

Title: The Pawn against the King

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*"Ultimately, what separates a Winner from a Loser at the Grandmaster level
is the Willingness to do the Unthinkable."*

Garry Kasparov

(15 times world champion)

The servant now stood outside the big chamber. Across from him, there was only the tall, heavy, carved door. The two guards on his side grabbed the solid-gold knob and opened it. Now, his grand opponent appeared straight ahead. The White King. The unimportant black pawn felt an awe surrounding it, even though there was a certain distance between them. He quickly swallowed his fear, held tight the wooden box and, accompanied by the guards, he moved toward the King. The closer he got, the more his sweat overflowed off his splintered skin. He couldn't even enjoy the luxuriousness of the big chamber. Nor did the King's throne seem impressive to the pawn. It was as if his brain had extinguished all colour palettes, so his eyes couldn't see the plays between gold and silver nor be charmed by the diamond veils' harmony. The pawn was solely focused on the wooden box and its content.

The King's instructions were pretty clear. He wanted the most perfect strategy game, and the one who would fabricate it would live in great wealth. Whoever failed would not only be doomed to lead a poor life but would also work for the rest of their life as a slave. That was the price for wasting the King's precious time.

So, the association of powers was on the side of absolute power. If the King got bored or displeased or discontented just a little, the chess game would be over. The humble pawn would be put to forced labour, just like many others before him. Why should that specific pawn come off as a winner? Was what it created so great?

Yes. He had been pondering over it again and again for years, one plan after the other, over and over again and hadn't found the slightest weakness. His organisation and preparation was steely. But what would the other player do?

As he got closer and closer to the absolute monarch, the pawn's gaze lowered more and more. He couldn't stand to look him in the eye. Considering the hyper-armour his adversary bore, a look in the eye would bring about negative results. At the beginning, he had to walk hesitantly, leaving space and staying barricaded behind an

impermeable defence. Bit by bit, gaining time and place and always proceeding one step at a time, it would lash back at him. All those thoughts instantly crossed his mind, as the time when he'd find himself face-to-face with his Excellency.

Now, the mortal was across from the immortal. His mind made one last hypothesis. He thought, "What will happen if, though I have created something perfect, the King thinks it's rubbish? History has proven that nothing matters as much as the King's opinion. If someone brought gold and the King said that it was manure, then that gold would indeed be manure."

As the game began, the weak one left its doubts where they belonged: in the back of his mind. The golden chamber, that it found imposing at first, now did not exist. The gold was the box he was holding.

Upon being just a few meters away from the Lord, all the guards stopped, and the servant kneeled. He could proceed farther, only if given permission by the King. So, he lowered his head and waited for the royal order.

"So," asked the absolute Lord, "did you make what I asked for?"

The humble one would do small movements in the beginning so as to create a solid army and then, he would proceed to tactical manoeuvres, depending on the attacks.

"Yes, my King," he answered without looking at him. "As you asked. An illumination of the battle that renders undefeatable those who can understand it." That word, "undefeatable," was the appropriate one. The most correct move. It was what had enraptured the King.

"Very well. Show me."

He signalled the guards to leave. They were so lesser that he didn't even want to talk to them. Now, the little guy stood and approached him. He went up the three steps stepping on the imperial carpet and placed the wooden box on the emerald table. With his

previous move, he had gained a minimum space that allowed him to develop his defence more.

He didn't care about the King's personal guard that ceaselessly watched him. He didn't pay attention to neither their clothes nor their equipment. His goal was none other than the Panmegistus. It was the two of them. The pawn faced with the King. The servant opened the box, took out the pieces, turned the chessboard upside down and presented it to his Majesty the King.

“Firstly, my Lord, the battlefield. In a perfect square. Divided into sixty-four small, perfect squares. The square symbolises stability and harmony. So, the battle is determined by the general's intelligence and not by the sneaky tricks of the weak who takes advantage of natural elements.

That move was very wise. The King found very interesting the way the weak one thought of the battlefield. As the Majesty and the unbeatable general that he was, with the huge army that he had, he wanted to fight in open plains in order to make use of his outnumbering power. His adversaries, who thought cowardly, wanted to give fights on mountains, in straits, in swampy forests. So, this way of thinking fit him perfectly, and a clear square was ideal in his philosophy. It was the battlefield he liked to fight in. The humble pawn gained another move and reinforced his defence even more. Now, he took out two pawns. One white, one black.

“The two opponents, my Lord. The bright side and the dark one.”

The King focused on the two pawns. He took them and examined them. While the idea seemed very appealing, he didn't like that he touched such a cheap material like wood. He immediately thought economically and made an aggressive move.

“Bright versus dark, eh? Good. But it would be much more impressive if one side was made of gold and the other of silver. That way, the two most precious metals would be the opponents. Gold versus silver.”

Now, the black pawn had to make a manoeuvre and not a confrontation. Instead of explaining his tenor to the King, he let him play his game.

“Brilliant idea, my Lord. Of course, I only thought of wood with my poor, small brain. But since you live in luxury, nothing less than gold and silver befits you.”

“Exactly. I asked for a game for Kings, and a King cannot be touching humble materials like wood. This must be changed.”

“Of course, my Lord,” answered the servant who was interested in the essence of the game, not in the trinkets. Yet, he continued his manoeuvre.

“Go on,” told him the Ruler of everything.

That was it. His manoeuvre had worked. The trap was set up, and the King hadn't noticed it at all. His developments began to grow.

“The two armies develop opposite from each other.” The slave took just the pawns. He positioned the black ones at his side and the white ones at the King's side. “The bright side is yours and the dark mine. The pawns, who are the least important, are placed in the first line, so that they protect the more important entities. Let's say that they deserve one point. One coin. Both sides have the same army. Eight pawns for the bright side, eight pawns for the dark one. Same goes for the battlefield. Thirty-two squares in the darkness, thirty-two in the light. As is fitting for Kings. Both opponents start with the same forces, the same rules and the same battlefield. There is nothing else. The mind, not the ground, will judge the victory or the defeat.”

The King liked that idea too. When he faced rebellions, his adversaries were outnumbered and thus, afraid to fight him in an open-air battlefield. So, they resorted to other means, trying to take advantage of the weather and the ground. The damages he had suffered due to guerrilla wars weren't negligible. The Monarch despised that kind of war, not just because of the material losses, but also because of their long duration. At the Royal way to fight, one force was across

from the other, and the best one won. Anything else was considered inferior. Bit by bit, the weak one was starting to unfold. The defence was set up. Now it waited to destroy everything that would come close.

“The pawns, my Lord, that are considered expendable, can move by only one square-step ahead. Never backward. They are just to open the way. In fact, when they are still at their initial spot, they can even move two steps. It depends on whether someone sees the battle as aggressive or defensive.”

The King was swept off his feet with that thought. Since he executed those who retreated, he liked that the most useless parts of the army fought only ahead. He found it very realistic.

“But they can also move diagonally, my Lord, only when they are to kill somebody. The soldiers must be disciplined and do only one thing: Obey orders. Only straight and only ahead. But if they can weaken the opponent and cause confusion to the opposed military forces, only then do we accept their deviation.”

The unimportant one then positioned two pawns diagonally on the chessboard and showed the move to his Excellence. The King was impressed. That was exactly the opinion he had about his soldiers. The humble one had gotten in his mind and predicted his exact move. The other one couldn't debate. Now, the common one gained even more space.

“Now, your Majesty, it is time for the important pieces to come in. The rooks are placed in the two corners. These entities move only vertically or horizontally, but they can cover the entire battlefield.” The absolute played fast.

“And they'll be able to reach me from all the way down there? My army will crumble, before the battle even begins.”

The response was immediate.

“That is impossible, Panmegistus, because there are the pawns at the front. A rook becomes dangerous, only after enough pawns have been killed, because he needs an open field to operate. If you wish to

play defence, the rook constitutes a fortress with archers that doesn't allow anything to come close. If you play attack, consider it a battering ram or a catapult that is able to take down any wall.

The slave took the rook and positioned it in the middle of the chessboard. He showed all the moves of the rook. Up and down, left and right.

“A rook can sweep everything. For this reason, let's say that his value is at five golden coins.”

This way, the small entity cancelled the move of the Big one. Soon, after time and space, he'd be ready to gain material as well.

“Next to the rook, my Emperor, is placed the knight. The cavalry. And next to them, the bishops. And then, you and the Queen. The bishops do what the rooks do. they can sweep the entire battlefield. But only diagonally.”

The insignificant one took a bishop and moved him.

“Since we have two bishops, each must assume specific duties. So, one bishop moves only within the white squares and the other moves only within the black. In other words, each one manages one side. Due to that limitation, the bishop is worth three golden coins.”

The King immediately launched an attack.

“Wait a minute. The bishop is worth three coins and the rook five? My bishops are worth more than that.”

It was the slave's turn to play. But instead of bursting into open warfare, which would be catastrophic since the power analogy was negative for him, he very wisely opted for a manoeuvre.

“My Lord, if a bishop falls, he is immediately replaced by another. There are several bishops. In how many of the battles you've given bishops were killed? Was there ever a battle lost because a bishop fell? But if a tower falls down, the defence is out in the open. The castle starts to fall. All efforts are made so that the rook doesn't collapse, and the enemy doesn't cross the walls.

This manoeuvre proved to be a saving one. If the expendable had dealt with the King's attack using his defences, the battle would have been lost. But thanks to the manoeuvre, the battle was won without even being given. The Indisputable shook his head.

"Hmm..."

He brought back to mind images from the battles he had won and noted that, once a city's walls have fallen, the result is almost certain. The ugly one who was buying time continued.

"Now, the cavalry. The knight is the only entity who can jump over any other piece. But he can only make three steps, and those neither straight nor diagonally. The knight can only move by making a right angle."

The unimportant took a knight and moved him. "One, two... three. The third step always forms a right angle. One, two... three. For instance, we have the King protected behind a rook, a bishop and pawns. Thanks to the knight, that defence is destroyed, and the King is threatened. However, since he can only make three steps, he is worth as many points as the bishop. Three golden coins for that piece too."

The first reactions were not late to come forth. And they were intense.

"The bishop moves through the whole surface, while my knight only three squares. Why are they of the same value?"

Although the King knew the answer, he asked that devious question to get his opponent where he wanted him. The informal one could not avoid that attack, so he decided that he had to try and defeat him in the battlefield that the King wanted.

"Yes, but the knight can jump over any piece."

"So, those qualities counteract with each other," answered back the nature's Commander.

If the poor one played however the King wanted him to, he would constantly be in a state of defence. Still, if he attempted a counterattack

so soon, the only sure thing is that he'd get destroyed. So, infallibly, he decided to remain behind his defence line waiting for the King's decisive attacks. If he rebuffed them, he would manage for the first time to also win material. That way, he'd balance the strength analogy and be able to elaborate more easily his attack plans to engage the King. If he didn't manage to defend himself, he would have fallen heroically. Inside he knew that his opponent's smashing attack would come at that moment. In that spot. The knight's spot.

“Precisely, my Lord. The knight moves on all squares, while the bishop only moves on one colour.”

“Isn't this an additional quality of the knight? He can both jump over pieces and move on all squares. Two qualities versus one. Shouldn't he have four points against the bishop's three? And why do you think that the knight should have more qualities than the bishop? Why do you underestimate my bishops?”

The King's massive attack had just begun. He was now in a position of power, and his multiple attacks would largely define the game's outcome. The trivial one was baffled. For a moment, he saw many pieces being threatened at the same time. He turned pale before that exorbitant menace. Cold sweat poured out of every pore of his body. His mind had various negative thoughts. Could it be that he had made a mistake? One single mistake that would cost him his life?

No, something like that couldn't be happening. Everything was perfectly studied. Yet, he had to reply quickly, because if he took more time, the King would think that his opponent had no answer. So, he would end the battle. Now, the slave looked at the chessboard while the King looked at the slave. Thanks to his steely discipline, his soul-crushing preparation and his flawless organisation, he regained his sangfroid and mounted demoniacal resistance.

“The knight, my Lord, can move on all squares and jump over pieces, but his asymmetrical move renders him a double-edged sword. Because by nature, men can handle simple shapes better, and they can understand straight lines better than zigzags. If someone is looking for

something and we tell him that it's 'straight ahead,' they will find it easily, no matter the direction. But if we say, 'after ten steps, you'll turn right, then you'll walk ten more steps and turn left,' this time he'll get lost and ask again. So, due to the complexity of his move, the knight loses one point and comes back down to the three points."

His decisive defence managed to rebuff the King's maniacal attack.

The pawn thought that now the desperate attacks would start, which may be easier to face, however underestimating them would be highly damaging. On the other hand, the King did not leave his position. He would continue to fight on the same side, without any manoeuvres. Only frontal. He still had the lead in material.

"And why should the knight move only three squares and not five?"

This time, the attack was easily refuted.

"My Lord, we already have two pieces moving throughout the entire battlefield making many steps. One piece should make few. If the knight made five steps, he'd threaten the King right away, and the game would be over after just two moves. For reasons of balance and tactic, after the storms of the rook and the bishop, comes the lull of the knight.

The King saw yet another attack being destroyed yet did not abandon his field of action.

"And why should he do that weird move and not a different one?"

The insignificant was not surprised; he answered right away.

"We have two pieces that move on a straight line. The third piece has to do something different. The knight symbolises the unpredictability that largely occurs in a battle and in life generally. Not everything is symmetrical in a war. We have a square battlefield, small squares, pawns and pieces that move straightly, therefore we should have something different as well. Something unexpected. Learning to

rebut a knight's attacks, we learn to deal with the unpredictable. Our life is not only a straight line. Sometimes, we'll need to deviate and fight unorthodoxly. That is a rule of life, not a rule of mine."

The King saw in the knight's moves his own life too. His path to the throne had not been a straight line. He deviated several times. However, he attempted the same attack, this time with another piece.

"Yes, but why forming a right angle and not an obtuse one?"

"Well, my Lord, because even in asymmetry, there mustn't be exaggeration. The knight may be moving in an unorthodox manner, but the right angle symbolises that, even in exaggeration, there is control. The knight is dual-natured. His nature is divided in the external and the internal one. He goes straight at first, but then turns. Externally, that move appears unorthodox. Internally though, that turn is controlled. Because the knight doesn't turn anarchically nor randomly. He forms a right angle, because he must form a right angle. Because everything is a right angle. The square battlefield, the small humble squares, the luxurious palace where you live, and even your catapults. It is all based on right angles."

That battle position was now collapsing. The King attempted one last attack before retreating.

"And why is he placed between the rook and the bishop? Why isn't the bishop placed between the rook and the knight?"

Those individual attacks did not worry the poor one at all. Not only did he rebuff them with ease, but also annihilated them with the least possible losses.

"The bishops are placed next to you, because they are on your side. They execute your orders. You have a contact that is quite close. This is the first reason. The second one is harmony. The one asymmetrical piece is put in the middle, so that it has two symmetrical pieces next to it. Harmony. A rule of life, not my own."

The King had launched an attack with the vast majority of his army and had been walloped. The position he had chosen for the attack

was correct, but he fell upon a granite defence that didn't allow him the slightest opening.

Now, the black player had balanced the material and started little by little to create a stranglehold, that was not visible though, around the white king. The plans were in his mind.

Then, there was the counterattack phase. On the other side, the King had to regroup his forces to attack anew. The precious time he'd be losing would give great advantage to the black to set up the ultimate counterattack that would evolve into a combative road roller, breaking down every resistance line of the enemy. But the game was still halfway through, and nothing was final yet. From the conception to the materialisation, there is always a big distance in between.

“Now, we get to the royal pieces. The Queen and the King. Let's leave the King who is also the absolute archon for last. The Queen, your Excellency, can perform all the moves of all the pieces. Except for one. The knight's move. She moves up and down, left and right, like the rook, but also diagonally, like the bishops. She also moves on both colours. She is your absolute support.”

Thinking that he saw a hole in the defence, the King immediately made an attack.

“And why can't she perform the knight's move too? She's the Queen and can do whatever she wants.”

The moribund was not surprised and ate up yet another pawn of his opponent.

“My Lord, the Queen is a lady. As the royal lady that she is, she must perform moves full of grace and harmony. She cannot be jumping over just anybody.”

The King saw another weapon of his being destroyed. Now, the servant advanced with almost all his forces, ready to make the final, surrounding move.

“And now, we get to the King.”

The white Sheikh, who always had an aggressive spirit, found himself in a dilemma. Should he gather his forces and reinforce his defence or defend by carrying out an attack? He opted for the latter, taking the wind out of his opponent's sails.

“Don't tell me, I got it. I'll tell you what the King does. He is able to perform all the moves of all the pieces. Even the knight's. As the King that he is, he does anything he wishes.”

The slave was taken aback; he didn't expect such a move. Having gone over to an attack, he decided to leave his defence exposed, because he had come to realise that his opponent wouldn't be tough enough mentally to launch an attack.

So, his rear was undefended. What should he do now? How would he tell the Great Conqueror that the King only moves one square? He wouldn't accept it for the world. He had made an opening too soon, underestimating his opponent. Now, he was in danger of an unexpected mate.

He looked at the chessboard. He saw that his pieces were too far to come back to the defence line. But as he observed the chessboard, he noticed that things weren't so tragic. His defence had opened, which gave his king the advantage of moving without getting trapped anywhere.

Then he figured out his opponent's plans. The Monarch had performed that move just as a diversion. Pretending that he would attack, he would force the black player to stop his advances and take some unities back to protect his lord. This way, he would buy time, regroup his defence and counterattack in a quick, direct way. He would get to an effortless mate, as he was open like that in the rear.

After noticing that the attack launched by the White didn't have so much strength as to capture his King and his basic guard, the black player proceeded with his advances.

“My absolute Monarch, the King only moves one square toward all directions.”

“What? That is unheard of!” said the Lord, reinforcing his attack. “How can the King make only one step, while all the pieces do more?” The White did not abandon his attack and kept on contradicting his opponent who was forced to delay his advancement.

“Yes, my Lord, but if he gets captured by the inimical forces, the game is over. We are not interested in who played better, who fought more bravely, who has the largest army. Since the King cannot move, it is over. It is all over. A player cannot exist without a King. This alone renders him the most significant piece.”

The Ruler of everything was excited with the idea that if the King collapses, then everything collapses. That was the impression he wanted to give his people. Kingless peoples are bare peoples. His diversion was losing ground. Still, he tried to make a desperate attack.

“Yes, but why can a queen go up and down and do whatever she wants, while I, her lord, can only move one step?”

“Master, let the woman think that she does whatever she wants. Let her saunter and wander around wherever she wants, whenever she wants and on whichever colour she prefers. However, if she gets killed, the fight continues. It’s no big deal. But if the King falls... then it’s all over. If you are the absolute ten and worth ten golden coins, the Queen is worth nine golden coins.”

The White’s distraction attempt failed. Now, the black would carry out an unprecedented attack, a pincer that would slowly close and trap the unprotected King who tried to organise his defence.

“Very well, up to this point. I have to confess that, until today, this is the best game that has been brought to me. However, I don’t think it rightly represents a battle.”

The King had now admitted that, attack-wise, he had failed. However, he hoped that if he organised his defence perfectly, he could decimate his opponent and end the battle with an armistice.

“Quite the contrary; it is all here. For example, if a pawn crosses the enemy’s lines and finds himself behind the adversarial defence

going on to reach the final line's square, then he automatically becomes a queen. It is like calling for backup."

The servant pretty much read his opponent's thoughts and didn't let him lead an attack; he continued his advancement.

"And you'll ask me, why should he become a Queen and not a King? Well, because bigamy is accepted and normal, while monarchy is absolute. There can only be one King."

Once again, the black was ahead of the White who had become predictable by now.

"And you'll ask me, why shouldn't a rook or a bishop do that? Well, if something like that happened, then the game's difficulty would be lost. It is easy for a bishop to reach the opponent's defence line. What is hard is for a pawn to achieve that feat. This way, we think more, which means we get smarter."

The grip began to get tighter. The pressure was unbearable.

"Moving on, I should say that all pieces are studied in such a way that they complement each other. Like a real army that needs its auxiliaries, its trackers, its mechanics, its doctors, its archers, its cavalry and so on. The rook that moves vertically and horizontally needs an open field of action. A close manoeuvre battle is not helpful for him; he'd be almost useless as he'd be trapped in the corners. Performing that strange move, a knight is greatly powerful when in the centre of the chessboard, but weak when he's found in the corners. And since he moves slowly, if he is cut off, away from the fight, precious time will be lost until he reaches it, so he's not useful in that case. Moving on one single colour, the bishop is omnipotent if there is no congestion on that colour. If the squares are occupied, then he is of no use. You see? The archers are very valuable at long distances, but in a hand-to-hand combat, they get immediately killed. The cavalry is highly powerful when there are archers or infantry in front of it, but if found across from phalangists, it has no hope. The phalangists are almighty in the frontal

attack, but very vulnerable if hit from the rear. No piece is unbeatable and perfect. They all have an Achilles' heel."

The insignificant continued. "Like at war, at this game too you can choose what kind of battle you will have and to which side you will give more attention. You can develop a defence on one side with your King behind pawns, a knight, a rook and a bishop, and an attack on the other side with the rest of the pieces: the other rook, the other bishop and knight, all supported by the Queen. You can also move all pieces from the start, if you want for the battlefield to open fast and have a rook and a bishop immediately enter the fire aiming for an immediate and thoroughgoing war, or you can opt for a war of attrition by making small moves, thus creating a solid pack that will withhold any counterattack.

"You can threaten the King with a knight whom you'll have covered with a bishop who will be covered by a rook, in turn covered by a pawn and the Queen. So, if the opponent kills your knight, another piece immediately takes his place. Or you can cover your knight with all the other pieces that will be covered by pawns. You should never leave a piece uncovered. Like in a real battle, we send the cavalry with the support of the infantry and cover the infantry with the artillery! If you wish to have a manoeuvre battle, then you'll wait for your opponent to make a mistake, leaving some part of his army unprotected, that is, a hole in their defence. Then, you'll attack and cause a rift. If you prefer an attacking game, you can start by eating up pieces even if they are supported. This way, the defences open up, and the game obtains a wild beauty, since the Kings are left exposed. Also, you can create a diversion. If one piece destroys your plans for the opponent's defence, you can sacrifice one piece of yours of higher or equal value, so that said piece gets out of the way. So, the opponent believes that you are making a mistake and takes that higher piece. But this way, you have managed to create an opening in their defence, and you can now lunge with all your forces. Yet, the most important thing is that you are left with less forces, but the fight is not lost. If one is a wise general, as you are, they can win, like it can happen in real life. Your enemy might

underestimate you and do clumsy dashes, while you can little by little balance out the fact that you are outnumbered.

“Also, it doesn’t matter who has the biggest army, but what kind of army they have. You might have a Queen, two rooks and a knight while your opponent has six pawns, a bishop and a knight. Their army is antiquated or consists of mercenaries without morale, while your army is fully equipped or comprises unyielding soldiers who are scared of nothing.

“It is all here. You asked for a strategy game, a war simulation, in which the perfectly knowledgeable ones cannot lose in any battle.

The black pawn’s attack was sweeping. He left no margin for error. His surrounding move was fully successful and now, he started closing the pincers, trapping his enemy who could do nothing other than buy time. The mate was certain and would be triumphant.

“So, the game ends once the King has fallen, regardless of who has the force superiority?”

“Precisely.”

“But how can a King fall? If I move one pawn and leave my King uncovered for a moment and you bring your bishop from the other side and finish the game, will I have lost that easily?”

“No. The game is simple but does have some complexity. It is dual-natured, like life, people, war. The King, my Lord, falls with a combination of moves that do not allow him to move at all; he gets eaten in every square he can move to. So, a brain is required to achieve such a thing. Thus, our brain learns to think more complexly.”

The King preferred to orient his interest elsewhere, trying to buy some time.

“And who will start the attack? Who is the defensive and who is the attacker, given that they all begin having the same forces?”

“The dark side attacks; the bright counterattacks. The dark acts, the bright reacts. The black go first.”

The King resisted.

“Good idea, but I don’t like to have the black go first. It is inelegant. The White, who are superior, should always have the first say. The Kings are the ones who control everything. They cannot come second. I won’t accept a slave going first.”

The black pawn realised that this pawn is of no value; he let it get eaten. Besides, the battle was taking place elsewhere.

“Very well, my King. The White always go first.”

The brainless didn’t care, because soon, willingly or not, the Lord’s attention would go back to the King’s threat. And it did.

“Let’s say that my King is threatened by a bishop. I move my King to another square. But if that square is threatened by, say, a rook, then I’ll have to move him somewhere where he isn’t threatened. But if all the squares are threatened and there is only one available which is threatened by just a little pawn, then what happens?”

“He loses. Even a pawn can take the King.”

The Supreme Titan persistently resisted. He refused to be defeated.

“Nonsense. I don’t accept that. It is not royal enough. A King cannot be killed by a simple soldier. Find something else.”

By now, he had thrown all his men in the battle. Nothing overawed his royal guard. This frantic resistance took the black by surprise, and he tried to finish the game with various manoeuvres.

“My Lord, it is certainly a demeaning way to die, not fit for an Excellency; but it happens. How many kings haven’t had a humiliating death? How many kings weren’t assassinated sneakily by moles or traitors or even their own blood?”

Still, his manoeuvres were rebutted with courage and self-abnegation by the royal guard.

“Yes, but never by a simple soldier. It is always by successors to the throne, by rival kings or by war generals. Not by soldiers. I don’t accept it.”

As the King’s guard grew stubborn, the slave’s forces persisted.

“My Lord, when the cavalry has been diminished, when the walls have been demolished, when the bishops have been trapped, and you desperately keep fighting along with your remaining guard, you can find death by anyone. Both the soldier and the general carry a sword.”

“It is not a royal death. I don’t accept it. A pawn cannot take the King’s life. Period.”

As it seemed, the end was not that easy. The black pawn struggled to make the final move, while the rabid defence wouldn’t let him. Had he made a fatal mistake? Had he not calculated correctly his opponent’s capacities? Had he underestimated him?

Just when he could achieve a total humiliation, he was now facing the spectrum of a tie. This couldn’t happen. The black pawn looked at the chessboard again and again, trying to close those pincers. But they wouldn’t close. As if they had crushed upon a primitive material that they couldn’t smash.

Seeing the forces and the way they were deployed in the battlefield, he decided to make a tactical retreat, a trick so that the game wouldn’t be brought to a tie. He wouldn’t make another step. He would bring his pieces together, create a solid mass, aiming at buying time for the creation of a new front. So, all forces would be gathered on one side while the other would be left exposed.

There, he would advance with the pawns, so that they bring reinforcements. Of course, that would leave his King uncovered, but he noticed that he couldn’t be threatened. What he had in mind would be achieved only if the reinforcements came and hit the King and his guard from the rear. The tactical retreat was just beginning.

“Very well, my Lord. The rules will change. The King cannot be killed by a pawn.”

The White believed in that gimmick. Now, he was certain that the battle would come to an end with an armistice.

“The deal is closed. I will keep the game, but that last rule is going to change.”

“Of course, my Lord. You have the first and the last word.”

“Good. Now tell me how much you want. I had stated that I would fill with gold whoever would bring to me the best strategy game. So, how much do you want? Ten thousand golden coins? Twenty thousand? Thirty thousand?”

“My Lord, I am but a humble man. I don’t want much. For every black square, I will be given the double amount in coins than for the last one. For instance, one golden coin for the first black square. Two for the second, four for the third, eight for the next and so on and so forth.”

The White King paid no mind to the little pawn that moved, and he started laughing.

“Did you hear what he said? I was about to give him even one hundred golden coins, but he prefers just a few. I don’t know if what you’re doing is brave or stupid. Money makes the world go ‘round. Due to my magnanimity, I shall insist. Are you sure?”

“Your magnanimity is admirable. But I’d like to get paid as I told you.”

The black continued the pawn’s move.

“Very well. The deal is closed. There’s no going back now. What has been agreed upon, it is agreed. If you regret it or realise your stupidity, you won’t get a penny more.”

The arrogant king hadn’t seen the threat coming directly at him.

“I agree, your Great Fairness.”

The two men shook hands looking each other in the eye. Everything had changed within a few moments. The humble one wasn’t

looking down nor was his voice anxious. On the contrary, he wore a winner's smile and when he stood up, his fiery look slid in the vacant look of the King. He wanted to scream and humiliate his opponent, but he preferred a mental triumph.

The calculations began. The one became two, the two became four, the four became eight, the eight became sixteen, the 16 became 32, the 32 became 64, the 64 became 128, then 256. 256 golden coins after the first ten squares of black colour.

The King wasn't worried yet. He didn't believe that the little pawn could turn into a queen. He thought that the sum would mount up to 20,000 approximately. The other guy was getting more and more ecstatic, as the numbers rose.

However, on the outside, he still had that glassy unbeatable look in his eyes, knowing that he had achieved the ultimate surprise. Soon, the pincers would close with the King inside it. The 256 became 512, the 512 became 1024, then 2048, then 4096, then 8192, then 16,384.

The King was flummoxed. He just started to realise what was happening. The amount would rise well over 20,000. However, he still believed that it wouldn't exceed the 100,000 he was planning to give him. He still believed that the game could be a tie. Big mistake. The 16,384 became 32,768 at the seventeenth black square. 65,536 at the eighteenth, and 131,072 at the nineteenth.

The King's face grew pale. It was the first time he felt the spider's breath so close to him. There were 13 more squares left, and the amount had already increased too much. Now, the King was looking at the chessboard with a thousand eyes. He tried to do calculations with his mind, but his confusion was such that it was impossible. The seconds that remained until the game's end were endless. He wanted to stop the time from passing. But despite his Majesty, he couldn't.

Now the black had closed the pincers and squeezed his victim like a constrictor snake. Every time the victim took a breath, the more they squeezed him. All those years of study, deprivation, humiliation and

patience were worth it to the last penny for this grandiose moment when a titan was losing to a dwarf, when the titan would end up a dwarf and the dwarf a titan.

A few remaining moves. 262,144 at the twentieth square. The pawn becomes a Queen. The Queen threatens the King. 524,288 at the twenty-first. The King makes a move. Now the bishop threatens the King. Check. 1,048,576 at the twenty-second square. The King avoids the bishop, but only has two free squares. He moves to one of those. Now, the knight threatens the King. Check.

At that moment, the White player realised that not only was he going to lose, but he would also lose totally and humiliatingly. He turned and looked at his opponent. The roles had been reversed. Now, the pawn stood tall before him like a marble Doric column. Not being able to explain what was happening to him, he started thinking in metaphysical terms.

“My God, you are not human. You’re a demon.”

His fainting voice didn’t even reach the ears of the black player who watched everything with a smile on his face.

“Go on. It’s your turn. At this game, we don’t have the luxury of not playing if we have no moves to make. You must play.”

The White bent over the chessboard and was led to his destruction. The King moved to the last free square.

The final sum was 1,073,741,824 golden coins. It was equal to the Monarch’s entire fortune; he fell flat on the ground, and the little pawn took the King.

The Black was the winner but didn’t say a word. He immediately turned his back and left the room. He had managed to do the impossible, to annihilate the infinite, to conquer the unconquerable, to win the unwinnable.

He left that enormous chamber with the decorations of inestimable value that now looked just trifling.

When he reached the door and touched the golden knob, without even looking at the little white, he said:

“My game is called chess, and as it turns out, I was right. The pawn does take the king.”

