kind on which Stanley ran his chess software. He never went anywhere without it, and refused to let me borrow it, although he offered several times to help select one I could buy for myself. I was confused and uncertain suddenly, an unpleasant feeling to have before the start of a big tournament considering how close it is to the surprise and concern I often felt when faced with an opening novelty or a middlegame exchange sacrifice. He had picked it out and Alek and my father had paid for it. It was probably already tricked out with the newest software, and my father’s flash drive was no

doubt a whole database of games and analysis. It was like having everyone there to prepare me for the tournament.

"I don't understand what's going on."

"It is simple. Your father asked me about you after the National Open and I told him your plans. He said we should help you, and I agreed. Your father had a favor coming from the championship committee for some work he did for them three years ago when he was in London. I could not tell you the details sooner because I did not know them until two days ago. Come, let us walk to the hotel through the magnificent gardens. They are true summer gardens, would you not say?"

We followed Alek through the gardens south to the hotel. A walkway had been formed out of stones and carefully placed flowering bushes so that one could stroll all the way in scenic luxury from one building to the other. The playing hall doubled as a convention center most of the rest of the time, even though it had been built originally for the sole purpose of holding grandmaster events.

As we walked, Alek told me what my father had been doing New York (researching a new book, as I already knew), and then speculated about my father's secret business in London (he suspected it was seeking additional patronage for my four-man tourney). The new book was what held Alek's attention, however. Apparently, it was part of something my father had been working on for years, from the way he talked to Alek about it, but Alek wasn't sure what exactly. Perhaps a new endgame manual. Alek had not seen the pages that I had read.

"What makes you think that? He's usually not secretive about his chess texts."

"It must be something different. The man he was having lunch with just before meeting with me was an editor at Harding Simpole the most prestigious chess publishing house in the world."

"Did he say anything about it?"

"No, and I did not ask for fear he might try to disguise it from me. Your father and I are close friends, but every player has his secrets." We strolled a bit further before he added, "Maybe it is a book of his best games. He has had quite a spectacular career. And only the one book written by Smyslov recounts any part of it."

"I doubt it," I said. "He was mortified by Smyslov's book, and he won't let himself brag."

"And yet…" Alek said, but then added no more.

We had finally reached the hotel. Alek shook our hands.

"You are very lucky, Savvy, very lucky. The hotel is full." He winked, but I did not understand. He grabbed Dana's hand and shook with vigor. "And you, please you must let me take you walking and for dinner one night before you and Savvy leave. I must not miss the opportunity of company with such a beautiful woman. Savvy has had you to himself for long enough, with more to come!"

We parted and it wasn't until we went inside to check in that it became clear. After much difficulty making the concierge understand what I was asking for did I finally realize what Alek was winking about. The hotel was full and the key was for one room. Dana and I would be sharing a room together.

I laughed and shrugged when I told her. I joked that there was precedence by Stanley and I sharing my room in Atlanta, but it didn't make her laugh. She just frowned embarrassedly and crossed her arms.

Things got worse up in the room. There was only one bed, albeit a queen size. I dropped the suitcases and began setting up my board and the new laptop. I didn't dare unpack any of my clothes until we had settled the room arrangements to Dana's satisfaction. What that would take, I did not know.

She stood by the window and surveyed the view, but said nothing. She had managed to keep her arms perpetually crossed against her chest, and I didn't like the feeling that she needed to guard herself against me.

"I'll take the hotel room back in town," I finally said. "The drive won't be so bad, and I can run variations in the car on the way there and back each day. You can get a head start on the prep being so much closer to the playing hall."

"Savvy…"

"I'm sorry about this, I really am."

"Savvy, please. Take off your clothes."

I knew I hadn't misheard her, but as if I had she began removing her clothes. She started with her baseball cap, untying her hair as she took it off. Then she pulled her shirt over her head and removed the rest, stepping out of her underwear last, as she walked towards me.

I hadn't moved a muscle, hadn't raised one hand to touch a single article of my clothes. Dana responded to my hesitation with tenderness. She moved slowly, removing my jacket, unbuttoning my shirt, and kneeling down to untie my shoes. In these simple actions I felt myself responding to the sight of her as she moved, the feel of her fingers against buttons and laces and

zippers, the sound of her breathing as it deepened when she stood back and saw me naked as she was. After taking in the sight of my body she stepped forward again and put my arms around her. I had been standing at the foot of the bed, and now in each other's arms we fell onto it where we made love for hours. We were both so anxious to prolong the moment together we pulled away just before the surge again and again. After we couldn't take it any longer we spent the time in between love making studying and exploring each other's bodies as if they were antiquated, long unseen chess games by the very first players to devise the game. In spite of my energy, the exuberance I felt seize my whole body, there was a serenity at the center of it all. Dana never once pulled away or asked enough, she stared into my eyes with the same intensity I had for hers, and her hands wouldn't quit as mine kept going over every inch of her.

I didn't remember falling asleep, but I must have because I awoke to the sound of the television on, but muted, and it was night outside our window. Dana had pulled the covers around us since the air conditioner had been blasting cold from the moment we entered the room. She felt me awaken and looked over at me and smiled.

"Casablanca?" I asked. Bogart was speaking to Claude Rains in his casino.

"It's in Spanish," she said.

"Didn't you sleep?" I said.

"A little bit."

I rolled over to face her and press against her. She held me.

"I want to say something to you," I said.

"Okay."

"This meant something to me."

She smiled. "This meant something to me too."

"I mean, it means everything to me. What we shared, what I feel right now, this is the most important thing in my life. You are the most important person in my life."

"Savvy," Dana said, pulling away slightly. "Were you a virgin?"

"Yeah," I said, not understanding. "Weren't you?"

"No, I wasn't. I'm sorry if you thought I was."

I turned over onto my back and stared at the ceiling. There was a fan above us, but we hadn't turned it on. It cast macabre shadows from the flickering light of the television.

"I didn't think…that is, I didn't assume you were. I just, I thought the way you touched me, the way you looked at me, it felt like we were connected."

"We were connected. We are. This is new territory for us, I didn't know how you'd react to my not being a virgin if, you know, you had thought I was."

"Dana, I think I'm in love with you," I said. It was the only response I could think of.

"You think?" But she said it playfully.

"I can tell you that when we've been apart it kills me, splits my mind in two. When we're together, when I can see you and talk to you and work with you, I feel whole. I feel like I can do anything. That sounds terrible, doesn't it?"

She laughed. "It depends, I guess. It sounds wonderful to me. You might not want to write any poems with those lines, though." She laughed again and kissed me.

"How do you feel about me?" I said, and immediately wished that I hadn't.

"I want to tell you I love you, but I can't tell you that's entirely true. I know that I feel the same as you. It drove me crazy when we were apart, and it killed me to have to tell you that I tricked you for your father, even though I didn't know I had. But this is all new for me. I've been involved with a guy like you before. Certainly never this long without being with him sexually.

And the way you were with me…wow. That's a big deal, Savvy. I'm saying wow here. No guy has ever made me say wow. You have this intensity, I feel it through me like a charge whenever you touch me. I've felt it for months working with you for this tournament. But to feel it on my skin, in my body…I'll say it again, wow."

"And that's not love?" I said.

"I want it to be," she said, and I kissed her and kissed her and kissed her until morning arrived.

In the hours as the sun rose, I told Dana about the hustler in Venice, the seductive woman who caught my attention, and the elderly man who stole my billfold. I told her about my confrontation with Takahashi the night before my devastating loss to him, and I told her about the words Alek had spoken that haunted me after the championship, about owing somebody, always. In short, I told her everything, making her complicit to everything in my mind and experience.

Her answer was simple.

"You need to talk to your father."

"I can't talk to him. I quit chess because I was afraid of him, of being shackled to him for the rest of my life."

"He knows you better than anyone else in your life, present company included. Maybe he can help you think about some of this stuff. Give you a perspective you can understand."

"I don't want his help thinking about this stuff. It's another chance for him to manipulate me. I feel like he's been manipulating everything in my life for a very long time, and getting into this tournament does not help assuage that feeling."

Dana sighed and looked down. “I can see your point. What do you want to do?”

“I want to win this tournament. Then, once I’m an official grandmaster, I want to get the whole team together and win next month’s tournament. It’s going to be in Venice, if you can believe that. Only now I’m glad, because I want to show it to you, share it with you.”

“Then we need to get cracking,” she said.

I became World Junior Champion two weeks later. The response was unprecedented. I had crushed Takahashi on the white side of an Evan’s Gambit, drawing him into a theoretical forest my father had planted decades ago and which had a path narrow enough only for me to slip through, out the endgame. The rest of my opponents were talented, knowledgeable, and eager, but I was able to dominate all of them, winning and drawing with ease. I won the tournament undefeated and was awarded my grandmaster title. Takahashi congratulated me, but reminded me it was only right I ended up where I did. It was all on the line for me, and he had earned his grandmaster stripes two years ago. He promised me I wouldn’t have such an easy time in Venice. He bought me me and Dana drinks after the closing ceremony.

Alek rode with Dana and me back to the airport, though he was heading back to London to meet up with my father. I gave him a message to take to him, I wanted to speak to him in person when he was able. If he couldn’t get away to fly back to Vegas then I would see him in Venice and we would talk then. Alek congratulated me again on joining the ranks of the chess elite, of which he and my father were proud members and could now call me the same. I thanked him and waved goodbye and as he walked to his gate.

Dana and I held hands almost the whole time on the plane. The hardest part about the games I had played was being separated from her, not feeling her hand in mine. And for once, I

had memories of a tournament trip that weren’t all gamescores and variations. I had memories of bliss.

Chapter 8

The most important chess games in history can be broken down into the moments between moves when one man sits facing the other at a small, square table under an intense overhead light. Darkness surrounds the two players, but within the darkness are bodies that rustle and shift. The voices do not register as whispers beyond the darkness.

Two men sit at the table, two men hunched over the board in practice posture so as not to blot out the light illuminating the 64 squares. Though it is only one man's turn to move, though only his clock is counting down, the digital numbers fading and then reappearing in declining sequence, I assure you that both men are thinking harder in those fragmented moments than they ever do in any other part of their lives. Imagine for yourself, those of you who gave up chess at age ten or twelve (or those who never had to learn in the first place), that there was a point in your life where if you sat in a chair at a table and had some problem placed before you on that table, by concentrating long enough and hard enough, you could solve that problem. And not a small or arbitrary problem. Imagine the problem is paying for your college education, or your kid's. Imagine the problem is a disease, or a war, or imminent death. I'm not being hyperbolic here, saying that chess players think they're struggling with life or death on the chessboard. They are, but I'm not here to argue that. I'm trying to get you, who has never played chess, to concentrate really, really hard.

Once you're sitting there, staring at the problem, and putting all your thought, all your creativity and imagination and knowledge to work, and once the sweat begins to form a film around your head, then the catch is added: there's not enough time, and there may not even be a right answer. You'll never know unless you solve it.

These are the moments that fill up the spaces between moves in the most important chess games in history. These are the moments whole books are written about. The moments grandmasters and world champions don't like to talk about because even the memory of it brings the whole moment back. It's a painful moment, when your whole life with all its myriad experiences is relived all over again searching for that one move, the perfect move that will win the game, the title, the championship, the world. On rare occasions, such a moment wins the very future itself.

I know because I've had to live through that moment twice.

* * *

The scene is a familiar one. It's easy for me to imagine it as the final act of Shakespeare's lost tragedy on chess players. There is a stage. There is a spotlight. Under the spotlight is a table with two chairs on either side. Two players sit, arms on the table in strained positions, supporting a chin or holding up shoulders. Each player's gaze is fixed. I stare at the position that is at once familiar, and yet I struggle to defamiliarize it. If I can see it new for a moment perhaps the answer will jump out like a knight from its home square. Across from me, Takahashi stares at me. His chin is the one that rests in his hands on the table. He never once takes his eyes off mine. To our right someone coughs. Behind me I know my team is staring on anxiously. I can almost see Dana standing there, worrying her mother's cap in her hands, fingers playing across the seams and wringing it closed and open from end to end. She's not worried about my move, or the game, but about me and what I told her before I started this round.

And then it's gone. All the moves I had calculated, the variations and the responses, it's all gone. The position is static before me. The dents, the flaws, and every blow I have struck in

trying to break open this endgame has been undone. I have to start over and there's only forty-two minutes left for me before the second time control.

So I start over from the beginning, in this moment, only faster.

How had I gotten to this point, locked in an endgame with Takahashi? What sequence of events had led me to this point? I had abandoned my queenside to Takahashi's rampaging bishops after his knight sacrifice on my kingside. I had plugged the dyke, but my exposed right flank more than made up for his brief loss of material. And from there? He had opened with his king's pawn instead of his queen's pawn. I had prepared a variation of the Nimzo to crush him, never once imagining that he would switch opening moves when the first had worked so beautifully to his advantage! He broke every guideline of opening play. He brought his queen out early, he neglected piece development, and he advanced his pawns far beyond rational defense. And yet I had barely escaped into that middlegame even. Before that, we had faced each other over the board, shook hands, and started our clocks. We were both dressed impeccably, near matching blue suits, his tie red, mine a soft gold, shirts starched and white. The European, Russian, and online press were there. It was a monumental event, after all. Takahashi smiled roguishly, his clean-shaven face smooth and shiny from early perspiration. He was nervous, but in a way that motivates risky, adventurous play. I said nothing as we sat and watched stone-faced as he made his first move. Earlier, in my room before the round, I was going over the Nimzo on a sheet of paper. I couldn't bring myself to use my laptop anymore. Not after what I had read on it the night before. I was finally interrupted when Dana knocked to walk down with me to the playing hall.

On the flight back home from Dos Hermanas Dana and I had relived some of our favorite moments. She gushed and relished the memory of meeting the likes of Takahashi, and the new

wunderkind, Mittelstrom. In the following month I played over my games against them, amazed at my resiliency when my plans had overwhelmed them. My antiquated playbook was a throwback to the romantic chess of the 19th century, having dazzled and confounded the 21st century players, and my rise was even more meteoric than it had been when I was young. I was in line to be first qualifier for the next world championship cycle a mere month after earning my grandmastership, a record unparalleled in chess accomplishment. And I was expected to do it while besting three of the best prodigies in the world. Alek's call and the revelation of my father's machinations followed.

So there I sat, face to face with Takahashi, in the sixth round in an endgame that I could draw and guarantee my share of first place. My only loss had come from the Sixth, the highest rated GM there, who had out-romanced me with an incredible double bishop sacrifice for a positional endgame win. All my other games I had drawn quickly or my three opponents had fallen inevitably under my newfound aggression and brutality over the board. At points I almost frightened myself with the power of my aggression, with the rage behind my exchanges and my pawn snatching. It was as if chess was no longer a wild animal I had to control and domesticate. Instead the beast was within me, writhing to be released so that it could maim. Chess had become the only means to tame that beast. My plans and novelties came quickly and easily. In the fifth round I had to restrain myself from exulting when Mittelstrom slapped the table in disgusted resignation. I had worked so hard to feel the passion for chess churn within me again.

And still the position sat static before me. No matter how hard I stared and concentrated, the pieces wouldn't move in my head. They stayed fixed upon their squares, like a resigned position captured for all posterity to be ridiculed and lamented by future generations. No other moves could be made, it seemed, because the game had finished.

At last I saw it. My exposed queenside left an opening for his rooks to invade through, but mine could escape also. I needed merely calculate the right rook for the right file. There it was. I placed my queen's rook on the c-file and punched the clock with the ball of my hand. Takahashi finally shifted his gaze to the board and his mouth fell, surprised by the change in direction I showed him. He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. I knew I had him in a think that would probably be long enough to even our time. If he tried to blitz me in this endgame, I knew I could crush him. I stood and walked around the playing area to stretch and clear my mind.

I saw that the other game had finished. Surprisingly, everyone was still there, watching Takahashi think and me pace. It was impressive for two youngsters known for unsound attacks to capture the attention of the likes of Gellman and Cranmic, who were in attendance. I saw Gellman's unibrow wiggle and twitch, not unlike my father's own eyebrows, and I could tell he didn't favor Takahashi's position in the endgame. Cranmic had removed his tie and rolled up his sleeves against the heat. Just then I felt how hot it was in the playing all. Venice, a city to which air-conditioning was still the greatest of luxuries, was a terrible place for a summer tournament. But the money and the opportunity were too good for any of us to pass up. I realized that by us, I was now including myself amongst the elite grandmasters of the world.

The idea stung me, and I looked to my team. Stanley and Dana were standing side by side. Each looked at me in a way designed to express the most worry and apprehension. I recalled easily how during the first round they smiled and laughed when approached by a reporter from *Chessbase* writing an article about the "unknown seconds." By contrast, Alek, as my comeback manager, and I were the hottest story at the moment. They asked why I had put my faith in my preparation for the biggest tournament of my career (so far) in two unknowns as

seconds. I told them that their dedication, their creativity, and their trust were all that I needed, and that was the truth. It was also the truth that one need not be a great player to be a great researcher, and they were both excellent researchers. In the weeks leading up to Venice I had every game played by every one of my listed opponents in openings and positions that might arise out of my playbook. Alone, neither of them could play from the positions well enough to find useful variations. But together, they pushed each other and filled in each others gaps so that it was like playing a Patel or a Weinstein in preparation for the tournament. It had also been rewarding to see Stanley attempt to drop his shy exterior to work with Dana and Alek and become friends with them. They had become so adept at filling in each other's gaps in knowledge when it came to chess that they eventually just finished each other's sentences when explaining new opening plans to me.

For once, they were copying one another's tension, with Dana wringing her mother's cap, and Stanley with his hands in his pockets, unknowingly biting his lower lip. I wanted to walk over and tell them I had made the right decision, that this was where I belonged. I wanted to tell them what we learned, what Alek told us, doesn't change anything about what I wanted and what I felt. I can't tell them that, though. Not because I don't believe it, but because it's forbidden to have any contact outside of the other players once the round begins.

I glanced at the board from my position and I saw Takahashi is now working it out in his head. His eyes shot like an amateur's from the rook down the c-file to the first and second squares. Then his eyes cut across to his last bishop and his rooks, looking for possible blocks or exchanges to deflate my expansion. His thought process was so totally exposed that I realized, in that moment, the moment that defines the most important games of chess in history, that the endgame was mine. He was not ready. He had spent so much time on aggressive openings and

complex middlegames, on replicating my playing style, that he had neglected his studies in the endgame, the place where I spent more time than any other. His arrogance, his swagger, the drivel his father and the his fans fed him about being the best and most stylish chance for American chess, had made him overconfident in the portion of the game where confidence counts for almost nothing. I had technique and precision on my side. I had every endgame lesson my father ever gave me to fall back on. I could replay every endgame my father and I had ever played. Unlike Takahashi, I could say my father had given me everything I needed to be the best chess player possible.

And he wasn't there.

I knew where he was. Alek had told me yesterday, almost browbeating the arbiter into adjourning the game so that he could tell me. As soon as my game was drawn and my score sheet was signed, Alek took me by my arm and lead me up to his room. He explained quickly and clearly, without preface or concern, that my father was in Milan, negotiating with Badulov.

"What?" I said. "Why?"

"He is preparing to support Badulov's platform to unify the titles under the ICF and compromise with Weinstein."

"You've got to be kidding me. Dad would never do that."

"He is doing it, as we speak."

"Alek, he hates Badulov. He hates Weinstein. He would never support anything that benefited the two of them."

"He told me himself an hour ago. There's more, something I think you should see for yourself. I have been talking with Dana," he frowned apologetically to her. "She has been concerned about you, as we all have been. At her behest I copied a number of files and folders

from his computer and brought them with me to Venice. I was going to show you after the tournament, but now that I know what your father is planning, I thought you would want to know immediately." He produced a flash drive and gave it to Stanley who inserted it into my laptop.

"Do a word search using Savvy's name," Alek instructed him.

Stanley spun my laptop around and showed me a quick search of the flash drive had found a dozen files, all in one folder that contained my name in conjunction with the keyword search. The folder had been buried in deep in a number of others and wouldn't have been stumbled upon by accident. I guessed my father didn't know about word/content searches. I opened the first file and began reading.

When I look back now on my time in Botvinnik's school I am at once filled with appreciation and terror. How can one hold two such incongruent states inside of himself at once? It would be easy to say it was beaten into me, and it was, but it is also the truth that those states are natural occurrences resulting from what I took away from my experiences there. Russia, in the winter time, is at once harsh and beautiful. So often I recall staring out the small, single frame window that had the good fortune to be positioned over my bunk in the school and see the most intricate frost pattern encrusted along the edges of glass. And yet when, in my zeal, I opened the window to pick off this very frost, how I was burned in my lungs and nostrils by frigid air, and my back pummeled by my studymates for having let an evening's worth of heat escape. Chess, and the way it was taught in the school, was like the frost outside my window. So beautiful to admire, yet cold and punishing to the touch. Only the bravest dare….

I shook my head and kept reading.

*And so it was that I had dreams to take my own son, **Xavier**, to Krakow, to see Poland in the summertime as I knew it, let him meet the people that had helped infuse his very blood with the wisdom and sight I had possessed as a boy his age. Little did I know at the time the wonders my own son would show me over the board. I often find that a father bullies and harangues his offspring into submission that he might lord over them and be their master forever more. Such a person though rarely glimpses and could never enjoy the true purpose of such an apprenticeship. To see my son become the chess player I had always wanted to be is the great joy of my life. To know that he can and will surpass me in my field provides a legacy greater than any grandchildren or personal achievement can hope to afford. I can only show him my birthplace, the land of his ancestors, but he shows me the future, and I would gladly exchange every one of my successes to insure his. [note: tense changes; re: "I have gladly exchanged every accomplishment and goal for myself so that my son could achieve his title and his place among the world's best. My only regret is that I did not possess the wisdom to usher him there sooner and with less cost to himself. I care not for the cost to me." etc. as will be necessary upon gm norms, wc qualif. and…]*

"What is it?" Stanley said.

"Is it about you or him?" Dana said.

I turned and saw both had been reading with me over my shoulder. In that instant I wanted to slam the laptop shut and tell them to leave me the hell alone. Instead, saying nothing, I opened the folder at its source in the utility subdirectory.

After skimming through the files and seeing them in their context it was all clear.

"What is it?" Stanley said again.

"It's a book," I said. "It's titled *The Sacrifice*. It's all about my father and me. It's half auto-biography, half biography."

"What?" Dana said. "It's about you and he didn't tell you?"

"From what I'm seeing, it's about how he sacrificed everything, all his opportunities and his dreams to have a son that would be world champion, since he couldn't be."

"Really?" Stanley said.

I stood up, setting the laptop aside. "Bastard," I said.

"Savvy…" Dana said.

I couldn't look at them, I couldn't look at anything, but I somehow found my way out of the room. The next thing I recall is standing over the Grand Canal and watching as the taxi boats floated by underneath. As I watched them I replayed over everything. My father had been brilliant in his handling of me. A true grandmaster. He had made so many of the situations in my life seem like my choice, my idea. Just like any good trap, you show your opponent exactly what they want to see, and when they move according to a plan they believe they have conceived, the trap is sprung and the game is over, you are at the mercy of your opponent. His life, his work, he had kept it mysterious on purpose, to excite my already over active imagination. The books he read to me, the Russian masters that teach about perseverance and triumph over suffering and a cruel, indifferent universe. He was preparing me to play the game. The only thing he hadn't counted on, the only thing he hadn't been prepared for was how right he was about chess being in my blood. It paralyzed me, shattered my psyche. I had become so involved, had devoted myself so completely, that it had unlocked something dangerous that had crippled me. It had to have happened to him too. The way he talked about the Russian school, the things that happened

there, he had had a break too, I knew it. But they had beaten it out of him. Given him electric shock therapy, water torture, anything terrible the mind can imagine to bring him back. And what had brought me back? What had made me functional again?

The truth was I was barely functional. I was playing a game—a game!—as a full grown man. I had only found love with a woman a month before. I had never held a real job, or seen the Eiffel Tower when I had the opportunity to visit Paris. I had quit my university studies last year and left them unfinished. My life was hollow and pathetic. I was doing it because I had convinced myself it was the only way to feel something again. My only memories of passionate feeling left were tied to chess. It was horrifying in its banality. I had not even maintained a normal relationship with my father. My mother lived in obscurity from me out in Houston. Where had love existed for me before I met Dana? So I became a grandmaster? So what? World Champion? What would the money or the recognition win me by way of happiness? Nothing that I could any longer see.

And yet the compulsion to play, to achieve those very things that I thought meant nothing, was still there. Was it borne of my father or was it my own? As I stood over the Grand Canal and gazed into the swirling black water I could make out a shape looking back up at me. I could not believe it at the time, but I was surprised to see my reflection in the water in the calming surface. I had expected to disappear, crumple and blow away like a paper doll with too much weight set upon the head. Yet there I stood. I continued and I had to think about what I would do with the rest of my life.

I eventually returned to my room and met Dana and Stanley there. I explained that I would not be taking the train to Milan. This was met with the expected reaction, so I stood and waited with the stone's patience my father taught me. When they were breathless and flushed I

calmly explained that there was nothing I could do to stop him. He wanted me right where I was, and more importantly, I had made a decision for myself. It was my choice, my life, to stay or go, and I had chosen to stay. Chess may not have been what I wanted for myself, but I was here and I had made a commitment. Who knew what would happen after the tournament? I may return home and resume my college studies as I had half-heartedly pursued them. Or maybe I would write my own book to counter my father's. Or maybe I would stay in Italy and see all of Europe I had missed because of my father's dream that I had convinced myself was my own. I laughed bitterly to myself when I thought about hustling for money to keep myself afloat. Whatever I decided, it would be my choice, and I was certain that it was right.

Stanley said nothing further and excused himself to his room. Dana stayed, lifting the bill of her mother's cap so that I could see her eyes and the fury there.

"I don't get you," she said.

"What's to get?" I said.

"You're just gonna let your father roll over on everything he's worked for and believed in these last eleven years because he wrote a book about you? You're gonna leave him to that jackal Badulov because you're pissed off?"

"Don't you see? He's controlled my life as if I were a pawn on the chessboard. The king cannot deliver mate, so the pawn must be advanced to win the game."

"That's bullshit. It looked to me like he only wanted the best for you."

"It was never my choice."

"You were a kid! Your choices were limited! Besides, where was your mother?"

"What?"

"Yeah, your mom. Where was she to protect you? If your dad was so horrible, why wasn't she there to stop him?"

"I…I don't…" I had not even considered my mother's absence as culpability.

"Maybe she thought he was right. Maybe she thought this would be the best for you."

"He could have played her just as easily as he played…"

"Oh give me a break! What about your own responsibility?"

"Dana, I took responsibility! I quit, remember?"

"So you're basically saying that abandoning him is frequent with you?"

I stood up straight and realized my arm was quivering. I had wanted to slap her. What had stayed my hand? I looked down, humbled to realize it was my father's own patience that had kept my anger in check.

"Dana…" I said, then paused because I felt my voice wavering. "Dana," I began again, "my father doesn't want me to interfere."

"Then you're both assholes," she said, and walked past me and out the door.

I caught up with her and apologized for my attitude. I admitted I felt like my father in that argument, and that I didn't want to be like him. Yet, I knew I would be forever grateful for the patience he taught me. She asked again, without acknowledgment, what I planned to do, and I told her I would call my father. She seemed to relent to this and I asked her if she would be willing to help me prepare against Takahashi. She declined and I was left alone. I made the call to my father after getting a number from Alek. At first he was upset with Alek for telling me anything, but then he was grave and decisive: No damage was done, I had found out anyway. I should stay at the tournament and finish it out.

The slap of the clock. Takahashi had finally moved. I made my way back to the board and found that time was on my side. Even more, the amount Takahashi had spent had helped him little. He was still on the attack, my king's rook was threatened, but I had considered a sacrifice to force the win now that my queen's rook was in an advantageous position. It would be my immortal game. I had played the opening and middlegame poorly, only to hold on and come back fiercely, only to elegantly sacrifice my biggest piece left for a mating combination too long for Takahashi to see. The moments that shape the most important chess games in history can be carved down to a single sacrifice that wins the game, the tournament, the title, the world. I could win even the future.

But again, the question presented itself, what kind of future would I be winning? Who would Grandmaster, World Champion Xavier Kowalski be? What kind of son or friend would he be?

In that moment, when the sacrifice emerged as the best, winning move, I realized the question was my own. I was the one asking myself this. What I had thought was my decision to stay and finish the tournament was not my choice. It was my father again, playing me behind the scenes of my unconscious. It was this question of who I am and what is the best thing to do that was really me. And I realized I had asked myself this question before. I have asked it in this same moment, three years ago, when I drew against the Sixth. In that defining moment I had not been able to recognize myself as asking it, and I had no answer. The question had consumed all my concentration and the Sixth had unsettled something fragile within me. And now it was here again. To defeat me?

Who was I? What should I do?

I stared at the board and saw only the sacrifice.

Without announcement or ceremony, I got up and walked away. When I headed for the space dividers, the arbiter ran over to stop me, but I pushed past him and kept walking. A few others, officials, other players, grabbed my arm, but I pulled away. The playing hall erupted in murmuring and confusion. Behind me, even Takahashi tried to stop me, to convince me to come back before it was too late. I didn't even acknowledge him, but I imagined the arbiter tipping my king over as I forfeited the game, and my future, to my famous rival.

* * *

The scene is a familiar one. There is a room. There is a hanging, overhead lamp. Under the light is a table with two chairs on either side. A wide window, facing a brick wall, is set into the wall off to one side. The chairs are empty for the moment. The room is featureless, barren of detail beyond the table, chairs, light, and window.

The train ride from Venice to Milan was long and taxing, especially because I had made it alone. I had stopped at my room only to pack an overnight bag and to tell Dana where I was going. She nearly bounced at my having changed my mind, but I informed her with great pain that I would have to go alone. I had to do this alone.

I stood with a chipped coffee cup in my hand, already half empty. The taste was surprising and unfamiliar, the only indication that I was someplace strange and removed from my experience.

The door finally opened. My father stepped in. He was without a coat, vest or tie, his usual traveling attire. His white shirtsleeves were rolled up, revealing large hairy forearms, and his shirt was open at the collar by two buttons. I could tell by the way his hair danced in gossamer strands over his bald pate, as he turned his head, that I had awoken him. I said nothing at first, I merely watched him as he looked back at the closed door, then readjusted his glasses,

and then finally looked up at me, his eyes blinking several times in succession, clearing his vision and accustoming to the light.

"Savvy?"

"Yeah, Dad," I said. "It's me."

He said nothing in response to this at first. He stood there, arms hanging stupidly at his sides, staring at me like he couldn't make any sense of my presence.

I gestured to the table with my free hand and then sat down first. After a moment, my father sat down as well. It was impossible to tell how he was. His movements were just as slow and deliberate when groggy as they were when he was wide awake. From the look of his color and his size, though, he had been taking care of himself.

"When did you arrive?" my father asked.

"About an hour ago."

"But that means you left before the end of the last round!" he whispered. He was awake then, I knew for certain. "How could you abandon your last game?"

"Dad, Alek told me what you're doing here. I know everything."

"Everything?"

"Yes, and I want you to know that I came here to stop you."

"You came to stop me?"

"To ask you, yes."

He frowned and his eyebrows, somehow grown bushier in the intervening months since I last spoke to him face to face, knitted together industriously.

"I remember telling Aleksander not to trouble you with this trifle."

"It's not a trifle. This is deadly serious. I thought you would know that better than anyone dealing with the likes of Badulov."

"It is not as bad as American television makes out, Savielly. I make deals and business arrangements with people I despise with some frequency. If I worked only with people whose company I enjoyed I would not work often." He smiled, and looked over the top of his glasses at me.

"So you see," he continued, "there is no need to worry about me. Go back to Venice. You can have Alek talk to the directors. You can still earn a candidate's seat."

"Why? Why would you want me to leave you here to give up everything you've worked so hard for while I go chase some stupid dream?"

My father waved his hand dismissively. "I am giving up nothing. I am sacrificing nothing. I am still committed to 'everything I have worked for' as you phrase it."

"This is stupid, Dad. I never thought you were capable of something like this."

"I am doing it for you, Savielly."

It was the answer I had been expecting, but for some reason it made me furious beyond anything I could ever remember feeling before that moment. I slammed the table with my palms, sending the thin, circular surface of the coffee oscillating wildly in the cup. I stood up and began pacing, as if trapped in an unfortunate position at the board, and then said, "How? How is this for me? How does giving in to the demands of a slimeball like Badulov and a tyrant like Weinstein help me?"

My father was visibly startled by my outburst, but he refused to let it ruffle his composure. He leaned back in the metal chair and folded his arms, staring me down from behind his glasses.

"You said Alek told you everything."

"Yeah."

"Then you know why I did it."

I knew then Alek had kept something from me. My father was still playing chess with me, using my own tactics and plans against me. My offensive had been neutralized and now I had to regroup if I hoped to burst a hole in his defenses.

"I want to hear you say it," I said.

"Oh, Savvy, you have been watching too much television. I do not have to explain myself to you, anymore than I expect you to explain yourself to me. We are both grown men."

"Yes," I said, "and I chose to resign my game and my reputation, and possibly even my career to come out here and help you."

My father shook his head disapprovingly, but said nothing.

I sat and tried to stare him down. I had never been able to do it in all the years and hundreds of chess games we played. In the end, I always had the board under my eyes, and I would shift my focus there. It seemed he would always defeat me psychologically, and my only recourse for victory was in the cold, mechanical combination of moves that he could not overcome with a glare.

I sipped my coffee as menacingly as I could. After a few minutes, it occurred to me that he probably would love a cup. I set my cup down and pushed it across the table to him. He stared down it, examining it as if he would a beaker of acid, and then shook his head.

"No thank you," he said.

"Come on, Dad. It's not drugged. I didn't spit in it."

My father chuckled, then said, "You failed to consider that I am not thirsty."

"Fine," I said. "Be miserable."

"You are wasting your time, Savvy. If you want to do something for me, then go back to the tournament. You can still arrive in time, and there is time to prepare on the train."

"How about we make a deal, Dad? How about…an *exchange*?" I did my best to translate the italics I saw in my head into my voice.

"Are you trying to tell me something with your choice of words?"

"Think of it like a chess game. It's an exchange sacrifice."

My father grumbled and turned his head.

"Don't give me that, Dad. You taught me chess. You taught me to think this way and to act this way and be this way, or don't you remember?"

"I remember that I told you chess is not life."

"Yeah, yeah, that's what you always said, but so what? My whole life was chess, every day spent playing, studying, practicing, thinking about it. How can I see life any other way?"

"It was your decision to play. It was your choice. I only tried to do everything in my power to give you what you wanted. I tried to give you the tools to succeed on your own. If you did not want to play you should have stayed retired."

"God, don't say that! How can you say that to me? Were you able to quit? When you were stuck in that dormitory, when it was cold outside, didn't you want to quit playing?"

My father stared at me, dumbstruck. He actually stood up and began pacing behind his chair. It struck me suddenly how much like him I had become. All these mannerisms and eccentricities. It was easy to see why Alek was infuriated by me sometimes.

"Savvy," he said finally, "I thought you had more respect for my property."

"A lot of that book is about me, my life."

"It's still my writing, my property."

"You haven't answered my question."

"I will not be interrogated by my own son. I was not Comrade Botvinnik. I never beat you, or starved you, or made you do anything you did not want to do. I cannot conceive of why you would treat me in this manner."

"Look what happened to me, Dad. I quit. I quit because I thought I'd be trapped in a chess game forever. I quit because I thought if I didn't I'd always be this little kid who you'd tell what to do."

My father finally stopped pacing. He slouched down into his chair and held his head in his hands.

"Do you really blame me?" he said through his hands.

"I don't know," I said, trying to be truthful, but not cruel. "It would help me understand if I knew why you did it, why you pushed so hard when it ended up hurting me like that."

His sigh echoed off the bare walls.

"I did it for you, Savielly."

"You already said that as if it explains everything. Well, it doesn't explain everything to me. You were the most distant and unapproachable man in the world until I learned to play chess. Was that for me, too?"

"Yes."

"Oh really? And I suppose telling Dana to play Takahashi's sacrifice against me, when you knew I had been hustling and coming back into the life, that was for me too?"

"I see that you do not understand me at all."

"No, I don't. All these years, I followed you. I trusted you and believed in you as the one who would take care of me and teach me to be somebody. I've looked up to you for I don't know how long. And all you've ever done is treat me like an experiment, or one of your students. I have to wonder if you even care about me."

"Of course I care, Savvy." Again his patience was limitless. His face was stern, but his voice was soft and rational. I wanted just once to have him yell and scream and call me a liar.

"Then tell me. Tell me why you asked Dana to play Takahashi's line."

"I did it so that you would be faced with the real consequences of your decisions. Did you think that simply because you had quit, whether from a breakdown in nerves or fears, that everyone you faced would eschew complex or psychologically damaging lines? You had to face the worst possible threat on the board to be certain you were making the right decision."

"And what if I choked? Did you consider that?"

"I needed to consider nothing of the kind. I knew you had overcome your poor judgment, as you overcame all obstacles put before you. You were the one who did not know what would happen. That is why I asked her to play that line against you. Now you know."

"And the distance you kept? The way you treated me for the longest time?"

"I do not know for certain how much of my book you read, but you must understand that I was always a better chess player than I was a father or husband. I was never allowed to have my parents as you did, and so I had no models, and no guides. I thought your mother would raise you better than I could, and then she left and you discovered chess. I knew then I could be a father to you, a teacher, and give you everything I had, but with a choice. The decision some day to embrace it or leave."

"Why couldn't you tell me all this sooner? Why does it have to be here and now that I find all this out? And not just what you've said, but about the book and everything."

My father sighed. "I always wait too long. I had intended to tell you about the book and to ask you about your future after you became world junior champion. I waited for an opportunity that never came. This last year I have spent my time and energy to try and bring that opportunity back, and I am close to accomplishing it now."

"What are you talking about?"

"So much has changed in the last three years. Before you quit, there was a window of time to supplant the world championship title and devalue the crown Weinstein stole from all of us. If someone new, someone dominant could win a number of elite tournaments in succession, that person could win the ICF world championship and be considered a true champion, in spite of never having played Weinstein. It's a title that would be safe, guaranteed, and with privileges that would benefit the winner his whole life afterwards, as it did before the split. It meant keeping it out of the hands of tyrants, thieves, and popular opinion. Weinstein is still a Soviet. He never defected."

"That's what this is about? Dad, the cold war is over. The wall fell years ago. Why didn't you just leave it alone?"

"Another blunder of mine, shielding you from the politics that drive the world. The Soviet Union may be dead, but those who ruled and toppled with it are still there holding on to any last remnants they can, including the world crown of chess and the tradition that gave wealth and respect to our sport. Do you not see? It was the reason I fought for years against unification, against giving in to Weinstein's demands, urging the ICF to develop and legitamize their own

title. It was a true life gambit and I failed. I could not deliver the champion I had promised. The champion I had trained."

Again, my father leaned over and put his face in his hands. There were no tears, but there was defeat raining down from his shoulders onto his head. I stood up and put my arm over his shoulder. He sat up quickly and looked at me.

"So you see, my choices became limited. I must face the consequences of my choice, the exchange I made all those years ago, whether it was successful or not."

"What exchange?"

"I could have been world champion myself, Savvy. Like Bronstein, however, I did not have enough support with the Soviet Union to make a title run. So, I defected. But you see, I couldn't pursue the title even then."

"The boycott," I said.

"Yes, and the imprisonment of my closest friends and allies back home. Once I had abandoned my goal of becoming world champion they were released and able to defect. But it wasn't a sacrifice!" He held his hand up to emphasize how clever he had been. "I decided, when I married, when you were born, that it was possible for someone else, a true American, my son, to be world champion instead. To be a leader, an example to the world. I exchanged my ambitions, my dreams, for you, Savvy. I reared you, trained you, to be the best world champion ever. Not just the best player, but the best person. And look at you! You have made a career for yourself. For yourself! You have made friends, have found a girl, an equal to care for, and you have navigated the most difficult aspects of chess, the politicians like Badulov. It has been so painful to watch you do these things under such uncertainty and duress, but it was necessary. I am so proud of you, Savvy."

I didn't know what to say.

"The book? The book about me?"

"Yes, about you. For the whole world to see the man you had become, the champion you are. It has other uses as well. My stock will increase with its publication, my influence will carry more weight. But always my goal is to support you, Savvy. By dealing with Badulov there will be a title for you to win, there will be money, and prestige and legitimacy. The window three years ago is closed. I am opening a new one for you."

"Jesus, Dad."

"So now you see why you must return to Venice, immediately."

"I'll go back, but only if you come with me."

My father sighed and shook his head. "I will not."

"Dad, listen to me. I am who I am because of you. I am also the man I've become because of three incredible people who came into my life last year. I want you to come meet them and spend some time with them. One of them is the woman I love."

"What would you have me tell Badulov when he and I have already spent so much time negotiating."

"Tell him anything. Tell him better luck next time. You want me in Venice, and I want to be there, but I won't go without you. There will be other cycles, other chances for that big win. It doesn't have to come at this expense."

"Savvy, you are still a young man. This won't last. Will you be as strong in four years? Six? A wife, a family divides your attention. By then it may be too late, by then a Mittelstrom…."

“Dad, listen to me, for once in your life, listen. I’ve already won. I’ve got Dana, I’ve got Alek and Stanley, hell, I’ve even got Takahashi. Won’t you join me? Can’t we be father and son at long last?”

To his credit, he sat there a long time calculating it. Maybe he was weighing the moments that decided the greatest chess games in history, like I had. Or maybe he was thinking about his regrets, the lifetime of blundered games, missed wins, and bad choices that he still carried with him always. I like to think he was thinking of making one last exchange, the ambitions of his youth and as a father given up for a happiness that was in the here and now with a son who was happy, healthy, and content with his life at last. I would never know because I didn’t ask him that question.

But to the question I had asked, he said yes.