

**The Immortal**

**Ricard Ruiz Garzón**

Translated from the Spanish by Rahul Bery

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*"No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."*

*Samuel Beckett*

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## **Saturday**

"Check!"

Judit smiles: Mister Aliyat has almost said it right this time. Almost. His accent is foreign, his consonants aspirated, but he is much easier to understand than before. Underneath his white turban, the Iranian smiles back and strokes his thick, black moustache.

A second later, in spite of everything, he is concentrating on the pieces once more.

From the other side of the board, where the black pieces are, Judit sighs and chews at her lip. With her high-top trainers, ripped jeans and unbuttoned shirt she looks older, but she's about to turn twelve. In a week, to be precise.

A few metres away, behind a metal fence, Judit's grandfather adjusts his tie and raises his eyebrows. He's telling her to stay alert: she's in check, and in a game of chess the king must always be covered, to keep one's options open.

And besides, this is not a normal game.

This is the most important game Judit has ever played against Mr Aliyat.

When it ends, the future of both players could change forever.

Perhaps that's why they're surrounded by dozens of people.

And journalists. And TV cameras. And some famous people. And police, lots of police.

It's all so terrifying I just want to run away.

But I can't.

## First note:

### Shatranj

Now, please look at the word written on this scrap of paper: *Shatranj*.

Have you ever heard this word? I hadn't either until I met Mr Aliyat.

But before we discover when and why he wrote down these eight letters, and what on earth this all has to do with the things I was just telling you about, I'm going to explain to you what happened the first time I saw Judit. Because I don't think you'll be able to guess.

What happened that first time is I took a dislike to Judit, quite a strong dislike.

Boy, I felt about her like I would about a kick in the shins. Like a rainstorm with nowhere to shelter.

It was a few months ago, at the beginning of spring. And it was a splendid day, the kind of day we like so much here in Switzerland, especially after a winter so cold our noses had frozen (yes, that sometimes happens in Geneva, our snot freezes; but we're used to it). Anyway, that morning, for the first time, people had dared to go out for a walk in the Parc de Bastions without running straight back home to their warm fires. Some people were even sitting on the benches and looking up at the sky, squinting and purring as they did so.

Judit entered the park through the Place de Neuve, dragging her grandfather along by his scarf. She was carrying her sketchbook and a box of charcoals. Without greeting anyone, she headed for the giant chess boards (you'll see them if you ever go to the Parc des Bastions, it's a typical attraction here in Geneva), walked over one of them and then sat in the middle of it, on the ground. Her grandfather opened his mouth, but said nothing; he shook his head, walked towards a bench and sat down on his newspaper, still shaking his head.

For half an hour Judit worked, with a look on her face like someone chewing nails. I didn't know then, but now I know that that exercise (drawing on the board, not chewing nails) had been recommended to her by Monsieur Bourdin, her drawing teacher at the academy. It seems that there are few better things on which to practise drawing with charcoals than a bunch of black and white shapes on a bunch of white and black squares. They say that if you manage to draw the

figures, the squares and the shadows of the shapes on the squares without it going all blurry it means you're beginning to master the charcoal.

Judit wasn't far off mastery, to be fair. She was one of the best students at the academy, which was one of the best in Geneva, an important city with regards to teaching drawing. Yes, Judit could draw, man could she draw, like an angel. Because of this she dreamt of winning the First European Artistic Portrait Competition for Young Talents which, despite its interminably long name, was a prestigious competition which was to take place in the month of July, in Switzerland to be specific, in Geneva to be even more specific, and, most specifically of all, on her birthday. The birthday that's one week away, remember?

This is all to come. We'll get to it in due time; it's never good to rush with chess. Now let's go back to the park, where a balding, bearded, slightly chubby gentleman and his little son had walked up to Judit. He stood by her side, looked at her sketchbook and exclaimed, "Wow, what good drawings!"

Judi gave him a proud look, typical in people who are convinced that merely being as good as everyone else is not enough.

"I know," she boasted. "It's in the blood – my father was a great artist."

"Oh yes?"

"Actually, he still is," added Judit, hesitating. "He lives abroad now, in Hungary. But I've already won three prizes, two medals and a municipal competition."

"Wow," the old man with the beard marvelled. "That's really good. Very very good, yes."

He half-shut his eyes.

"That must be why you've sat down on e4, yes?" the gentleman noted, the intrigued look still on his face. "It's the best choice, of course."

This time it was Judit who half-shut her eyes. She observed the gentleman and looked for her grandfather, who was dozing on the bench.

"I'm... sitting on the ground," she remarked finally, not really knowing what to say.

The bearded gentleman brushed his hand over his bald patch and then crossed his legs.

"Oh no, dear, no!" he corrected her. "You're sitting on e4, exactly on e4, a very important square, isn't that right, Roger?"

The boy, freckly and red-haired, no older than eight, nodded sarcastically.

“Most important!”

Judit returned to her sketchbook, but neither the man nor the boy moved.

“And why is it important?” she asked after a few seconds.

The bearded man rubbed his hands. “Well, the thing is, there aren’t any boards free at the moment,” he reasoned, gesturing to the area around him, “and I’d like to have a little game with my son Roger. I’d be delighted to answer your question if you’d be kind enough to let us have the board. Would you mind?”

Judit’s face looked as if she’d swallowed some of the nails, without chewing.

“I’ll draw for another half hour,” she said, finally. “You can wait on the bench, with my granddad.”

The gentleman shot a glance at the old man, who was still dozing, unaware of anything.

“Look, I’m sure your grandfather...”

“Could you stop talking?” Judit demanded rudely, shaking her sketchbook. “You have to concentrate if you want to draw properly, you know?”

The bearded gentleman was no longer squinting; he opened his eyes wide, surprised by Judit’s attitude. Then he crouched down until he was the same height as her.

“Pardon me, I only want to ask you one more question,” he assured her. “Do you... know how to play chess?”

Judit responded as if she had been bitten by a snake. “Of course not.”

“Ah, then you’re not such a good drawer after all.”

Judit’s green eyes were fixed on the gentleman’s beard. “And why not?”

“Why, because you don’t know two secrets. Two big secrets.”

Without adding anything further, the gentleman got up and traced an arch in the air with his hand, inviting her to get up from the board. Judit stayed quiet for a few seconds, but in the end, I guess, her curiosity got the better of her. She closed her sketchbook and grumpily moved away from the grid.

While the red-haired boy moved a white king’s pawn, almost half his height, by fits and starts, the gentleman turned back towards Judit.

“The first big secret, little one, is that the conditions you are given in chess are the same as the ones you have in real life,” he said. “There’s birth, death, war, joy, sacrifice, imagination, attack, defence, loyalty, cowardice, bravery... The first secret is that you can sketch life onto a chess board, and whoever has the best perspective will make the best drawing. That’s why you have to know which squares are the most important, like e4 for example, where you were just sitting and where there is now a pawn.”

Judit stood still, thinking of how to respond, looking as if she hadn’t quite understood.

“And the second secret?” she asked.

“You must know the second one if you’ve won so many prizes.”

Judit turned red, maybe from anger, maybe from embarrassment.

“The second secret, child,” the bearded gentleman continued, “is that in order to be a winner...”

“What?”

“In order to be winner, you must know how to lose.”

After that conversation, Judit went back to the Parc des Bastions almost every day. No one was expecting her, not even me, but still she went. Calm, however, was not so rapidly restored.

“So then,” she’d ask in those early days, “what’s this square called?”

Her grandfather, used to meeting her every whim, struggled to answer.

“Right, the board is divided into rows, like in battleships. And in order to be able to note down each move, some have numbers, and others letters... By the way, since when were you interested in chess?”

“And which one is e4?” Judit counterattacked, without answering his question.

“Well, the box where row e and column 4 meet, where the king’s pawn starts.”

“And how do you move a pawn? And a knight? And the castle? And how do you win?”

“Look, the objective of this game is to defeat the opposing king...”

In this way, little by little, the grandfather explained to her how each of those pieces, each one coming up to Judit’s knees, moved. Most of the time Judit spent in the park was still devoted to drawing in her sketchbook, but after a week she was already dedicating one hour to drawing and

another to playing chess. One thing's for sure, she did considerably better at drawing; like all beginners, Judit lost all of her first few chess games. Every one. And she lost every one of them against her grandfather, who practically had to apologise after winning.

"Ch-checkmate," he stammered.

"Again," Judit said, angrily, before kicking over the same pawn she had been sketching enthusiastically not long ago.

I think I've already mentioned that back then I, and everyone else, thought that Judit was a very rude person. In Switzerland, land of peace and good manners, temper tantrums like the ones she threw were unforgivable, much more so among chess players, masters of patience. The other players would watch Judit's frequent tantrums from their own boards and shake their heads in sympathy with her grandfather. In short, we all thought they'd both leave the park very soon.

But one day, after two or three weeks, I realised something.

I realised that Judit would lose, yes, and groan and kick. But she wouldn't give in.

She'd lose, take it out on her surroundings... and then she'd play again.

And so, after a month of playing, she won her first game against her grandfather. And before a month and a half was up, from game to game, she'd won three games in a row.

That was when her grandfather, fanning himself with his diary, suggested, "Maybe, ahem, maybe you could start playing against other people... To improve, you know?"

Judit's first rivals in the park, after her grandfather, were a lady having a walk with her poodle in her arms; a girl with glasses and a discoloured *Toy Story* T-shirt; an adolescent who glimmered with piercings; the neighbourhood postman, who decided to challenge her during his break... Oh, and Roger, the bearded gentleman's pompous, red-headed son, who took longer than expected to beat her.

"Not bad," the boy admitted, his teeth clenched.

"You're learning very quickly, Judit," Roger's father congratulated her, after consoling his son. "If you keep it up, soon you'll be able to face Mr Aliyat."

Judit followed the bearded gentleman's arm and discovered, on the board that was closest to the walkway, an old man with a moustache and a turban, playing chess, surrounded by curious onlookers.

“He’s a foreign champion, a grandmaster,” the gentleman went on. “He doesn’t speak our language, not a word, but he comes to play every afternoon. And he always wins. He beats everyone. Without exception. They say that the day he loses he’ll leave the park and never return. It may be a myth, but it’s certainly the case that he’s been winning for months.”

That afternoon, Judit moved closer to Mr Aliyat so she could draw him in her sketchbook; that man, sixty years old, dark, with bushy eyebrows and a broad moustache, whom you’ve already met. As you can see, he wore a suit and shoes, and was not very tall, although the turban made him look taller. He spent the whole afternoon at the board, making him the perfect model. Judit managed to do such a good portrait that even Mr Bourdin congratulated her.

The most curious thing was that Mr Aliyat did not talk at all while he played, just as the bearded gentleman had said. He began with a greeting, a swift movement of the head which made you fear for the turban’s balance, and then he moved each piece until he won. Then he repeated the greeting and got ready for another game. He played for a couple of hours, always with the blacks, surrounded by admiring onlookers, like a real star.

Judit spent a few days among them, watching Mr Aliyat play and drawing him in different poses. He’d change his suit, but he never forgot his white turban.

“You wrap a strip of cotton around your head,” Judit’s grandfather explained when she asked him about this garment. “In Iran, in Mr Aliyat’s country, it’s very common.”

After several attempts, Judit managed to sketch every fold of the turban.

And so, from game to game, from drawing to drawing and from fold to fold, we arrive at a cloudy May day. Mr Aliyat had just beaten an executive who was howling for his mobile when it suddenly began to rain. Those who were surrounding the board, including Judit’s grandfather, ran to take shelter beneath the kiosk. Everyone except for Judit, who was finishing off her sketch of the knight that had brought victory to the Iranian. Her grandfather was shouting in the distance, but Judit was still concentrating so hard that she didn’t even hear him. Nor did she see Mr Aliyat approach, open an umbrella and cover her sketchbook to protect it from the rain.

At that moment, Mr Aliyat saw the drawing of the knight and stared intently at Judit.

And Judit turned towards Mr Aliyat. And it stopped raining, and the master, with no warning, closed the umbrella and returned to the board. And he made his habitual head movement.

Judit gulped. Mr Aliyat... Yes, Mr Aliyat was inviting her to play.

As soon as she took her place, shaking, behind the white pieces and moved her pawn to square e4, the crowd came back. And nobody left until eight minutes later, when Mr Aliyat won. Judit knocked her king to the ground, as she had learnt to do, and Mr Aliyat bade her farewell with his usual head movement. While the disappointed girl lowered her own head, Mr Aliyat came up to her, put his hand in his pocket and took out a piece of paper. Then he wrote something on it, with a pencil, and gave it to her. After asking her grandfather, Judit accepted it and said goodbye to the master, who was already walking away.

"He's written 'sha'... oof... 'shatranj'," said Judit, reading it as well as she could. "And what does that mean? Something in his language?"

"I've got no idea, but we can look it up when we get back to your room," her grandfather suggested, putting on his raincoat. "We Swiss didn't invent the Internet for nothing, did we?"

Ten minutes later, granddaughter and grandfather arrived home. Judit greeted her mother, and ran to carry out an essential ritual: she gave herself a kiss. Well, actually, she kissed a portrait of herself that hung, framed, in the entrance hall. A detailed, very accurate charcoal portrait done when she was six, and signed by her father. By the great artist who lived in Hungary.

"We'll be down in a minute, Mum!"

By the time her grandfather sat down with her, in her room, Judit had already opened her email.

"Any emails from your father?"

"No, nothing," Judit replied, saddened. "He's late this week."

"Bah, he's probably very busy, he'll write soon," her grandfather said in his defence. "Shall we look the word up?"

In less than a minute, Judit had already found several entries for *shatranj*.

"It's the name of an older form of chess," she read from the screen, after clicking on the Wikipedia entry. "A game that came to Persia via another game, *chaturanga*..."

"Persia? That's the old name for modern-day Iran," her grandfather noted. "That's where Mr Aliyat is from."

“But in the Persian language,” Judit continued, “*chaturanga* lost its vowels and became *chatrang*, then *shatranj*, which comes from *sha*, that is, ‘king’, and *tranj*, ‘game’.”

“So...”

“So,” she cut in, “*shatranj* means ‘game of kings’. It means ‘chess’!”

Her grandfather simulated applause, to show her she was right.

“Look, it says that the game’s names in different languages came from that *sha*,” he added. “*Échecs* in French, chess in English, *scacchi* in Italian, *escacs* in Catalan... And in Spanish, an article was added, and from *ash’shatranj* people ended up saying *axedreç*.”

“And the famous ‘checkmate’ comes from *sha mat*, which means ‘dead king’.”

For a good while, Judit and her grandfather went through different Internet links, devouring information. And they would have kept on doing so if H el ene, Judit’s mother, hadn’t told them that the table was set for dinner.

Once they were in the dining room, however, the bombardment continued.

“Did you know that in chess there used to be elephants instead of bishops?” asked Judit as she piled salad onto her plate. “And did you know that ‘elephant’ in Persian is *fil*, and that’s why it’s called *alfil* in Spanish...?”

H el ene smiled, distracted. “Wow, how interesting. There aren’t many girls who play chess, are there?”

Judit’s mother, a robust woman, with glasses and a million curls, served herself half a bowl and sighed. Some days, after working so many hours, she got home and didn’t even feel like speaking, although she felt immensely proud of supporting an entire family. Judit’s grandfather, who still hadn’t opened his mouth, took advantage of the pause in conversation.

“Well, now you’ve brought it up,” he said, looking at H el ene, “we discovered that in old chess there was no queen. How curious, eh? It turns out that the lady, the most powerful piece on the board, is a modern invention. As always, women fighting to get a place...”

Judit’s mother nodded, content.

As far as I knew back then, she worked at the same place Judit’s grandfather had worked at before retiring: CERN, the famous European Centre of Investigation where the World Wide Web

had been invented. It seemed that H  l  ne was also very proud of having triumphed in a world, the world of science, in which men like her father had, historically, had it much easier.

“Well, I’m happy to see you learning so much, but what about the drawing?” H  l  ne asked suddenly, gesturing towards the sketchbook on the living room table. “You haven’t shown me any exercises today, Judit. And since we’re paying for you to go to such a good, not to mention expensive, academy, now’s not the time for you to suddenly start playing chess and...”

“I haven’t stopped drawing!” protested Judit, raising her voice.

“Don’t use that tone with me!” her mother warned her. “I’m only saying that you’ve spent months talking about the European Artistic Portrait Competition, and you’ve worked so hard to take part in it. You’re only a few weeks away, and now’s not the time to start relaxing.”

“I haven’t stopped drawing!” Judit repeated.

“Look, it’s important, because if you really want to be like your father...”

Without letting her mother finish, Judit took a piece of paper from her pocket and said, between sobs, “Daddy’s never seen one of my drawings! Not really! Just scanned photos!”

H  l  ne and her father looked at each other, shocked. That was the first time Judit had reacted like that to the mention of her beloved father’s name. At least the first time in their presence. Her mother frowned and unfolded the paper, which had a sketch of two pawns with arms fighting each other on a board. Then she looked at her daughter. When Judit spoke again, she had a tear on her cheek.

“My father hasn’t taught me anything!” And she added, “Not even how to play chess, like Roger’s father. And his emails are getting more and more delayed! And that’s not all! That’s not all!”

“Judit, when Adolf and your mother separated...” her grandfather tried to mediate.

H  l  ne stopped her father with a gesture. “Judit, love,” she ventured softly, “your father...”

“My father’s not here!”

“But, my darling daughter...”

“He’s not here! He’s not here! He writes emails, but he never comes!” Judit shouted finally, before running up to her room. “Even if I won the stupid competition, I’d have to write him an email or he’d never know!”

**Sunday**

“Check!”

Today it's Judit who is threatening the opposing king, this time with the bishop. And Mr Aliyat smiles, but not as much this time. It's the same game as yesterday, yes, the only one the Iranian has played with white pieces since his arrival in Switzerland. And it's a close one.

Judit has the advantage in terms of her position, but Mr Aliyat has better pieces. They can only play for one hour a day, and in that hour, like the greats, they barely make half a dozen moves. This requires a high level of concentration, but they can hardly do otherwise.

Remember this could be, and surely is, the game of their lives. And remember that around the board, behind the fences, there are members of the public, and journalists, and cameras, and police, quite a few police. Lots of police, actually. And there's Judit's grandfather, and there are tourists, and Judit's classmates, and one exceptional invitee who I haven't introduced to you because she hasn't come up in our story yet.

But be patient, all will come in time. Patience, I insist, is everything in chess.

While the game goes on, and before I return to Judit, I'd like you now to concentrate on her grandfather. He's wearing a tie as always, though it's very hot, and he's following each and every move. But look at his face... His triangular brow, his wrinkled forehead, his firm lips... His sweaty hands holding the small cross hanging from his neck... And watch how he gulps from time to time. Of course the game is important, but... is that all there is to it? Isn't he suffering quite a lot for someone who is just watching a game?

The answer is yes. Right now, Judit's grandfather is worrying about several things.

I know because the grandfather told his life story to Mr Martigny.

And because in explaining it he also explained his great fear.

And because at the time I was only a few metres away.

Let me tell you: Judit's grandfather and Mr Martigny met a month and a half ago, on a wooden bench in the Parc de Bastions. Judit's grandfather was sitting on his newspaper, watching Judit draw, when someone called his attention.

“Excuse me, is this space free?”

And old man with a stick, a bow tie and a boater hat, so elegant he looked like he'd come out of a painting in a museum, asked his permission, pointing at the other side of the bench.

“Of course, please sit.”

Five minutes later, as tends to happen in these cases, they were both chatting like old friends about the weather, family and the future of Europe.

“Oh, but please excuse me,” Judit's grandfather said, getting up. “I still haven't introduced myself. My name is Antoine Piaget, and that one over there is my granddaughter, Judit.”

“Pleased to meet you, Mr Piaget,” his bench companion responded. “I'm Ferdinand Martigny, and I don't have any grandchildren, but I look after a fair few of these boys over here.”

Noticing the inquisitive look on the grandfather's face, Mr Martigny clarified, “Since I retired two years ago I've been organising youth activities in the parish of St Francis of Sales, on the Rue des Voisins. Are you religious, Mr Piaget?”

The grandfather smiled timidly. “I'm afraid not, Mr Martigny. My daughter and granddaughter are baptised, but that was because of my wife, may she rest in peace. I'm a man of science, not faith.”

“Are they incompatible?”

I'm sure you can readily imagine what happened after that question: every day for two weeks, on the same bench, Judit's grandfather Antoine and his friend Ferdinand debated every possible angle of the matter: God vs Einstein, the cross vs the electron, the tables of the law vs the periodic table, evangelists vs equations, heaven vs the cosmos, physics vs metaphysics... Neither one managed to convince the other, but both of them were so delighted by the civilised discussion they were having that they ended up giving each other presents. Mr Martigny, grateful for these edifying debates, gave Mr Piaget a necklace with a small cross. Judit's grandfather, influenced by his granddaughter, gave Mr Martigny a travel chess set.

“Some call it a game, or a sport,” he pointed out. “But it has its scientific aspects.”

“And faith, it has elements of faith,” Mr Martigny insisted, laughing. “Don't forget one of the pieces is called a bishop. Do you think that's just a coincidence?”

Of course, this question was the beginning of another debate, but I'm not going to tell you about that one.

What I do want to explain, on the other hand, is how a few weeks ago Judit's grandfather arrived at the bench at the usual time with a worried look on his face. While Judit went towards Mr Aliyat, in order to draw him, Mr Martigny took his hat off and said to his friend, "Will you look at that face. Antoine, what's happened?"

I heard his raspy answer from my camouflaged position, just metres away.

"Oh, Ferdinand," he confessed, looking at Judit. "I have a problem."

"With your granddaughter?"

"No, with her father."

And Judit's grandfather told him his secret. First he spoke about his daughter, H  l  ne Piaget, Judit's mother. And he told him that the marriage between H  l  ne and Adolf had been a happy one for several years. Judit, their only daughter, was born, and for a time everything went swimmingly. Adolf was making progress as an illustrator, H  l  ne was working at CERN, there were no signs of the storm that was brewing. But when Judit was four, H  l  ne came to see him.

"She told me, in tears, that Adolf had fallen in love with another woman, a Hungarian painter," the grandfather told Mr Martigny. And that he was going to go and live with her. He said he needed freedom, a bohemian lifestyle, who knows. Codswallop. But in any case he seemed prepared to abandon his family. His daughter."

"And did he?" Mr Martigny asked, alarmed.

"He did, yes. He left and never came back."

"How appalling!" lamented Mr Martigny. "And the little one?"

Judit's grandfather – who, being a widower, had gone to live with his daughter so he could help out – said that at first he was worried about H  l  ne, but she got over it. Judit, however, never accepted it. She asked about her father every day, she cried, she shouted, she bawled...

"I was there for her all the time, I looked after her, I spoiled her," the grandfather explained from the bench, "but all that did was make her more capricious. Where her father was concerned, nothing changed. She asked for him, she begged, she demanded that we find him. And neither her mother nor myself could ever find out how to calm her down. Until I did it."

“Until you did what?” asked Mr Martigny.

“Until I went to Hungary. To find her father.”

Mr Martigny opened his eyes wide, appraising his friend’s gesture.

“I returned with a portrait which I hung in the entrance hall. A lovely portrait of Judit, done from a photo and dedicated to her. That was all I got from Adolf.”

“He didn’t come back?”

“No,” confirmed the grandfather, looking down at the ground. “Judit fell in love with that portrait, of course she did, and that was where her passion for drawing came from. But soon she demanded more of her father’s work, more contact, more news about him. And then came the arguments. And the punishments. And the psychologists.”

“How terrible!” Mr Martigny lamented. “And her father knew and did nothing.”

The grandfather looked at his friend for a good while, and wiped away an invisible tear.

“One day, we opened Judit’s first email account for her,” he continued. “For her to practise, so she could send messages to her friends, that kind of thing. After a month, Judit received an email from Adolf in her inbox. An email in which he said he thought of her a lot in Hungary, that he’d heard she also wanted to draw. Nothing of any importance. But...”

“Yes?”

“Judit was thrilled,” the grandfather sighed. “She was mad with joy. She learnt the message off by heart and recited it to all of us, to me, to H  l  ne, to her friends... Her father, her dear father, the great artist... he hadn’t forgotten her! She took a whole day to reply, but she sent her return email and spent the whole week in seventh heaven.”

The grandfather paused again. Mr Martigny fanned himself with his boater, expectantly.

“A week later, Judit received a new email. And then another, and another, and another, and then one a week over the last three years. Judit hasn’t seen her father again, but they write to each other, and she scans her drawings and tells him things. And so on, every week.”

Just at that moment, as if she knew they were talking about her, Judit came back from the walkway and her grandfather put his arm up to greet her. After returning his greeting, she went back to the board with Mr Aliyat, her grandfather to his conversation with Mr Martigny.

“The problem, Ferdinand, is that Judit is getting bigger – she’s about to turn twelve,” her grandfather added. “And the emails won’t be enough any more. Her greatest wish now is not for her father to write to her, but for him to come, to come and see her after so much time. So she won’t stop asking him, insisting again and again.”

“And what does he say?”

“The emails say he’ll see if he can, but he’s very busy, he doesn’t know...”

“Poor little girl,” Mr Martigny deplored, gripping his stick.

The grandfather nodded and crossed his hands on his chest.

“We’ve already had a thousand arguments on this topic,” he confessed. “With her mother and with myself. And there will be more to come, because her father... her father... He’s not going to come.”

Even more indignant, Mr Martigny shot up like a spring. “But how can he...!” He regained his composure and sat back down. “My my, if I had that Adolf before me right now, I’d tell him a thing or two!”

The grandfather lowered his head and took his friend’s forearm. “Maybe it’s me you should be telling a thing or two, Ferdinand.”

For a moment, Mr Martigny looked quite perplexed.

“Yes, Ferdinand. The emails Judit gets... Those emails that Adolf has been sending her for three years...”

Mr Martigny put his hand to his mouth, guessing what was coming.

“Well, that’s the thing, they’re not from her father,” the grandfather said. “They’re from me.”

## Second note:

### Polgar

The second time Judit played against Mr Aliyat, two days after her debut in the rain, she was defeated in half the time it had taken in the first game: four minutes.

But she still didn't give up.

And I began to like her a bit more.

As she had done with her grandfather, Judit kept practising, mostly with Roger, the red-haired boy. And she watched him play against his father while she did charcoal drawings in her sketchbook. And she got better, better at drawing and better at chess.

The next three games against Mr Aliyat lasted five, six and eleven minutes. The Iranian won every one, of course. But after the last movement of the turban, the master once again took a piece of paper from his pocket and wrote something on it. What's more, this time, as he gave her the note, he pointed at Judit with his little finger and bowed to her.

"What a strange gesture," the grandfather remarked, touching his tie. "What's he written for you today?"

Judit showed him the scrap of paper. On it was written, in capitals: *POLGAR*.

"Maybe it means 'loser', because he thrashes me every time..."

"Don't say that," her grandfather smiled. "I don't think a grandmaster like that would play against you so many times if he found it boring."

Not convinced, Judit tilted her head.

"Anyway, the best thing to do is look it up on the Internet."

No sooner said than done, Judit began to type the six letters from the scrap of paper on her keyboard the moment she got home, without even kissing the portrait this time.

"Not checking your email today?" her grandfather asked.

Judit lowered her eyes by way of a reply. Then she got up, went to look for her notebook and showed him a drawing. It showed a king piece leaving the chess board, a suitcase in his hand. On the opposite corner, a solitary pawn was bidding him farewell with a handkerchief.

"Wow," her grandfather said, gulping. "A bit sad, isn't it?"

“Can’t you see anything new?”

Her grandfather glanced at the drawing again, paying more attention this time. The king, the suitcase, the board, the pawn, the handkerchief... All in charcoal, all very accurately rendered, in black and white.

“Well...”

Suddenly, her grandfather fixed his eyes on the signature. A small signature, at a slight angle, situated in the lower left corner, where Judit always put it. Underlined, as always, and as always with the dot on the ‘i’ in the form of a circle.

Only this time there were two circles. Two ‘i’s.

Her grandfather sat up, looked at his granddaughter and opened the sketchbook from the start. There were her first sketches, her first chess boards, her first portraits. And Roger, his father, the postman and himself, sitting on the bench, half asleep. And there were rooks, knights, bishops, pawns and even the poodle belonging to the lady she had played against after she had begun winning. And, of course, Mr Aliyat.

There were all her drawings from the last few weeks. And on every one, in the bottom left, her signature. With a circle above the ‘i’.

The grandfather went back to the last drawing. To the two ‘i’s.

And he saw that Judit’s surname, her father’s, had been reduced to just an initial.

And she saw another surname in its place.

Hélène’s surname. His surname.

“Judit H. Piaget?”

“Sounds good, right?” said Judit.

“But I, ahem, your father...” her grandfather began, unable to find the words.

“I was thinking of signing like that from now on,” Judit emphasised. “Maybe when my father sees his missing surname, he’ll react and come and visit me.”

Judit’s grandfather looked at her and scratched his head. His face was a poem.

“What’s up?”

“Nothing Judit, nothing.”

“Sure?”

"It's nothing, it's just..." he added. "You're just growing up very quickly, that's all."

Judit grimaced, rolled her eyes and all of a sudden burst out laughing.

"Come on, Granddad, don't be a pain in the neck," she joked, returning to her computer.

"Let's see what Mr Aliyat has written today. P-O-L-G-A-R... There you go!"

Surprised, grandfather and granddaughter both moved closer to the screen, where the search for 'Polgar' had brought up a photograph of a young girl, with a reddish mane, a serious look on her face and a t-shirt with see-through bits on it. There was a chess board and a clock in front of her.

*"Judith Polgar," her grandfather read, "is a Hungarian chess player, perhaps the best female player in history. She possesses the title of International Grand Master. She's an Olympic champion, and the only woman who's managed to get into the world top ten. Her playing style is combative and imaginative, and she never gives up on a game. Thanks to this approach, she's managed to turn many difficult situations back in her favour."*

Judit used the mouse to move the cursor and looked for more photos. In many of them, Polgar was behind a chess board, smiling, surrounded by her trophies. There was a whole series in which she appeared next to the Russian champion Kasparov; she had been the first ever woman to beat him. In others she was with her sisters Susan and Sofia, also famous players.

"So there's a world chess champion who's a woman?"

Her grandfather pointed at his granddaughter with his little finger, imitating Mr Aliyat in the park.

"And she's called Judith, just like you!"

Judit opened her mouth and closed it again, without saying anything.

"You don't think it's a coincidence, do you?" her grandfather insisted. "Mr Aliyat never moves a piece without first calculating the move. He's saying you're champion material!"

"Yeah, sure..." Judit countered timidly. "Come on, let's see what else it says."

To tell the truth, it said lots of things. You can check for yourself – there are pages and pages on the Internet dedicated to Polgar, and to her family, who decided to educate their daughters in the game using their own method. And to their achievements, especially Judith's. What

particularly struck her namesake in Geneva was that Polgar had been proclaimed Grand Master at the age of fifteen, at the time the youngest ever to achieve the title.

“Fifteen?” she asked. “You can be a Grand Master at fifteen?”

“Well, remember that her father dedicated himself to teaching her from a young age and...”

Before he finished the sentence, her grandfather realised he’d put his foot in it. Mentioning Lazslo Polgar, a father totally dedicated to ensuring his daughters were the best, was not a wise move in that fatherless household.

“Right, Adolf is not Lazslo,” Judit commented, not attaching any importance to the subject, “but if the Polgars are from Hungary, like him, then just from being in the same place, something might rub off...”

Judit’s grandfather observed her for a good while. He had not failed to notice that Judit had referred to her father by his first name for the first time. And that was after having deleted his surname from her drawings. They were only two gestures, yes, but they were important ones.

“What’s up this time?” Judit asked, referring to her grandfather’s silence.

“I’ve already told you,” her grandfather commented, sighing and ruffling his hair. “I don’t know how, but you’re growing up very fast.”

**Monday**

“And here we are, still here, live for the 12.45 news on RTS info. Behind us, you can see Judit, the girl who has, this summer, put the Swiss authorities into check. As always, the girl is playing chess in this part of Les Tilleuls with a seventy-year-old Iranian citizen who just last week...”

Okay, okay. Stop listening to that blasted TV reporter.

Don't look at her, don't pay attention to her, take no notice.

At least today. Please.

I know she's there, next to Judit, who's being shown on the news, and I know that that's calling your attention, but it's not important. It just seems like it is.

Besides, if you keep listening to the reporter, you'll hear certain things I'd like to explain to you first. The reporters are only doing their jobs – one can't object – but they still don't even know half the story.

For example, they don't know that that group over there, to the right of the cameras, the children drawing everything, is Mr Bourdin's class. You remember, right? He's Judit's teacher at the academy, and he's brought his pupils along to this small part of Les Tilleuls to support their classmate. And to make sure she can participate, next Saturday, in her much-talked about Artistic Portrait Competition.

Speaking of which, her participation in said competition is up in the air right now, even though Judit has got through every phase and has been selected as a finalist.

The reporters also don't know, despite continually interviewing and questioning her, why a chess player of Judit Polgar's level has come to Geneva to watch this strange game between a Swiss girl and an Iranian master. Look at her there, next to H  l  ne, touching her long hair with a serious look on her face. Do you see? Can you see that it really is the same one you saw on the Internet, just a bit older? Yes, that's is the outstanding Polgar, the champion of champions. And she's here. Right here, so close I could touch her. I already told you that there was a famous guest.

There's a lot they don't know, that's for sure, and the reporters are paying no attention whatsoever to that gentleman over there looking up to the sky, up at the aeroplanes flying above

our heads (it's a bit of a nuisance that the Parc des Bastions, beautiful as it is, is right next to an airport). But not you. You recognised this elegant man with his straw hat, his stick and his bow tie: it's Mr Martigny, Ferdinand, Judit's grandfather's friend.

Goodness, you already know more than the reporters.

But don't be too sure, because you might see many things and yet the same thing would still happen to you: you wouldn't be able to find the real headline.

Even though you might well see Roger and his father, close to Hélène.

And Polgar's children, who are also with her.

And even those dark boys I'll show you now, one with a white shirt and a freckle, around fifteen years old, the other one Judit's age, with dark, deep, black eyes... You might even notice the game, and not without good reason, because Judit has just moved her queen to defend herself from a new attack. The match is really hotting up, and Mr Aliyat has sacrificed a piece which will seemingly give Judit the advantage. But, I insist, no. The important thing today has nothing to do with this.

What's important, what's newsworthy, is not what is here, but what's missing.

That's what chess is all about, you know? At least with good players. It's about reading between the lines, going beyond this moment, anticipating future moves.

The magic of chess is discovering the invisible.

And today you can all find what cannot be seen, what is absent, what's missing.

Got it?

Yes, exactly, a piece is missing from this scene, a key figure.

Antoine is missing, Judit's grandfather.

He's not here. Anywhere.

He's spent every day behind the fence, he's accompanied Judit since her first game in spring, he's been watching her play and draw for months. Without leaving her side.

He was here yesterday, suffering. Sweating, but there.

And now, on such an important day, in the decisive week, he's disappeared.

Do you want to know where he is? Because I can tell you, if you can keep a secret.

Yes? You do?

Okay, I trust you. But be discreet. It's a delicate matter.

Because Judit's grandfather is having a clandestine meeting.

And the meeting is with Adolf, his son-in-law.

Judit's father.

### Third note:

#### Fahim

Over the course of an entire month, from the beginning of June to the beginning of May, Judit played against Mr Aliyat twenty times. That is to say, she lost against him twenty times.

And that's how I found out she wasn't so bad after all.

Because she kept playing. She never admitted defeat.

Like a real champion.

I'm sure the notes helped. Because Mr Aliyat kept giving her notes, bits of paper with strange words written on them, which piqued her curiosity. The notes were written by hand on scraps which, Judit found out, had been torn from the back of some advertising leaflet.

On the fourth note, for example, he wrote *Linares*. And after investigating, Judit and her grandfather found out that there was a small city in Spain which was considered to be "the Wimbledon of chess" between 1978 and 2009, because some of the most prestigious tournaments in the game's history had taken place there. Among its champions, in fact, were world legends such as Anatoly Karpov, Boris Spassky, Viswanathan Anand, Vladimir Kramnik and Gary Kasparov, who paid tribute to the Andalusian town by choosing it as the location from which he announced his retirement in 2005.

"Why has Mr Aliyat written 'Linares' for me?" Judit asked, sitting in front of the computer. "Did he once play in that city?"

"It could be, yes," her grandfather reasoned. "But remember that Linares, and the whole south of Spain, spent the middle ages under Arab rule, and that was how chess spread. In Europe we're going through a difficult time in our relationship with the Arab world, and so... Well, maybe Mr Aliyat wants to remind us that it was them who taught us how to play. The Arabs also gave us our numbers, did you know that?"

The expression on Judit's face showed that she didn't quite get it, but she awaited the next clue. But the following note didn't clear anything up either.

"'Carroll'? Sounds like an English name..."

When they looked into “Carroll” and ‘Chess’ on the Internet, Judit and her grandfather delved into *Through the Looking-Glass*, the follow-up to Lewis Carroll’s famous novel *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. As far as they could make out, the British writer conceived of the book as a great chess game, in which the girl protagonist Alice would pass from square to square, having innumerable adventures until her coronation in the second to last chapter. And all within a dream in which kings, queens, knights and other pieces lived alongside other creatures such as Humpty Dumpty, the Jabberwocky and the twins Tweedledum and Tweedledee.

“Look up Tenniel’s illustrations for Carroll’s books,” her grandfather suggested, really enjoying this one of Mr Aliyat’s clues. “You’ll love them, and we can use them to show your mother that chess is helping you with drawing.”

It was hardly necessary – for some days Judit inundated her sketchbooks (she had several at this stage) with drawings in the style of John Tenniel, for which she swapped charcoals for more precise pencils. As a consequence, as well as receiving renewed praise from Mr Bourdin, the preliminary rounds of the Artistic Portrait Championship were quick and painless. Judit saw herself catapulted, in a single leap, into the final.

But it wasn’t so easy, as you know. Nor was Mr Aliyat’s next note.

“‘Carlsen’,” read Judit a few days later. “Do you know what that is, Granddad?”

“No idea.”

Magnus Carlsen turned out to be the latest big thing in chess.

He was a young Norwegian, an unbeatable champion, the best chess player of the twenty-first century.

And to top it off he looked quite handsome, as far as Judit could see.

“Don’t you think, Granddad?”

“Ahem, yes, I... of course, of course. Very handsome. I suppose.”

Other notes were to come, with words like “Zugzwang”, “Smothered Mate”, “Windmill” and “Fischer” written on them, but I imagine you won’t be needing the full list quite yet. What you do need to know is that there was a special, distinctive note that Mr Aliyat gave Judit in the middle of June. That is, a month ago. For the note itself, its content and everything that went down, for that, I

need to set the scene for you. At the end of the day, we're still here in Les Tilleuls, at this game which is being watched by half the country; it's got quite a lot to do with that.

That day, Judit was playing Mr Aliyat, just like now, but in the Parc des Bastions. For the first time, the master wasn't so certain as to how to take on his rival. Judit was still making mistakes, and her game was too focused on the short-term, but her attacks were so daring that they seemed to genuinely disconcert the Iranian. In fact, some curious newcomers had gathered around the board, joining Mr Aliyat's regular audience. Judit was starting to get her own fans.

A few metres away, next to the girl's sketchbook, Ferdinand Martigny was having a conversation on his favourite bench with someone he'd just met. And no, it wasn't Judit's grandfather.

"Yes, my father's ill, a cold," H  l  ne, Judit's mother, explained, her patterned jacket seeming to frolic with the blossoming flowerbeds. "Nothing serious, but he needs to stay in bed. He insisted I tell you and apologise on his behalf... He speaks very well of you, you know?"

"Say hello to Antoine from me, please, I hope he gets better," Mr Martigny said. "Although, if it means you coming in his place, tell him he can stay in bed for a few more days."

H  l  ne, who had introduced herself as Mrs Piaget, took a few moments to understand that he was paying her a compliment. And she took a few more seconds to start blushing.

"What silly things you say..." she protested. "Ah, look, Judit's finished. Has she won?"

"Well, that would be news," Mr Martigny admitted. "Mr Aliyat never loses."

"Oh no? That's not very graceful!"

Without awaiting a reply, H  l  ne took a sombre look at the Iranian.

"He seems like a good man. Although of course, dressed like that, with that turban..."

Mr Martigny said nothing, but frowned a little.

"Anyway, I hope that all this doesn't affect Judit's drawing," H  l  ne continued, glancing at the sketchbook. "It's very important for her."

As if she'd heard her mother, Judit bounded over to the bench. She'd had her hair cut and was wearing it messy, with a lack of care that seemed completely intentional.

“Mum, mum, Roger’s going to play his first game against Mr Aliyat!” Excited, Judit pointed at the board, where the red-haired boy, facing the Iranian, was moving his first pawn. “Can we stay a little longer?”

Mrs Piaget looked at her watch. “The thing is, it’s getting late…”

“Please, please!” Judit insisted, trying to butter her mother up; then she called attention to her sketchbook. “I’ve never drawn Roger and Mr Aliyat, it’ll be a good exercise…”

“Don’t worry.” Mr Martigny stepped in, smiling. “Roger is learning more and more each day, like your daughter, but this match won’t last more than a quarter of an hour.”

The moment H el ene begun sighing, Judit read her expression and ran off. Before sitting down, with her legs crossed as always, she’d already started sketching the first lines in her book.

“Throwing herself on the ground without a thought,” H el ene lamented, pushing her glasses up. “No wonder her trousers always end up like that.”

Mr Martigny smiled. A few seconds later, he took his straw hat off, placed it on his knees, and commented, “You know, Mrs Piaget, I work with children at Saint Francis of Sales…”

“Yes my father said something about that.”

“I wouldn’t want to get involved when my help hasn’t been requested, but the truth is that I am familiar with cases like Judit’s. Children of single mothers, or separated fathers.”

H el ene shuffled nervously, but Mr Martigny raised his hands up. “Don’t worry, I am religious, but I don’t like giving sermons,” he joked. “The only thing I wanted to say is that you and your father are doing a great job with Judit.”

“Wow, thank you. It’s not easy.”

“I appreciate that,” Mr Martigny said. “But I’d like to say something more, if you’ll allow me.”

Mrs Piaget nodded, stroking her curls.

“I want to make it clear that in just over a month I’ve witnessed a very positive change in Judit. She gets angry less, thinks more, her movements are softer… Have you noticed?”

“Hmm… yes, it’s possible.”

“The thing is, I must admit that a good part of this change has something to do with chess,” Mr Martigny added. “And with Mr Aliyat.”

“Where will it stop?”

“Don’t take it away from her...” the old man warned, looking her straight in the eye. “Tell her to combine it with drawing, with her studies, with whatever you want, but don’t take chess away from her. I can tell you from experience, there’s nothing in this world more terrible than punishing a child for their vocation. And if she’s got it from Mr Aliyat, you should thank him.”

As Mr Martigny’s appeal was coming to an end, Judit return to the bench. In the distance, behind the board, Roger and Mr Aliyat were walking in opposite directions.

“It’s over already? So soon?”

“Yeah, what a thrashing.” Judit smiled, bringing a hand to her mouth. “Look at the drawing.”

In the sketchbook, an Aliyat three times the size of Roger was moving some flaming figures which were mercilessly laying waste to those on the opposing side.

“Wow, very expressive. But to tell the truth, it’s not my style.”

Judit looked at her mother and at Mr Martigny, like she was weighing up the opportunity to change the subject. Then she remembered something, put one hand in her pocket and took a piece of paper out.

“The master has given me another note.”

“‘Fahim’,” Mr Martigny read, coming closer to the scrap of paper. “Sounds like an Arabic name maybe, I don’t know. You’ll have to look it up.”

“That won’t be necessary, I know what it means!” the woman exclaimed, laughing.

Surprised, Judit and Mr Martigny watched Mrs Piaget’s hulking form shake.

“It’s just a coincidence.” H  l  ne laughed again, rummaging around in her pocket.

A few seconds later, to her daughter’s obvious surprise, H  l  ne pulled out a diary. Inside it, sticking out the top, could be seen a page from a newspaper.

“I cut it from the newspaper last weekend – I thought you or your grandfather might find it interesting,” H  l  ne explained, unfolding the paper. “And then, as you can see, I forgot.”

Beneath the headline “KING OF BENGAL” was an article showing a photo of a boy who was older than Judit, dark, with a freckle on his cheek and dressed in a white shirt. The article’s subtitle was as follows: *The incredible story of Fahim, the refugee saved by chess*. Judit’s mother paused and read the opening:

*“At the age of eight he fled from his country, Bangladesh. At ten, he was sleeping on the streets. And before his twelfth birthday, he’d been proclaimed French chess champion. His name is Fahim Mohammad, and his passion for the chess board meant that, after several campaigns of solidarity, the French authorities regularised his father’s situation. The man, Nura, had to leave his country for political reasons, but once he had become a refugee he fought with all his might for his son’s future. Now a book, a film and a play retell the story of the boy, his father and the coach who discovered Fahim and encouraged him to win the game of his destiny.”*

After finishing the paragraph, H el ene folded the cutting and gave it to her daughter.

“You can read the rest at home, with your granddad.” She gestured in his direction. “It’s hard, because Fahim and his father had to flee via Calcutta, Delhi, Budapest and Rome before arriving in Paris. And once there, they suffered a lot, because besides being on the street and not having papers, they depended on the boy winning for them to be able to eat.”

Judit took the article and placed it carefully between the pages of her sketchbook. Then she bit her lip and looked at Mr Martigny.

“And do you think Mr Aliyat...? Do you think he’s also a...?”

Although Judit didn’t finish the question, Mr Martigny began answering it. “Well, if he’s a foreigner, doesn’t speak the language and spends working days in the park...”

“What are you insinuating?” asked H el ene.

“Yes, Judit,” Mr Martigny concluded, looking serious. “If Mr Aliyat has given you that note about Fahim, it’s possible he has found himself in a similar situation.”

Judit’s mother covered her mouth with her fingers, although she removed them straight away.

“Then Mr Aliyat is an illegal immigrant?” she said. “One of those people... with no papers?”

“Now, I don’t want to jump to any conclusions,” Mr Martigny clarified, alarmed by the tone of the question. “For now it’s merely an assumption.”

Judit turned back towards the board, now deserted, and then fixed her green eyes on her mother. “Well, if that’s true, what a pickle, because Mr Aliyat is an old man and he doesn’t have a father to fight for him, like Fahim’s father. Or like Roger’s or Judit Polgar’s...”

Hélène scrunched her face, recognising Judit's argument. Mr Martigny, in his turn, crossed his fingers. And Judit, also quiet now, gathered her things and began to walk off with her head bowed. Before she got to the path, however, she said something that still rings in my ears:

"If I had my father here, I could ask him to help."

For a long minute, until Judit had left the Parc des Bastions, Hélène trembled under Mr Martigny's arm.

She was crying her eyes out.

**Tuesday**

Today, here in the centre of Les Tilleuls, there have been no checks on the chessboard.

In fact, there have been very few movements at all, because the authorities have decided to suspend the match after barely ten minutes of play.

The reason for this is that the two demonstrations ended, breaking out into pitched battles.

With the police, the journalist and the TV crews, with dozens of children, with everyone close by. The people in the first demonstration, the official one, were attempting to march to the airport holding banners in support of Mr Aliyat. It's been a great comfort to see people of all races and backgrounds pleading with the government, parliament and even the UN to appreciate the singularity of this case. Maybe it's because I'm not white myself, but I've found it quite moving.

Other Swiss people, more purist in outlook, do not want change and will not hear of any exceptions.

And they say that the law is the law, and that there cannot be any meddling in it.

And they ask, they desire, they demand that Mr Aliyat's trial follow its course.

And they do so without knowing any of the details, without wanting to know more.

And they're making lots of noise, too much noise.

It all starts like any other day, with Judit taking her turn as soon as Mr Aliyat gets through the fences. Her first move, her opening one, throws off friends and strangers alike: she's moved her castle to a square that no one would have predicted, putting it at risk. A momentary lapse in concentration? A new strategy? A sacrifice? The first "oh"s and "ah"s are heard from behind the fences, and the reporters take advantage of the moment to make their live commentaries. I, on the other hand, decide to fix my attention on three people.

The first is Mr Aliyat himself, who despite all the commotion never loses his concentration. Having stroked his moustache and balanced on the tips of his shoes, he's begun to think. That's all. His attention is all-encompassing; you can almost see the cogs in his brain making calculations beneath his turban. It sounds unbelievable that he can stay focused, with all that's at stake. But that's what champions are like. If you feel like it, have a read of *Chess Story* by Stefan Zweig (yes,

he also lived in Switzerland, although he was Austrian), and you'll understand how a chess player can do something like this.

The second person I turn to is Judit's grandfather, Antoine, who has returned to his spot by the fence after yesterday's absence. He is still, however, very preoccupied. Pale and nervous, continually adjusting the knot on his tie, his eyes are darting around like he's looking for someone in the crowd. His agitation is so noticeable that even H  l  ne has asked him if he's okay.

But Judit's grandfather lies. "Don't mind me," he says. "I'm just watching the protest."

A few metres further to the right, sure enough, the pro-Aliyat demonstrators are beginning to organise themselves among the banners. Although they are carrying loudspeakers, whistles and vuvuzelas, their intention is, as they had agreed, not to use them until they leave Les Tilleuls. The Swiss Chess Federation, one of the march's organisers, has made this request: above all else, a game is taking place here. And no matter what's happening, silence must be observed during a game of chess. That is sacred.

Trying to get away from the reporters, who are trying their best to breach that silence, the arch-champion Judit Polgar is trying to deal with the press. Polgar, the third person I wanted to find, has also got involved in the campaign in Mr Aliyat's report, in spite of the sensationalist newspapers, so thrilled at having brought together a Jewish chess player, a Christian girl and a Muslim immigrant in the story of the summer. I warned you yesterday: sometimes even telling the truth ends up distorting it.

"Above all, Mr Aliyat is a great chess player, a champion!" Polgar is insisting before the microphones. "In Iran, they have tried to ban chess more than once. And now here, in our own continent..."

But Polgar isn't able to finish her statement. In the background, on the main road, insults have begun being heard, and shouts, and someone has come running to warn the police.

"The far right!" a girl with blue dyed hair warns. "They're coming to break up the game, we've just clashed with them!"

By "us", of course, the blue-haired girl is referring to the pro-Aliyat demonstrators, who have already started filing off towards the airport.

Suddenly, everyone, starting with the authorities, has rushed towards the gates. The police have unsuccessfully attempted to disperse both demonstrations, and each individual has taken their own decision: some are arguing loudly; others, more aggressive, have resorted to using their fists; and the majority, from tourists to family members, from the reporters who don't have cameras to Mr Bourdin's drawing students, are trying to find an exit, or are taking cover.

I, for a change, have stayed quiet. Rooted to the ground, like a fencepost.

In the midst of this chaos, several agents have suddenly surrounded the board. That's when, thanks to the fact that I'm still paralysed, I notice.

Judit and Mr Aliyat are still playing, deep in concentration. It's like looking at a still pool beneath a waterfall. Like an oasis in the desert. Like a flower unharmed by the fire that surrounds it.

Around the squares, things are becoming more and more confused. People shrieking, making dashes, chasing each other, flying objects, banners on the ground, cars moving, mothers and children trying to escape. A police cordon is protecting H  l  ne, Judit's grandfather and Judit Polgar. And another cordon, by my side, has cut off the players, who are still by the board which, in imitation of the ones in the Parc des Bastions, has been placed on the ground. Inside the cordon, Judit and Mr Aliyat look like two fish in an aquarium.

If you studied them properly, then you'd discover that neither one of them is completely unaware of the commotion. They couldn't possibly be, with so much noise and movement around them. And yet, silently, perhaps with a movement or a glance, they seem to have taken the decision to continue with the match. To impose calm, to feign normality at whatever cost.

Mr Aliyat, his hand on his goatee, is analysing Judit's movement of her tower. Beneath his fingers, however, you can see he is clenching his teeth together, obliging him not to raise his eyes. One of his fingers is also shaking, at intervals. His little finger.

On her part, Judit is trembling like a leaf. Without moving, without turning round, ignoring the uproar, but, perfectly understandably, scared.

Anyone who had paid attention would have seen that, but it wasn't everything.

When the first shaved-headed demonstrator come too close, the police put their endgame into action. A group of three agents lead Mr Aliyat inside the area, behind the fences, and officially suspend the match. At the same time, two other agents take Judit and bring her to her family.

That's when the three of them pass before me.

And that's when I see Judit's green eyes. Holding fast, determined, undefeated.

I'll say it loud and clear, in case anyone was still in doubt: Judit is not going to give up.

Not ever. She's a champion. And she's made her move.

Now it's their turn to play.