

The Pawn's Prelude

Kat Aguirre

"Aaandd one, two, three..." Our instructor waved his hands, conducting the choir as though he could touch the quarter and eighth notes with his bare fingertips. I didn't like him. I didn't like how he treated us like babies; how he didn't push us to improve. There was no passion. I mean, we were in second grade, but still.

★ ★ ★

Breathe in, breathe out. We walked up the stage, right in the center. Parents crowded in front of their little ones, eager to catch every second on their phones. Then *they* started singing. And by '*they*', I mean the other kids I was with. The stage lights shone so bright it practically blinded me, and the flashes from the cameras didn't help either. It felt like countless pairs of eyes pierced right through me, like they knew I was unprepared. So, I parted my lips, mouthing the lyrics sans sound. Music filled the air, but mine was a silent act—a secret between the stage and me.

In a blink of an eye, it was all over. *It's fine*, I thought; *I can just get away with it by being adorable like all kids do.* I went over to my mother, thinking she didn't know, but *boy*, was I wrong. "You looked like a fish back there. Why weren't you singing?" She asked incredulously. I could feel heat rush to my face, and I wanted nothing but the ground to swallow me whole. From that day on, I vowed never to sing again, out of spite for my mother. I left that R.E.C. class without regret.




The following year, I enrolled in a new R.E.C. class, switching to Piano, where I spent five consecutive years honing my talents. I was one of Ms. Johnson's best students, and she was one of my best teachers. Her strict demeanor held no room for unprepared students, but she was passionate about music. She constantly challenged us to do better, to become the best pianists we could be. In other words, she cared.

Our R.E.C. classes would be hours of intense practice, and she'd make it a habit to watch each of us play the assigned pieces for the week, one by one. She'd rhythmically beat the side of her poor old keyboard over and over again until everyone followed a singular tempo, playing their parts to perfection.

But there would be days when one or two of us couldn't follow. They'd take a moment to compose themselves, cautiously bringing their hands up to their pianos, as though one wrong move would've scalded them. Then they'd start playing, and it wouldn't be long before their hands lost momentum, fingers tripping one before the other, before music no longer filled the room—only the silent, knowing glances passed around the students and the ghost of irregular, dissonant chords.

Ms. Johnson would demand that they stay at the back of the room and rehearse until they got it right. Not once has anyone completed their practice with the meager two hours of class—doing so would've defied the laws of physics. It was humiliating enough that raw tears touched the cold, hard floor before the unfortunate students could stop it. Except me. I read my pieces, studied them, practiced them till I could feel the dull ache in my fingers, knew how to sight read, do arpeggios, the scales, *everything*. I did my job diligently, so when the time came, I'd be ready for whatever she threw my way. And for



a long time, I succeeded. Everybody knew that.



We lined up at the side of the room, practicing a run-through of the talent fest. Padding to our spots, we bowed before taking a seat on the lime-colored chair. I took a moment to straighten up.

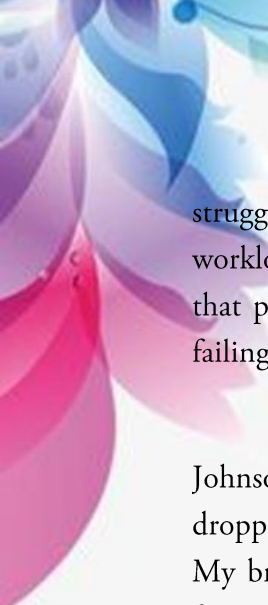
"1, 2, 3..." I count and we start uncoordinated.

"Make your voice louder, Kat. You're the class president. They have to know when to start playing," Ms. Johnson said, and I cleared my throat before counting again, making myself louder this time. We kept rehearsing until the blues in the sky became lavender, until the room became the stage, until the chatter of students became hushed prayers wishing for luck.

We gave ourselves a pat on the back, and it felt as though a weight was lifted off my shoulders. It was finally done. Months and months of practice compressed to two minutes of performance. It was rewarding, in a way. If I could've bottled the melodies we made and gotten drunk on them, I would've. That was back then. Now, it was my poison of choice, leaving a bitter taste on my tongue.




I watched as I slowly felt my footsteps grow heavier by the second, as my heart rate went miles per minute to the point where I thought I had a panic attack simply by trekking to the piano room. I had just graduated grade school, bagging three medals in academics and leadership, and I was on top of the world. But I should've been more careful; it's easy to fall from a high place. I



struggled to transition from one department to another; the change in workload insufferable, as though I was swatting a bunch of bothersome flies that permanently crowded me. I started plummeting in a downward spiral, failing to practice one piece after the other.

“I’ll listen to all of you play it one by one. We’ll start with Kat.” Ms. Johnson turned to me, and I felt like I got doused in iced water. My heart dropped to my stomach, burning itself in the acid and spreading it like wildfire. My brows furrowed in concentration, straining to catch the notes with my fingers. And then it slipped away from my grasp until I could no longer read the piece. All I saw were blank lines. My classmates exchanged looks, watching me lose a game of hide and seek with the notes. Paranoia set in. *What key was it in? A Minor? C Major? Is this A or B flat?* Unanswered questions violently swirled through my head, and the familiar silence visited the room once more, shame and humiliation whispering words of failure in my ears. I stopped before I could make it worse. Now I was the one behind the room, catching up with the others.

“How many times do I have to knock some sense into you all for you to *practice your pieces?*” Ms. Johnson berated, voice echoing throughout the room. I took comfort in the fact that I wasn’t the only one behind. As expected, we didn’t finish practicing the piece. The whole session flew by, and it was all over. “Class dismissed. Kat, stay. I’ll talk to you,” Ms. Johnson said with a firm tone, and I watched as my peers left the room, saying their farewells while I was bound to stay, legs stuck to the ground. I was already sifting through countless possibilities of what she’d tell me, dreading every outcome nonetheless. The lump in my throat only got bigger, the sight of her disappointment driving a stake through my chest.



“C’mere, sit,” Ms. Johnson gestures to the chair, and I obediently follow, avoiding eye contact by keeping my gaze on the sad beige floor. After a moment, she breaks the silence.

“What happened to you?”

That was all I needed to break down. Tears broke free from their constraints, streaming down my cheeks before making a dark patch on my pants. I used the sleeves of my jacket to keep wiping my nose as an excuse to cover my face. I couldn’t look at her nor show myself to her. I couldn’t even hear her; it was coming in one ear and out the other, too overwhelmed to process her words. I was drowning in tears, in shame, in *everything*. All I did was agree to whatever she said before I found myself hobbling back to my bus, sniffles and soft sighs trailing behind. That was my worst year during my time as a pianist, and it was my last.


★ ★ ★

I was walking around the mall with my dad, a little eight-year-old me brimming with curiosity, when something in the corner of my eye caught my attention. It was a music shop, with various instruments hung on display. The songs I heard made my tiny legs walk toward it like bees to nectar. Dad seemed to notice, so he turned to speak.

"What is it?"

"Nothing."

It was a piano. I didn't think we could afford it at the time, nor would he agree to buy it, so I ripped my gaze off the glass and walked right past it. The next thing I knew, the same piano was nestled snugly in our living room.



I turn to look at my father in disbelief.

"What's this?"

"A piano." He shrugged nonchalantly.

"But I don't know how to play."

"Then learn to."

Sometimes I wonder what my life would be like if I had never seen the piano on display. *Would I have chosen another class? Maybe another R.E.C. center? Would I have been just as good, or would I have been better?* I guess I'll never know.



"Merry Christmas!" My mother chirped, pushing a giant rectangular cardboard box into the living room. It was half as tall as her, the top of the box reaching just past her hips.

I already knew what it was. Even so, I still asked.

"What's this?"

"A gift from your dad," she replied.

It was a piano. He bought another to replace the old one, which was tainted yellow with age and had several white keys dislodged from constant use. It looked pretty.

But I didn't want to play anymore.



The pandemic hit, and I left school during the lockdown. Whenever I left my room, I'd avoid glancing at the brand-new piano, collecting dust as it rotted away. It never felt the same. I missed the way my fingers glided swiftly as I played, the way we'd rehearse the same thing for hours on end, the claps and cheers of the audience as I bowed with my classmates—all of it.

I took pride in the fact that I was Ms. Johnson's most loyal student, having stayed for five years when no one else did. But now I know I didn't love piano. Not anymore.

I was ready to let go.



"Alright. *Taegeuk* one, *sijak*," Coach Jose said loudly, and I immediately began doing the *poomsae* form, landing a series of low blocks and middle punches.

I transferred back to my old school for senior high, and I decided to try something new, switching from Piano to Taekwondo. It's a stark contrast, but I've grown a lot since the pandemic. I was no longer the goody two shoes; the little miss perfect. The old me was dead; I buried her myself.

Once again, I found myself dissatisfied with my new instructor. Coach Jose only did the bare minimum. He'd make us practice the same things over and over again. He often canceled training or asked his colleague to substitute, and then complained about having insufficient time. He wasn't dedicated to training me or my classmates. It felt like being stuck in quicksand, with each



movement sinking me deeper into stagnation. I couldn't make progress, and I hated it. I wasn't thriving at all.

"*Baro*." I brought my fists up to my solar plexus and then down my hips, signaling the end of my form.

★ ★ ★

The sign-ups for Intramurals finally opened, and I immediately went to the board where the papers were posted. I was a little bummed to see Taekwondo excluded, but I scribbled my name in there anyway, right under the word '*Chess*'.

I already had experience in that sport during my last Intramurals as a neophyte, so I wasn't necessarily veering too far away from my comfort zone. I knew I could guarantee a spot on the chess team considering our history from when we first started. Now, all I had to do was practice playing.

Our co-captain was adamant that we play against each other in a round-robin style for her to gauge our skills and formulate a strategy for board placement. Usually, there'd be six players and six boards. Board One, Two, and Six often housed the strongest players, usually the captains and co-captains of each team, while Board Three, Four, and Five often held what we liked to call the '*wild cards*'. It was a polite term to refer to the weaker players. Knowing the status quo, teams would sometimes arrange their placements to make it so that their strongest players would be placed somewhere in the middle, like Board Three, to guarantee a win, knowing that the middle boards were a weak spot. I won a couple of matches against my teammates, placing me in Board Two.




It was finally the first day of the chess tournament. I had slept a full eight hours the night prior to ensure I'd be in my best condition. We had just gone from the Athlete's Parade, and, to be brutally frank, the lack of time to practice our positions caused us to completely butcher our part. It wasn't the end of the world, though.

It was just the beginning.

We headed straight to Mere Maria Hall, where our tournaments would be held. Our first match started at nine. I opened the door, and a gush of cold wind hit my face. It was unbearably freezing inside, as though we were packaged meat locked in a walk-in refrigerator. Other teams had already set up camp in their corners of the room, bringing their blankets and stuffed toys, making themselves comfortable before the incoming match. We sat next to the seniors when I felt the tension in the air, increasing with every tick of the chess clock. It was as though everyone wore masks, acting a certain way to prevent others from knowing their strategies and finding a weakness in them. It thrilled me to partake in that little game of ours.

I drowned myself in mac n' cheese out of sheer anxiety. The coaches arrived. They'll be facilitating our games for the two whole days of the tournament. One was in his late twenties or early thirties; the other was a much older man, most likely a senior citizen, with how the wrinkles and crow's feet adorned his face. It reminded me of Master Oogway and Shifu from Kung Fu Panda. They were both laid-back and reserved, but the way they spoke told tales of experience. The younger man steps into the middle of the room.

"Everyone," he called out, "we will only be having five boards instead



of six, so adjust accordingly. Thank you.” And then he walked back to the table meant for both coaches. I turned to our co-captain.

“What was that?”

“One of the teams only has five members, I think.”

“Ah, I see.”

The younger man announced once more. “We’ll be starting in a few minutes.” I felt adrenaline coursing through my veins, my body igniting with anticipation. I had so much energy that I could run laps around the school. Instead, I ate more of the mac n’ cheese, hoping I could swallow the anxiety down with it.

And then they called us in for our first match.

Everyone collectively groaned in exasperation, unwilling to face off against their respective opponents, but it had to happen. We huddled together as a team, saying our prayers and wishing each other luck.


“If you can’t win, give them a hard time,” our co-captain reminded us.

I approached my table and sat with my opponent. I was pretty confident until I heard her say one word: *Coach*.

Then it dawned on me. He was her coach. She was in Chess Varsity.

I wasn’t.

It didn’t take long before I found out she was also the team captain for their batch. All the blood drained out of my body, but if there’s one thing I



can be good at, it's keeping a straight face. I hid my look of surprise and made small talk to size her up, much to my dislike.

“Are you in varsity?”

“Yes.” She nodded.

“How long?”

“Five years.” My heart stopped.

She grinned, and it felt like I was some piece of meat—something she could prey on.


“Get ready,” the coach announced, shaking me out of my thoughts. “Shake hands and start your clocks.”

It was all over before it even began. Still, I didn't go down without putting up a good fight. She was able to corner and checkmate me with her queen and bishops, but I at least tried to force a trade of queens with her twice. I accepted my fate with open arms.

Another match ensued right after the previous one, and this time we were against the freshmen. I've heard the batch had a pretty bad record of winning in chess, but I kept my guard up, refusing to underestimate them. I was against a timid-looking girl, and she seldom made eye contact with me. It gave me some semblance of hope. Once again, I sized her up, making small talk.

“How long have you been playing chess?”

“About a year,” she replied, voice almost a whisper, “how about you?”



“I’ve been playing since I was seven, but it was an on-and-off thing,” I replied, not giving away too much. “Good luck.” I smiled through my face mask.

“You too.”

I messed up. We were neck-to-neck, checking each other’s kings and making the same amount of illegals, but my pride got the best of me. I moved my king to a side where she was able to trap and checkmate me with her queen. I felt like an *idiot*. *Why didn’t I see that coming?* I internally screamed in my head, only looking up to notice that spectators had been crowding around us the whole time.

They saw me *lose*.

I practically limped over to my teammates, who patted me on the back with a sad smile. The familiar lump on my throat appeared again before I shoved it back down with a gulp, simultaneously blinking back tears.

“Are you okay? You look like you’re gonna cry,” my teammate said. I quickly shook my head. We huddled again, whispering words of comfort to the ones who had lost.

★ ★ ★

We ate lunch before going back to the hall again, ready for the second onslaught of matches.

We were against the sophomores now. Usually, their batch performs exceedingly well, together with the seniors. I suppose it’s because both batches will have to graduate soon, so they’re putting their all into it. I never knew how

much of a powerhouse they were until we went against them.


My opponent was a much taller, more talkative person than the previous one. I greeted her and asked the usual questions, finding out she was also in varsity. This time, I opened up a bit more, cracking jokes here and there. She seemed like a fun person to talk to.

Then we started the clock.

We pretty much had the same opening. Our pieces were in good positions, gearing towards development. And then we found ourselves staring a hole through the left half of the chessboard, where most of the tension accumulated. There were countless forks and set-up baits and pieces on the defense, all of them at a standstill, awaiting our next moves. Soon, we'd be capturing them left and right, and it felt as though a coil was slowly tightening, waiting to snap like a ticking time bomb.

I glanced at our clock. I had only two minutes left. I avoided moving anything from the left side of the board and focused on the right and center, forming a plan on the spot to checkmate her king, only to come up with nothing. Her pieces were fiercely defending each other, forming a barricade between my pieces and hers. My mind went blank, unsure what to do.

I glanced at the clock once more. *Twenty seconds left.* I'd be flagged down if my timer ran out, and that wouldn't be a good thing. *So,* I thought, *if I can't win, then I'll at least try to end in a draw.* And so I tried. I glanced at the clock for the third time, looking at the number of moves I had made. *Forty-six moves. Four more, and I can claim a draw.* The fifty-move rule meant a player could claim a draw if no capture or check had been made at that point. And there haven't been any.



Ten seconds left. I felt desperate, repeatedly moving my king to reach fifty moves, clawing at the chance of getting a draw.

I reached fifty moves, and I immediately paused the timer, raising my hand to confirm the draw. Then the coach clarified that it wasn't; it only happens in the endgame, when only one or two pieces are left with the king.

But we still had several pieces left.

My timer ran out, and we shook each other's hands, exchanging names as well as *'Good games'* and *'Thank you'*. I was happy to play with her, even though I lost. Her win was well-deserved.

We went straight to another row of tables to play with the seniors. I groan in exhaustion, mentally fatigued from the matches that seemed never-ending. I sat down again, facing my opponent. I made the usual small talk to gauge her skill.

“How long have you been in chess?”


“About two years, give or take, but I only started training seriously the year before.”

“Ah, are you in varsity?”

“No, actually.”

I chuckled softly. “That’s good to know.”

We cracked jokes and shared laughs, and I couldn't help but fall in love with chess even more, along with the community it fosters. I can't remember the last time I genuinely enjoyed something.



We prepared for the match, fixing the chessboard and our clock. She goes for a handshake. I respond with a fist bump.

“Oh, you’re left-handed?” She asked, a slight surprise evident on her face.

I laughed. “Yeah, that’s why I fist bump ‘cause otherwise, I’ll have to twist my arm,” I replied. In chess, you had to use just one hand, usually your dominant one. Using two hands is forbidden.

“Me too!” She exclaimed. I felt glad to meet a fellow lefty.

She won the match, and we congratulated each other. I didn’t feel bitter about it. It felt like exchanging a win for a new friend.

“You’re really good,” I said. “Good game.”

“Good game,” she replied. “You were on my level too, you know. I made some mistakes, and you didn’t let me get away with it.”

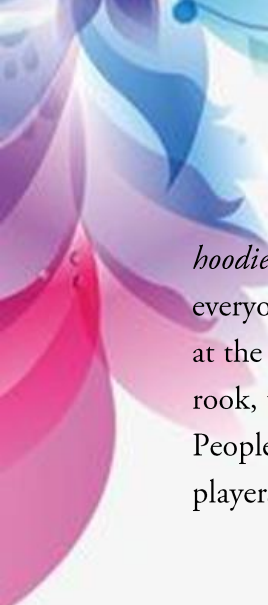
“Seriously?”

“Yeah, you noticed it right away.”

“Damn right, I did.” I laughed. “I felt intimidated at first when you started moving the pieces ‘cause you looked mad when you did it,” I admitted.

“Oh, no.” She lifted her arm. “I just have a heavy hand.”

I exchanged names with the second friend I made and watched my other teammate play, considering I finished early.



He was on the last board against *‘that one senior with the navy blue hoodie’*, as we liked to call her. They were both roughly on the same level, so everyone was curious as to how their match would play out. They were already at the endgame. My teammate had forty seconds remaining with his king and rook, while the senior only had her king left. Our team had the upper hand. People crowded in front of them, whispering strategies as though they were the players in the match.

“*Forty seconds,*” I whispered to our co-captain, panic evident in my tone.

“It’s going to be a stalemate,” she replied, dreading the outcome.

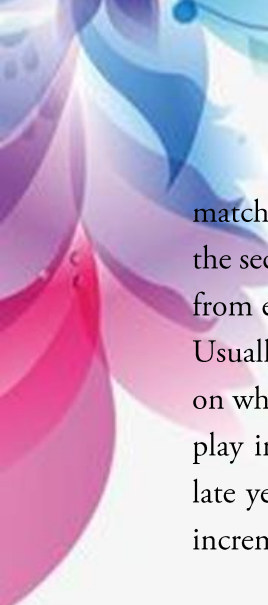
The anticipation was killing everyone. My teammate shakily lifted his rook, moving it *painfully slowly*, placing it on the square before hesitantly removing his hand like the chess piece connected to his skin. He looked like he was on the verge of tears.

As expected, it ended in a stalemate. The senior couldn’t make any legal moves, and her king wasn’t in check either. Everyone clapped, and as if on cue, my teammate broke down.

We all rushed to his side, patting his back and comforting him. It was his first time in a chess tournament, so winning a draw for the team was already a big deal. Because of the draw, both teams gained four and a half points. We were tied with the seniors.

★ ★ ★

The second day came, and again, I made sure to go to sleep early. I haven’t won my team any points yet, but this time, I know I will. Our last



match was against the neophytes, and then we'd be playing Blitz, which was the second category of the tournament. It's a chess match between two people from each team playing on a five-minute timer with a one-second increment. Usually, it was the captains and co-captains from each team, but it depended on who the strongest players were. The entire team, on the other hand, would play in the Classic category with a thirty-minute timer, but since we started late yesterday, we were forced to play for twenty minutes with a five-second increment.

We sat down to face the neophytes, anxiety now just coming down from its high. I was pretty confident I'd win this one, having spied on their practice earlier with the rookies to gauge their skill. For the last time, I engaged in conversation to make small talk.

“How long have you been in chess?”

“Oh, just this year,” she replies, “how about you, *Ate*?”

“I've been playing since I was seven, but it's on and off,” I replied. “Good luck to you,” I said with a small smile.

“*Ate*, what's your rating po?”

I tilted my head in confusion. “You mean in chess.com? Uhm, last time I checked, it was fifteen hundred.”

“Fifteen hundred?” Her eyes widened, looking at her teammates. “*Hala, ayoko na.*”

I immediately retracted my statement. “Oh, uhm, I don't really play there anymore, Lichess is better, plus it might've decreased now.” I nervously



chuckled, not letting my pride get the best of me this time.

Needless to say, she put up a good fight. She had me spending three whole minutes contemplating my next move after she took her bishops out and threatened my knights, but I was able to win with the ladder mate using my rooks.

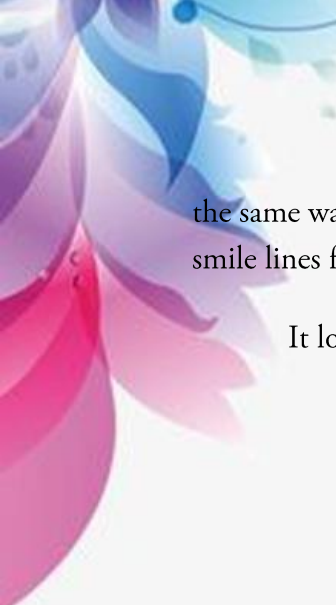
I wasn't part of the Blitz category, so I could've left by then, but I stayed in the hall to show support for my teammates. In the end, we managed to bag third place for Blitz. Everybody took pictures for remembrance, and I made sure I took some with the two new friends I made. It felt incredibly rewarding to see the triumphs and hardships of the people around me, to be in a place where people loved the same thing in the same way. I felt seen and understood.

★ ★ ★

I saw chess in a different light that day. Where your watchful eyes saw the light and dark squares and pieces in wood or plastic, mine saw an empty, barren land. Soldiers emerged from either side, marching to the front lines, while war masterminds orchestrated their victory through a battle of wits. They would kill and capture, piles of useless bones turned into mere figures, until the sands from the hourglass ran out, until one raised their flag in surrender, tasting salt on their cheeks from their fruitless labor.

And when the dust has settled, and everything has fallen into a deafening silence no louder than bombs dropping, you'll see who won and who learned.

Images of the older coach flashed across my mind again, and it made me think of a life where I'd spend my time playing with people who saw chess



the same way I did, and I'd keep playing until my dark hair turned white, and smile lines formed on my face. My heart swells at the thought.

It looked like a life worth living.