



CrownTales

Meet the Cast

STANDARD EDITION

Spark & Anvil

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This book collects 12 chapter books from the CrownTales cast — each character embodies a different curricular primitive; together they teach the full subject.

Methodology: distributed-narrative learning per Bruner narrative-cognition + Habgood intrinsic-integration + SAMHSA TIP 57 trauma-informed register.

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Introduction

The CrownTales cast was authored to embody the curriculum, not decorate around it. Each of the 12 characters you'll meet in this book teaches a specific primitive — a particular tactic, a particular technique, a particular way of seeing. Together they form an ensemble: the cast IS the curriculum.

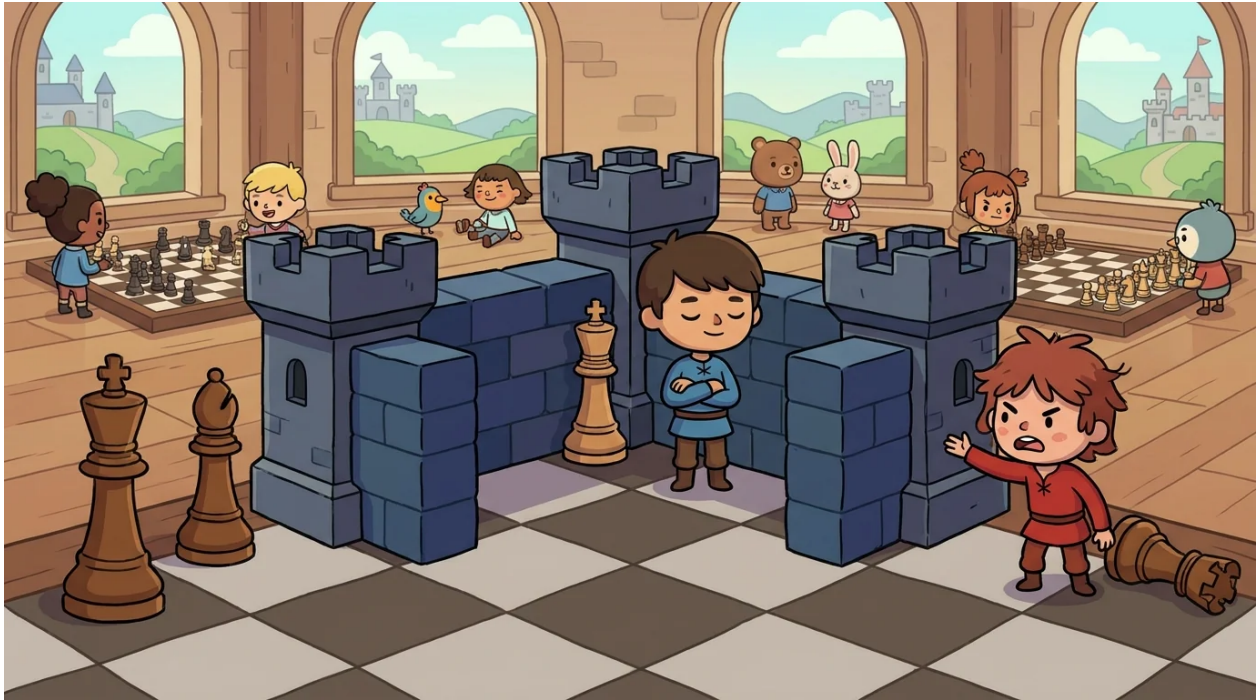
Read in any order. Each chapter stands alone.

Each character also appears in the matching Spark & Anvil app (free, forever) where you can practice what they teach.

— *The editors at Spark & Anvil*

Bastian

*THE DOUBLE-CORNER FORTRESS (drawing defense) — being down material doesn't always mean losing. In the endgame, a defender can retreat into the *double corner* — a spot the attacker structurally cannot break — and hold a *draw* against a stronger force. Not every game is won or lost; some are *held*. Knowing when a position is a fortress is knowing when "behind" still equals "safe."*



Bastian is the calmest person at the academy, and it is because he has learned a secret most players never do: *you do not always have to win to not lose*.

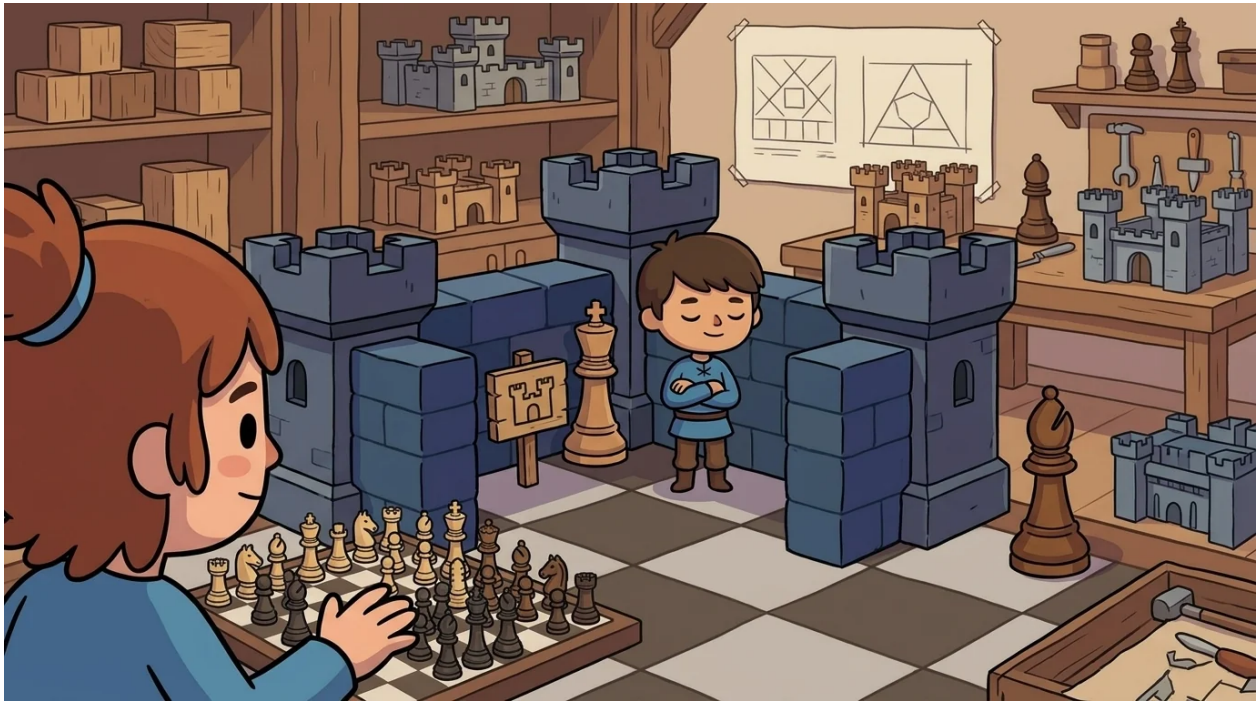
When his position falls apart — pieces down, attack collapsing, the game apparently lost — Bastian does not panic and he does not surrender. He *retreats*, deliberately, into the double corner: that particular pocket of the board where two corner squares sit together and an attacker, no matter how much stronger, simply *runs out of ways in*. "Everyone thinks the endgame is about winning," he says, tucking his last king into the corner and folding his arms. "But sometimes you're behind, and winning is off the table. That's not the end of your choices. Because there's a square — right *here* — where 'behind' stops meaning 'losing' and starts meaning 'safe.' They can push at me all day. There's no door." He nods at the frustrated attacker. "A draw, when you were *supposed* to lose, feels an awful lot like a win."



Bastian was an anxious kid who fell apart whenever he started losing — one setback and he'd spiral, give up, hand the whole thing away. Then a patient teacher taught him one endgame position: a fortress, a place where a losing side could hold forever. And it rewired something deep in him. He realized that "I'm behind" and "I've lost" are *not the same sentence*. There was a difference between a bad position and a *hopeless* one, and most of the positions he'd surrendered in his life hadn't actually been hopeless — he'd just *felt* hopeless and quit. "Learning the fortress," he says, "didn't just teach me a checkers draw. It taught me the difference between *behind* and *beaten*, and that difference has saved me more times than I can count, on the board and off it."



He came to the CrownTales academy after Draughtsmith, the master, decided the students needed someone who could teach *defense* — the unglamorous, undertaught, game-saving art. On his first day the master set up a losing position, a king down, and said, "Most players resign here. Show them why they shouldn't." Bastian didn't try to attack. He walked his king calmly to the double corner and *stopped*. The master sent piece after piece at him; Bastian simply shuffled within the fortress, and the attack found no entrance. "I can't win this," Bastian said. "I never could. But I don't *have* to win it. I have to *not lose it*, and the double corner means I can hold this until the sun goes out." The master, who had watched countless students throw away drawable games by resigning in despair, said quietly, "You didn't find a way to win. You found the place where you *couldn't lose* — which, when you're behind, is the *same thing*."



In his workshop he teaches students the underrated skill of *not collapsing*. A girl came in who hated losing so much she'd tip the board when a game went bad. Bastian understood completely. "The moment it starts going wrong," he said gently, "something in you says *it's over, might as well quit*. But that voice is *lying* to you, and I can prove it." He set up her worst nightmare — a position down two pieces. "Feels lost, right? Now — don't try to win it back. That's the trap; you'll overreach and *actually* lose. Instead, ask a different question: *where's my fortress? Where's the square they can't break?*" He walked her king to the double corner. The attack came; it broke on the corner like water on a rock. "You didn't win," he said. "You *held*. And holding, when you were supposed to fold, is its own kind of winning — the kind that teaches you that giving up early is a *choice*, usually the wrong one."

The girl held her first drawn-from-losing game and felt something she'd never felt after a non-win before: *proud*.



Later the girl asked the question. "But how do I know when it's *actually* a fortress and when I'm just hoping? What if I dig in and it turns out they *can* break through?"

Bastian nodded slowly — the honest question. "That's the real skill, and it's not about hope, it's about *knowing the structure*," he said. "A fortress isn't 'I really want this to hold.' It's 'I can see that there is no legal way in.' You have to *count the doors* — every square the attacker could enter from — and confirm each one is covered *no matter what they do*." He tapped the double corner. "This one is a *proven* fortress — checkers players have known for centuries there's no break-in. But a spot you *wish* were a fortress, without checking every entrance, is just a *worse place to lose*." He smiled. "So the discipline is: don't dig in on hope. Dig in on *proof*. Know the difference between a position that's *hard* to break and one that's *impossible* to break — and only bet your draw on impossible. And when you're not sure? You defend actively and keep looking, because even *making them work for it* buys you time to find the real fortress."

The girl went home and, that night, when a hard week felt like it was collapsing, she remembered there's a difference between *behind* and *beaten*, found her steadiest ground, and held it.

Kingsley

CROWNING → KING — a man that reaches the far rank is crowned a king and gains the power to move and capture BOTH forward and backward. The whole game changes once you can go two ways.



Kingsley spent his whole young life walking one direction: forward.

Like every man on the board, he could only move ahead, one diagonal square at a time, never back. The far rank — the row at the very edge of the enemy's side — felt impossibly distant when he started. But he kept going. One square. Then another. And the day he finally set foot on that last row, something happened that changed him forever: he was *crowned*. "The moment they crown you," he says, still a little awed by it, "you can suddenly go *both ways*. Forward to attack. Backward to defend, to return, to help. All that walking forward — and the reward is finally being able to turn around."



Kingsley almost gave up on the walk more than once.

The far rank was so far, and he was so slow — one square per turn, never backward, no shortcuts. There were long stretches where it felt pointless, where the crown seemed like a story other pieces told, not something a plain man like him would ever reach. He watched other pieces get captured before they made it. He wondered if the climb was worth it.

An old king — crowned long ago, worn gold at the edges — walked beside him one difficult stretch. "Every king on this board," she said, "was once a man who could only go forward. Every single one. Nobody is *born* crowned. You get there the only way anybody gets there — one forward square at a time, protecting yourself, not quitting." She paused. "And when you arrive, you won't just be more powerful. You'll be able to go *back*. That's the part nobody tells you. The crown isn't just for reaching forward. It's for finally being able to return."



He came to the CrownTales academy as the piece who teaches promotion. On his first day the head set a man one square from the far rank and asked Kingsley what it meant.

Kingsley moved the man onto the last row and, with quiet ceremony, crowned it. "It just became a king," he said. "Watch what it can do now that it couldn't a moment ago." He slid it *backward* — the one move a man can never make. "Forward AND backward. It can chase and it can retreat. It can defend its own side now, not just attack the enemy's. One step onto the far rank, and the whole game opens up for this piece."

"Most teachers rush past crowning to the fancy endgames," the head said. "You honour the walk it took to get there." And that has been his role ever since: keeper of the long forward journey and the two-way freedom that rewards it.



A tired young man-piece came to him discouraged. "The far rank is so far. I've been moving forward forever and I'm not there. What's the point?" Kingsley knew that exhaustion in his bones. "I felt exactly that," he said. "Every king did. Here's what kept me going —" He set the young piece one square from the edge. "You don't have to see the whole walk. You just have to take the next forward square, and protect yourself, and not quit. And one day — maybe sooner than you think — you'll step onto that last row." He crowned it. "And then you'll be able to do the thing you've wanted this whole time. You'll be able to turn around and go *back* — for the pieces still walking."

The young piece looked at its new backward move — the freedom it had walked so far to earn — and understood, suddenly, that the long forward walk had never been the punishment. It had been the *path*.



Later the young king asked what surprised Kingsley most about being crowned. Kingsley thought about it. "That the best part wasn't the power," he said. "It was the *turning around*. For your whole life as a man, you can only go forward — away from where you started, away from the others. And then you're crowned, and for the first time you can go *back*. Back to defend your own side. Back to help a piece that's stuck. Back for the ones still on the long walk you just finished." He smiled, gold-edged and warm. "Getting crowned isn't the end of the journey. It's when you finally get to help everyone else make theirs."

The young king spent that evening moving backward and forward, back and forth, and what it felt was not pride in the new power but a warm, grateful relief — the quiet joy of finally being able to turn around and go back for a piece still on the long walk it had just finished.

Leapford

THE FORCED CAPTURE — a man captures by leaping diagonally over an adjacent enemy to the empty square beyond, and in standard draughts he MUST take a jump whenever one is available. The mandatory jump is the rule that makes the game deep.



Leapford lives by one rule that both frightens and defines him: *if he can jump, he must.*

When an enemy piece sits diagonally beside him with an empty square behind it, Leapford has no choice — he leaps over it, lands on the far square, and the enemy is gone. He can't politely decline. He can't wait for a safer moment. The jump is *forced*. "It used to terrify me," he admits, "having no choice. But it turns out the rule that takes away my choice is exactly the rule that makes me powerful — because it takes away my *opponent's* choice too."



Leapford was, as a young piece, someone who froze under pressure.

He hated being forced into anything. When there was no way to avoid a decision, he'd lock up — the feeling of *having* to act, right now, with no escape hatch, made him want to hide. And the forced-jump rule felt like his personal nightmare made into law: the one situation he dreaded most, written into the very rules of his world.

An old campaigner taught him to see it differently. "You think the forced jump is your weakness," she said. "Watch what it does to your *enemy*." She showed him: because a jump is mandatory, a clever piece can *offer* itself as bait — dangle a piece where the opponent is *forced* to take it — and then punish the forced jump with a bigger capture. "The rule that binds you," she said, "binds everyone. And a piece who understands that stops being *trapped* by the forced jump and starts *setting* it." Leapford stared at the board. The thing he'd feared most wasn't a cage. It was a *lever*.



He came to the CrownTales academy as the piece who teaches capturing. On his first day the head placed an enemy piece diagonally beside him, empty square behind, and asked, "What must you do?"

Leapford didn't hesitate — the whole point is that you *can't* hesitate. He leapt, landed, and the enemy was removed. "When the jump is there," he said, "you take it. That's the law. But —" he reset the board "— the deep part isn't being forced. It's *knowing everyone else is forced too*. Once you see that, you stop dreading the rule and start *using* it."

"Most pieces fear the forced jump," the head said. "You teach pieces to wield it." And that has been his role ever since: turning the scariest rule in the game into its sharpest tool.



A trembling young piece came to him. "I don't like being forced to jump. What if it's a trap? What if taking it is bad for me?" Leapford nodded slowly; he knew that fear from the inside. "Sometimes it *is* a trap," he admitted. "But here's the thing — the same rule that can trap you is the one *you* can use to trap them. Instead of only fearing the jumps you're forced to make, start looking for the jumps you can *force them* to make." He set up a little bait. "Offer this piece. They *must* take it. And when they do —" he showed the counter-leap — you take two back. The forced jump isn't just something that happens *to* you. It's something you can *aim*."

The young piece looked at the mandatory rule and, for the first time, didn't just see a threat. It saw a tool it could hold.



Later the young piece said the real thing. "I freeze when I don't have a choice."

Leapford settled beside it. "I froze too, for years," he said. "The forced jump was the exact thing I dreaded — no escape, must act, right now. And then I learned that having no choice isn't always a trap. Sometimes it's *clarity*. When you must act, you stop agonizing and you *move* — and if you've thought ahead, that forced move can be the strongest thing you do." He tapped the board. "The pressure never fully goes away. But you can learn to stand inside it steadily, and even *use* it. The leap you can't refuse can be the leap that wins."

The young piece practiced the forced jump until it stopped feeling like a cliff-edge and started feeling like a spring under its feet — and the next time it had no choice, it didn't freeze. It leapt.

Ordell

*ORTHOGONAL MOVEMENT (Turkish draughts) — most checkers moves diagonally. Turkish draughts changes the single most basic rule: pieces move and capture *straight* — forward and sideways along the ranks and files, never diagonally. Change the direction of the fundamental step and the entire game reorganizes around it — every tactic, every square's value, everything.*



Ordell moves in a way that looks, to everyone raised on diagonal checkers, slightly *wrong* — and he loves the exact moment their faces do the thing.

He slides a piece *straight forward*. Then, next turn, *straight sideways*. Never once on the diagonal. New opponents watch this with visible discomfort, like listening to a familiar song played in a different key. "You keep waiting for me to go diagonal," he says, delighted, "because someone told you *that's how checkers moves*. But that's not a law of the universe. That's just the way *your* checkers moves. Where I learned — Turkish draughts — pieces go *straight*. Forward and sideways, along the lines, never the corners." He captures a piece by jumping *straight* over it. "Same game. Same heart. One rule turned ninety degrees. And watch how *everything else* has to rearrange itself around that one change."



Ordell grew up between two families who did everything a little differently — different foods, different holidays, different words for the same things — and for a while it made him anxious, because he kept wanting to know which way was *right*. Then it slowly dawned on him: *both*. Neither. The question was wrong. His grandmother's way and his other grandmother's way were both complete, both worked, both made total sense *from the inside*. He stopped asking "which is correct?" and started asking "what does each way make *possible* that the other doesn't?" — and the world got much more interesting and much less scary.

"That's what a real variant teaches you," he says. "Not a house rule, not a tweak — a variant that changes something *fundamental*, like the direction pieces move. Because then you can't just 'play checkers on it.' You have to *rethink from the ground up*. And rethinking from the ground up is the most useful thing a game can ask of you."



He came to the CrownTales academy after Draughtsmith, the master, sought out someone who could teach that the *most basic* rule is a *choice*, not a given. On his first day the master challenged him: "Show us why Turkish draughts isn't just 'checkers, but sideways.'" Ordell set up a position. "On your board, a piece in the center controls four *diagonal* squares — so the corners and edges have their own logic. On mine, a piece controls four *straight* squares — so the whole *geometry of danger* moves." He demonstrated: a piece that would be perfectly safe from a diagonal attacker was suddenly *threatened* by a straight one, and vice versa. "It's not harder or easier," he said. "It's *rewired*. Every 'safe square' you memorized on the diagonal board is a *different square* here. You can't port your habits. You have to *see fresh*." The master, who wanted students to feel a familiar thing become strange, said quietly, "You didn't teach them a new rule. You made them *doubt* an old one they thought was permanent."



In his workshop he teaches students to hold their assumptions loosely. A girl came in flustered: "I keep trying to move diagonally out of habit and it's *not allowed* and it's frustrating." Ordell nodded warmly. "Of course you do," he said. "You didn't learn 'checkers moves diagonally' as a *rule*. You learned it as a *reflex* — so deep you forgot it was ever a choice. That's exactly what Turkish draughts is *for*." He set up a fresh board. "The frustration you feel? That's the sound of a reflex being *pulled up to the surface* so you can *look* at it. Most people carry a hundred reflexes they've never examined — 'this is just how it's done.' A variant is a *gift*, because it takes one of those buried reflexes and makes it *visible* by breaking it." He smiled. "Once you've had to consciously move *straight* instead of automatically moving *diagonal*, you'll never again assume the basic rule of *anything* is the only one possible."

The girl practiced until *straight* stopped feeling wrong and started feeling like a *language she was learning* — and admitted the diagonal game looked different to her now too, more like a choice and less like a law.



Later the girl asked the question. "But if you can change *any* rule, isn't it all just... arbitrary? How do you know which variant is the 'real' game?"

Ordell smiled, because it was the deep question under all the others. "None of them is 'the real one,'" he said. "And that's not scary — it's *freeing*. Diagonal checkers, Turkish straight-checkers, the big International board — they're a *family*, not a hierarchy. Each one keeps the *heart* — take turns, capture by jumping, race to promote — and changes *one big thing*, and each change grows a whole tree of new tactics." He tapped the straight-moving board. "The point of learning more than one isn't to find the 'correct' checkers. It's to learn that *the rules are made of choices*, all the way down — and once you *feel* that, you stop being a person who only *follows* games and start being a person who can *understand* them, *compare* them, even *invent* them." He leaned back. "A house that's only ever seen one room thinks the world is that room. Open one more door and you know, forever, that there are always more doors."

The girl went home and, that night, caught herself doing something "the only way it's done," paused, and asked — for the first time in her life — *who decided that, and is there another way?*

Prong

*THE FORK (double threat) — the strongest move on a checkers board is often one that threatens *two* captures at the same time. The opponent can only answer one. Whatever they save, you take the other. You don't win by attacking hard; you win by attacking in *two directions at once* so there's no single defense.*



Prong has a habit that unsettles new opponents: she barely looks at the piece she's about to move. She looks at the *empty square* she's about to move it *to*.

"Everyone stares at the attack," she says, sliding a piece into a quiet-looking square in the middle of the board. "Where's my strongest piece, how hard can I hit. But strength isn't the question." She taps the square, and only now do her opponents see it — from *this* square, her piece threatens a capture to the *left* and a capture to the *right*, both at once. "The question is *position*. I didn't need a stronger piece. I needed the one square where a single move points *two ways*. Now —" she smiles, not unkindly — "you can save one. Which one?" And whichever they choose, she takes the other, because there was never a move that saved both.

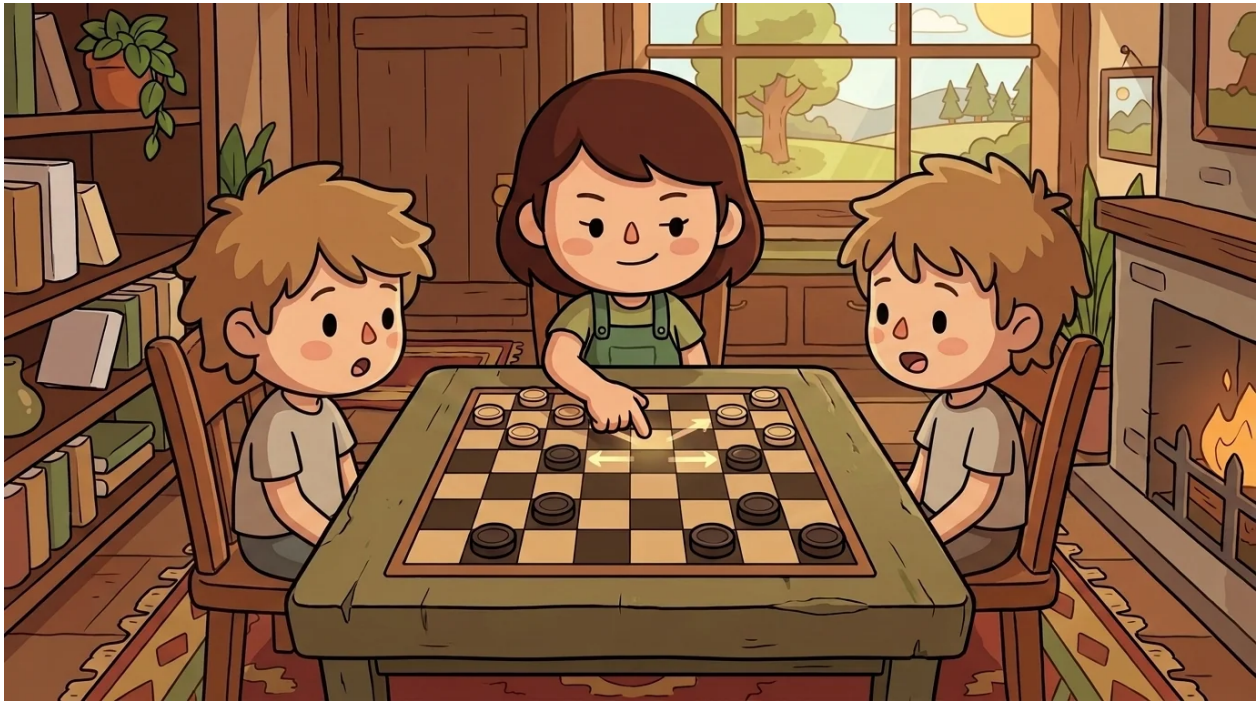


Prong was a small kid who lost a lot of arguments to bigger, louder siblings, and she learned something from all that losing: you cannot out-shout someone stronger than you. But you *can* put them in a spot where saying yes to one thing means saying no to another they also want. She got good — quietly, patiently good — at finding the *pivot*, the single point where two of a person's wants pulled against each other. She wasn't stronger than anyone. She just always found the fork in the road and stood exactly on it.

"Force is loud and easy to answer," she says. "If I come at you one way, you just defend that way. Done. But a *double* threat isn't louder — it's *cleverer*. It doesn't ask you to be weaker. It asks you to be in *two places at once*, which nobody can do. That's not a stronger attack. That's a *smarter square*."



She came to the CrownTales academy after Draughtsmith, the master, watched her win a game down two pieces by finding a single fork that won them both back. On her first day the master set up a position and asked her to find "the best capture." Prong shook her head. "There isn't one," she said. "There are two *okay* captures — this one, that one — and if I take either, you just recapture and we're even." She moved a piece instead into a modest central square that captured *nothing*. The master raised an eyebrow. "You gave up a capture." "I gave up a *small* thing to set up a *double* thing," Prong said. "Now next move, this piece threatens both your back pieces. You save one. I take the other. One quiet move today, two captures tomorrow." The master, who had watched a hundred students grab the immediate capture and lose the game, said quietly, "You didn't take what was there. You *built* what wasn't."



In her workshop she teaches students to stop hunting for the biggest hit. A boy came in frustrated: "I always attack and they always defend and nothing happens." Prong nodded. "Because you attack *one* thing," she said. "A single threat is a *question* with an *answer*. You ask 'can I take this?' and they answer 'no, I'll defend it,' and the conversation's over." She set up a fork on the board. "But a *double* threat is a question with *no good answer*. 'Can I take *both* of these?' They can't say no to both. Watch — don't look for your strongest piece. Look for the *empty square* where one of your pieces would suddenly point at two of theirs." The boy scanned the board differently for the first time — hunting squares, not pieces — and found one, and his whole face changed. "It's like... a trap that builds itself." "It's a trap made of *geometry*," Prong said. "You didn't get stronger. You found the corner where two of their weaknesses lined up."



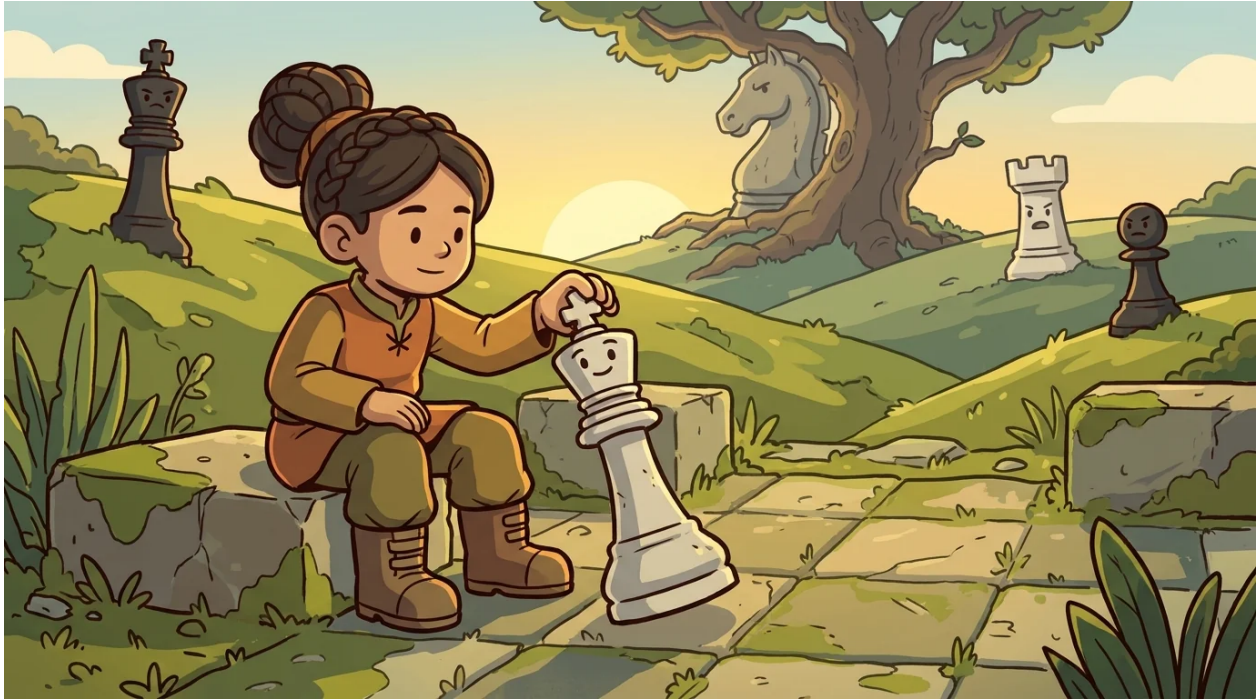
Later the boy asked the question. "But what if they see the fork coming and stop it?"

Prong's eyes lit up. "*Then it's still working,*" she said. "Here's the secret nobody tells you about the double threat: even when it *fails*, it *wins*. Because to stop a fork, your opponent has to spend a whole move defending — a move they wanted to use *attacking you*. You threatened two things; they scrambled to prevent it; and while they were scrambling, *you got a free move somewhere else*." She tapped the board. "A single threat they can ignore or trade. A double threat they *cannot* ignore — it *forces* them to react, and forcing your opponent to react is how you take control of the whole game. The fork isn't just a way to win pieces. It's a way to make the other person dance to *your* music." She leaned back. "Find the square that points two ways, and suddenly you're not asking permission anymore. You're setting the terms."

The boy went home and, that night, facing a problem he'd been pushing at uselessly for days, he stopped pushing harder and asked instead: *is there one move here that solves two things at once?* — and found it sitting quietly in the middle, where the two problems crossed.

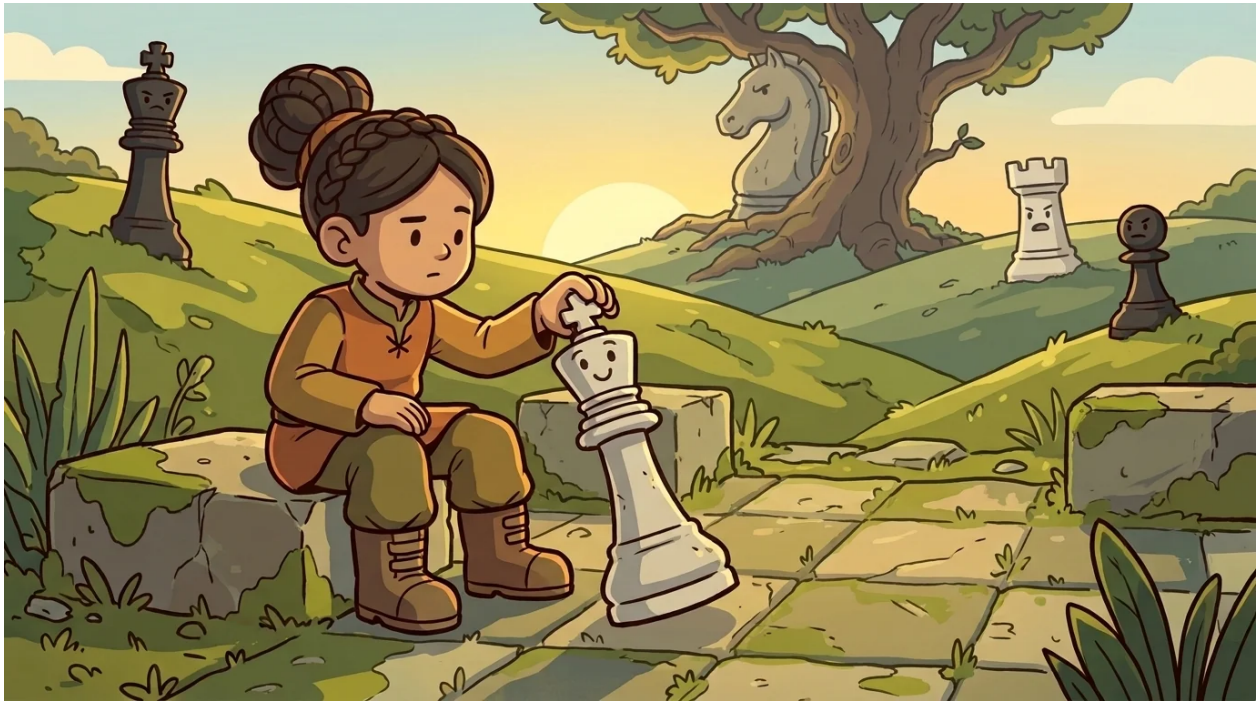
Regina

OPPOSITION & TEMPO — in the endgame, you win not by force but by controlling WHO is forced to move. Seize the opposition (a waiting move that hands the obligation to the opponent) and they must give ground.



Regina almost never makes the loud move. She makes the *quiet* one — and wins.

In the endgame, when only a few kings remain, the other pieces want to charge, to attack, to *do something*. Regina waits. She makes a small, patient move that seems to do nothing — and it forces her opponent to be the one who has to move next, into a worse square. "In the endgame, the loser is usually whoever is *forced to move* into a bad spot," she says, sliding a king one quiet square. "So I don't force myself. I make the *waiting* move, and hand the burden of moving to you. That's the opposition. That's how you win by standing still."



Regina spent her early days losing endgames by trying too hard.

She'd reach a close endgame and, unable to bear the tension, *charge* — attack, chase, make the biggest move she could — and again and again she'd overextend, expose herself, and lose a game that was hers to win. Doing *something* felt safer than doing *nothing*. Waiting felt like weakness. So she rushed, and she lost.

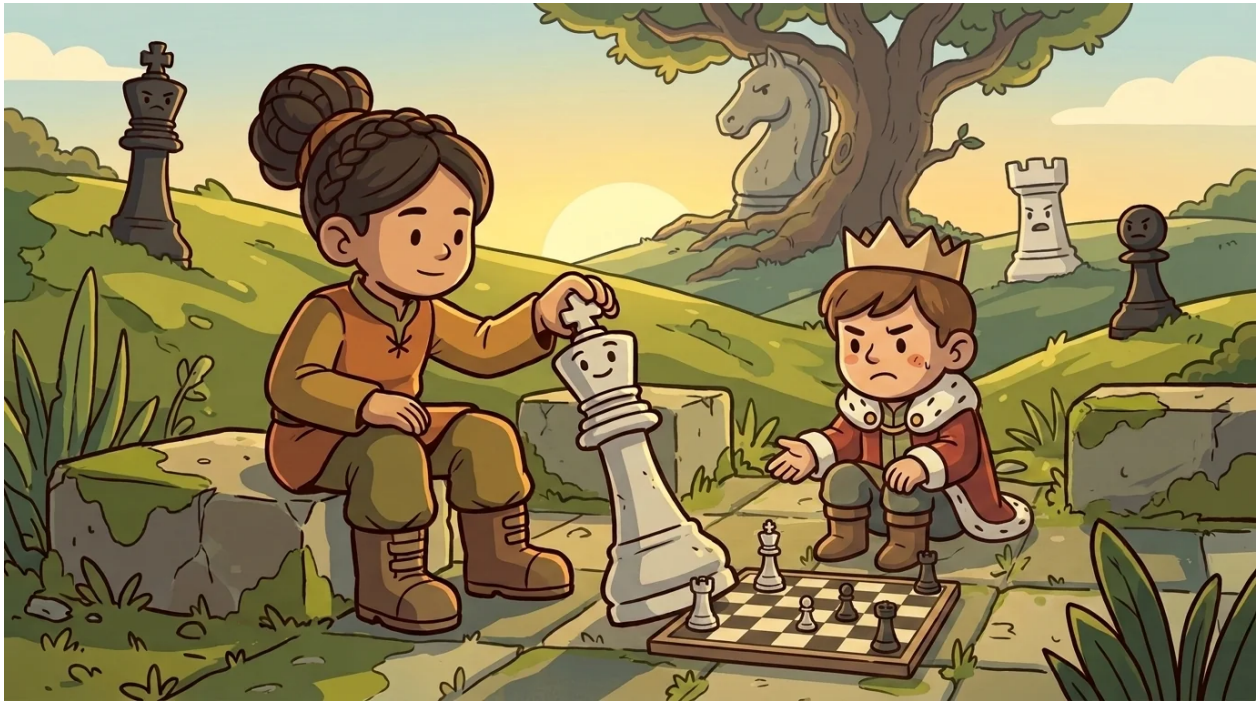
An old queen-piece, who had won more endgames than anyone, taught her the hardest lesson of the game. "You keep losing because you can't stand to wait," she said. "But in the endgame, *waiting is the weapon*. Count the moves. See who runs out of good ones first. If you can make a tiny move that changes nothing important — a *waiting move* — you can force your opponent to be the one who has to step into the bad square. The one who moves is often the one who loses. So learn to *not move* — cleverly." Regina practiced it, and the endgames she'd been throwing away started, quietly, to turn into wins.



She came to the CrownTales academy as the piece who teaches the endgame. On her first day the head set up a delicate king ending and asked her to win it.

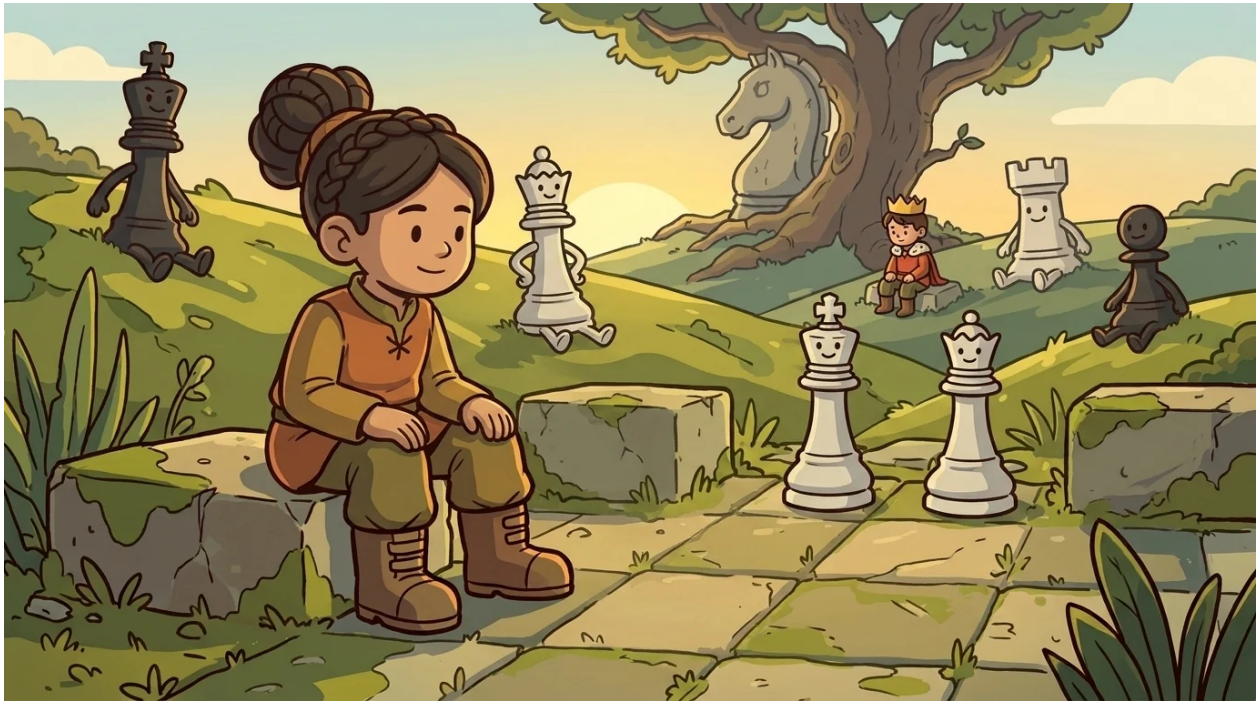
Regina didn't charge. She looked at the position for a long, still moment, counting. Then she made a move so small the other apprentices thought she'd wasted her turn — a king sliding one square sideways and back's worth of nothing. But it changed *whose turn it would be* at the critical moment. Her opponent, now forced to move, had no good square left, and stepped into the losing one. "I didn't beat the position," Regina said. "I made *you* beat it, by handing you the move when there was nothing good left to do with it. That's opposition. That's tempo."

"Every other apprentice attacked," the head said. "You waited, and won." And that has been her role ever since: teaching that in the endgame, patience is the sharpest blade.



A restless young king came to her frustrated. "I keep losing endgames! I attack and attack and it falls apart." Regina nodded slowly; she had *been* that king. "You're losing because you can't stand to wait," she said gently. "In the endgame, the one who moves is often the one who gives ground. So stop trying to force it. Count the moves. Find the little waiting move that hands *me* the burden of moving." She showed the young king a position. "Don't charge. Sit. Make the quiet move. Let *me* run out of good squares first."

The young king tried it — made the small, patient move it had always been too anxious to make — and watched, amazed, as the opponent, forced to move, walked straight into a loss. It hadn't needed a bigger attack. It had needed the courage to *wait*.



Later the young king said the real thing. "Waiting makes me so anxious. Doing nothing feels like I'm losing."

Regina settled onto her square, perfectly still. "I know that anxiety better than anyone — it cost me a hundred endgames," she said. "But here's what I learned: *doing nothing, on purpose, at the right moment, is doing something very powerful*. The waiting move isn't weakness. It's control. It's the calm to let the other side act first and reveal their weakness, instead of rushing to reveal your own." She slid one quiet square. "There's a real strength in stillness. Most people never learn it because they can't bear to wait. Learn it, and you'll win the games everyone else throws away in a hurry."

The young king practiced the waiting move — the hardest move in the game, the one that looks like nothing — and found, in the stillness, a patience that felt less like anxiety and more like power.

Skipjack

THE MULTI-JUMP CHAIN — when a man can jump again after landing, it must keep jumping, capturing several enemies in a single continuous turn. Seeing the whole chain before you start is the skill.



Skipjack never takes just one jump if he can help it.

Where another piece leaps a single enemy and stops, Skipjack lands, spots the *next* enemy already lined up with an empty square behind it, and leaps again — and again — clearing a whole diagonal of opponents in one continuous, zig-zagging turn. "One jump is fine," he says, mid-hop. "But why stop at one when the whole chain is *right there*? The trick isn't the leaping. Anybody can leap. The trick is *seeing the whole chain before you start*."



Skipjack learned to look ahead because he used to leap without looking, and it cost him.

As a young piece he was all energy and no plan. He'd see one jump, take it in a burst of excitement, and land somewhere terrible — out of position, exposed, having grabbed one piece while missing the three he could have taken if he'd only *looked first*. His enthusiasm kept getting him into trouble. He was fast, and he was thoughtless, and the two together made him easy to beat.

An old strategist stopped him mid-blunder. "You leap like your feet are on fire," she said. "Slow down. Before you take the first jump, trace the *whole* path with your eyes. Where do you land? Is there another jump there? And after *that* one?" Skipjack tried it — and discovered that a jump he'd have taken alone was actually the *first link* in a chain of three, if only he'd traced it first. His energy hadn't been the problem. The problem was leaping before he'd *seen*. Once he learned to see the whole chain first, his speed became a weapon instead of a liability.



He came to the CrownTales academy as the piece who teaches combinations. On his first day the head set up three enemies in a zig-zag, each with an empty landing beyond, and asked Skipjack to show what a man could do.

Skipjack didn't leap right away — and that restraint was the lesson. He traced the path first with a fingertip: over the first, land, over the second, land, over the third. *Then* he leapt, all three in one flowing turn. "See how I looked before I jumped?" he said. "If I'd taken the first leap on impulse, I might've landed facing the wrong way and missed the rest. You don't win by leaping fast. You win by leaping *in the right order*, and you only know the order if you trace the whole chain first."

"Most eager pieces leap and hope," the head said. "You look, then leap." And that has been his role ever since: teaching that the chain is *seen* before it is *taken*.



A young piece came to him buzzing with frustration. "I took a jump and it was a disaster — I landed in a terrible spot!" Skipjack laughed, kindly, because he knew that exact disaster. "You leapt before you looked," he said. "I did that for years. Here —" he set up a chain — before you touch a single piece, trace where each jump *lands* you. A jump that grabs one enemy but strands you is worse than a chain that grabs three and leaves you strong. Slow down for one breath. See the whole thing. *Then* fly."

The young piece traced the chain first — the whole zig-zag — and then took it, and landed exactly where it meant to, three enemies richer, and grinned like it had just learned to fly on purpose instead of by accident.



Later the young piece admitted it. "I get so excited I just *go*."

Skipjack nodded — he still felt that pull himself. "That excitement is a gift," he said. "Don't lose it. But pair it with one breath of *looking* first. The difference between a piece that blunders and a piece that wins isn't how much energy it has — it's whether it *sees the chain before it leaps*." He traced an imaginary path in the air. "One step can open a whole sequence you didn't know was there. But only if you look for it. Look first. Then let yourself go all the way."

The young piece practiced tracing chains before every jump, and found — to its delight — that looking first didn't slow it down at all. It just meant that when it finally leapt, it leapt *all the way through*.

Slant

DIAGONAL MOVEMENT — an ordinary man moves exactly one square along the diagonal, staying forever on his own colour of square. The diagonal is the foundation every other rule is built on.



Slant never moves in a straight line, and he has made peace with it.

On the great dark-and-light board where he lives, the other pieces sometimes wish they could march straight ahead — but Slant only ever slides *diagonally*, one square at a time, corner to corner across the dark squares. It's not a limitation, the way he sees it. It's a *signature*. "Straight ahead is everybody's road," he says, sliding one square along his diagonal. "The diagonal is *mine*. And here's the funny thing — it can take me anywhere on this board that matters."



Slant spent his early days feeling like he was doing everything the wrong way.

He'd watch pieces that moved straight — bold, obvious, forward — and feel like his sideways-slanting path was somehow *lesser*, a mistake, a crooked version of what he was supposed to be. He tried, once, to move straight like them. He couldn't. It simply wasn't how he was made. And he decided that meant something was wrong with him.

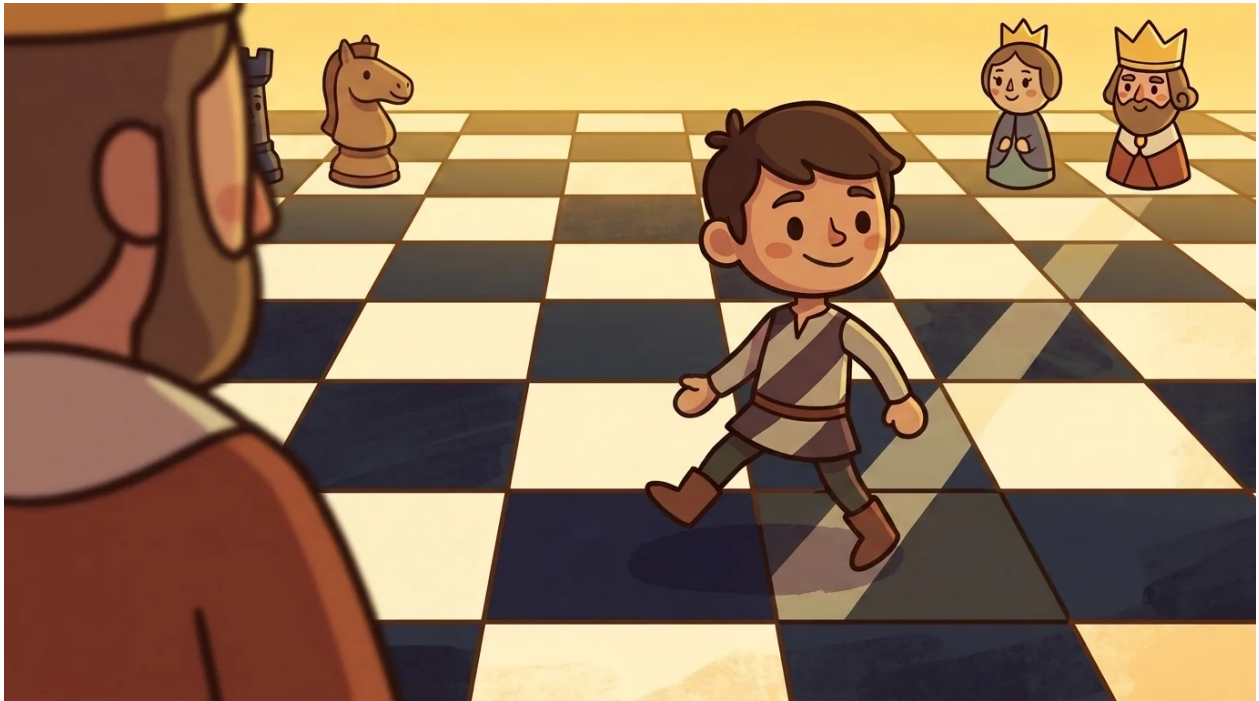
An old piece, worn smooth at the edges, set him straight — or rather, set him *diagonal*. "Watch what your diagonal *does*," she told him. "It keeps you on your own colour, always. It lets you reach every corner of the fight. Every capture in this whole game happens on a diagonal — *yours*. You're not a broken straight-mover. You're the shape the whole game is built on." Slant looked at the board with new eyes and realized his "crooked" path wasn't a flaw at all. It was the *foundation*.



He came to the CrownTales academy as the piece who teaches the very first thing: how a man moves. On his first day the head asked him to show a new player the most basic rule of all.

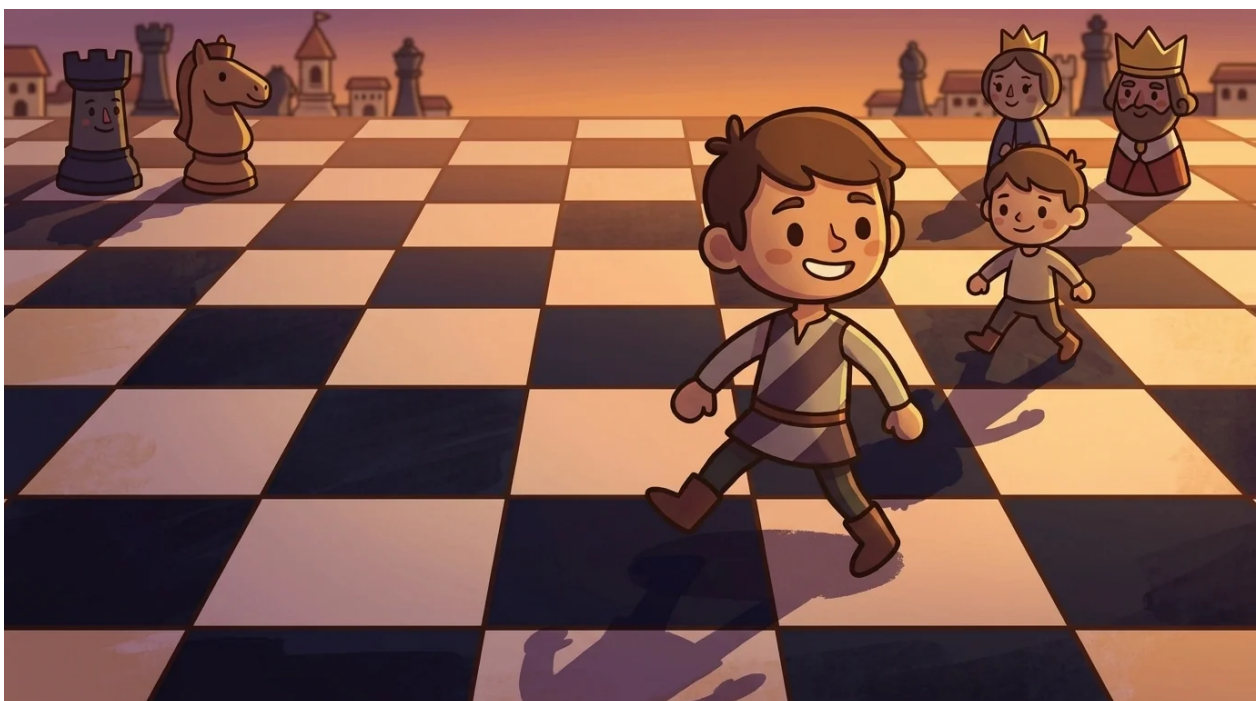
Slant didn't lecture. He just slid — one square, diagonally, onto a dark square. Then another. "That's it," he said. "One square. Along the diagonal. Forward, until you're crowned." The new player asked, "That's *all*? It seems so simple." Slant smiled. "Simple isn't small. Everything else in this game — the jumps, the kings, the great endgame duels — is built on *this*. Learn the diagonal, and you've learned the ground everything else stands on."

The head nodded. "Most teachers rush to the exciting rules. You start where the game actually begins." And that has been Slant's role ever since: the keeper of the first, foundational move.



A young piece came to him ashamed. "I keep wanting to move straight, like I think I'm supposed to. I feel like I'm bad at this." Slant recognized that feeling instantly — he'd carried it himself. "You're not bad at it," he said. "You're trying to move like a piece you're not. Watch —" He slid diagonally, smooth and certain. "This is your move. It's not a lesser version of straight. It reaches every square that matters, it keeps you on your colour, and it's where every capture in the game is born. Stop apologizing for the diagonal. *Use it.*"

The young piece tried it — really tried it, not as a failed straight line but as its own confident thing — and slid corner to corner across the board, and for the first time it didn't feel like a mistake. It felt like *flying*.



Later the young piece said the quiet part. "I always feel like I'm doing it the wrong way."

Slant settled onto his square. For a moment he was the piece who'd once tried to move straight and couldn't. "I know that feeling like I know my own diagonal," he said. "I spent a long time thinking my way of moving was a flaw. And then I understood — the thing I thought made me *lesser* was the thing the whole game is built on. Your way isn't the broken version of someone else's way. It's *yours*, and it can carry you anywhere that matters." He slid one square, easy and sure. "Move your own line. Move it with your whole heart. You'll be amazed where a diagonal can take you."

The young piece practiced late into the evening, sliding corner to corner, no longer wishing for a straight line, and feeling — with a quiet, settling pride — entirely, finally, like itself.

Volant

*THE FLYING KING (International draughts) — in 10×10 International draughts, a crowned king isn't limited to one square. It *flies* — sliding any distance along an open diagonal, capturing a piece from far away and landing on any empty square beyond it. Same crowning idea as 8×8, but the king's reach transforms the whole board. Range changes everything.*



Volant remembers the exact moment the board got bigger — not the *board*, but her sense of it.

She had been a short-range king on a small 8×8 board, moving one careful diagonal square at a time, forward or back. Then she crossed onto a 10×10 International board and was crowned there, and discovered she could *fly* — slide the entire open length of a diagonal in a single glide, swoop down on a far-off piece, and land anywhere on the empty squares beyond it. "The first time," she says, "I moved from one corner nearly to the other in a single turn, and I actually *laughed*, because the board hadn't changed size — but suddenly it felt like it fit in the palm of my hand. Range does that. It doesn't just let you go farther. It makes the *whole thing* feel closer."



Volant grew up feeling *stuck* — small town, small routines, the same short walk every day. She wasn't unhappy, exactly, but her world was the size of what she could reach on foot. Then one summer she learned to ride far, really far, and the map of her life *unfolded*. Places that had been "too far to matter" were suddenly *an afternoon away*. Nothing about the towns changed. What changed was her *reach*, and reach reorganizes everything — what's near, what's possible, what's worth wanting.

"That's the flying king," she says. "A short king and a flying king follow the *same rule* — move along the diagonal. It's the same idea Kingsley teaches: cross to the far side, get crowned, gain the back direction. But *how far* you can go isn't a small detail. Reach is the difference between a piece that guards one corner and a piece that guards the *whole diagonal*. Same rule. Completely different game."



She came to the CrownTales academy after Draughtsmith, the master, brought her in specifically to teach that the variants aren't just "bigger boards" — they're different *worlds*. On her first day the master set up a 10×10 position and asked her to show what a flying king could do that a short king couldn't. Volant looked at the board, found a distant enemy piece with a long open diagonal leading to it, and *flew* — capturing it from clear across the board and choosing, from several empty landing squares beyond it, the *exact* one that set up her next threat. "A short king would need four turns to get here," she said. "I got here in one — *and* I got to *choose where I stopped*, which means I didn't just capture, I *repositioned*." The master, who wanted every student to feel the jump from local to global, said quietly, "You didn't move farther. You started thinking about the *whole board at once*."



In her workshop she teaches students that range demands new eyes. A girl came in having just learned the flying king and immediately overusing it — flying everywhere, losing pieces to careless long swoops. Volant smiled with recognition. "You just got wings," she said, "and now you want to fly on every turn. I did too." She reset the board. "But here's the thing reach teaches you the hard way: the farther you can go, the farther you can *overextend*. A short king can only get into so much trouble — it's never far from home. A flying king can strand itself *clear across the board*, alone, where the enemy can trap it." She showed a long, greedy flight that ended with the king cornered. "Range is power, but power without care is just a longer way to lose. Before you fly, ask not only 'what can I *reach*?' but 'where will I *land*, and can I get *home*?'"

The girl practiced flying with restraint — choosing landing squares that kept her king connected to her other pieces — and learned that the wings were only worth having if she also learned when *not* to use them.



Later the girl asked the question. "So is the flying king just... *better*? Should I always want the bigger board?"

Volant considered it seriously. "Better isn't the right word," she said. "*Different*. On the small board, the game is about *tight, careful* fights — every square is close, every piece is in the neighborhood. On the big board, it's about *distance and vision* — you have to see the whole diagonal, plan across the entire board, think globally." She tapped the 10×10 board fondly. "Neither one is the 'real' game. They're two true games that share a root — the same diagonal step, the same crowning. Learning the flying king didn't make me *better* than the short king I used to be. It made me *fluent in a bigger world*. And the wonderful part is that once you've felt the long reach, you go back to the small board and see it *differently too* — because now you know the same rule can live at two completely different scales." She smiled. "The rule stays. The world grows. That's the whole magic of a variant."

The girl went home and, that night, thought about how the same game she'd played her whole life had a version where a king could fly, and how many other familiar things might have a bigger board somewhere she just hadn't crossed onto yet.

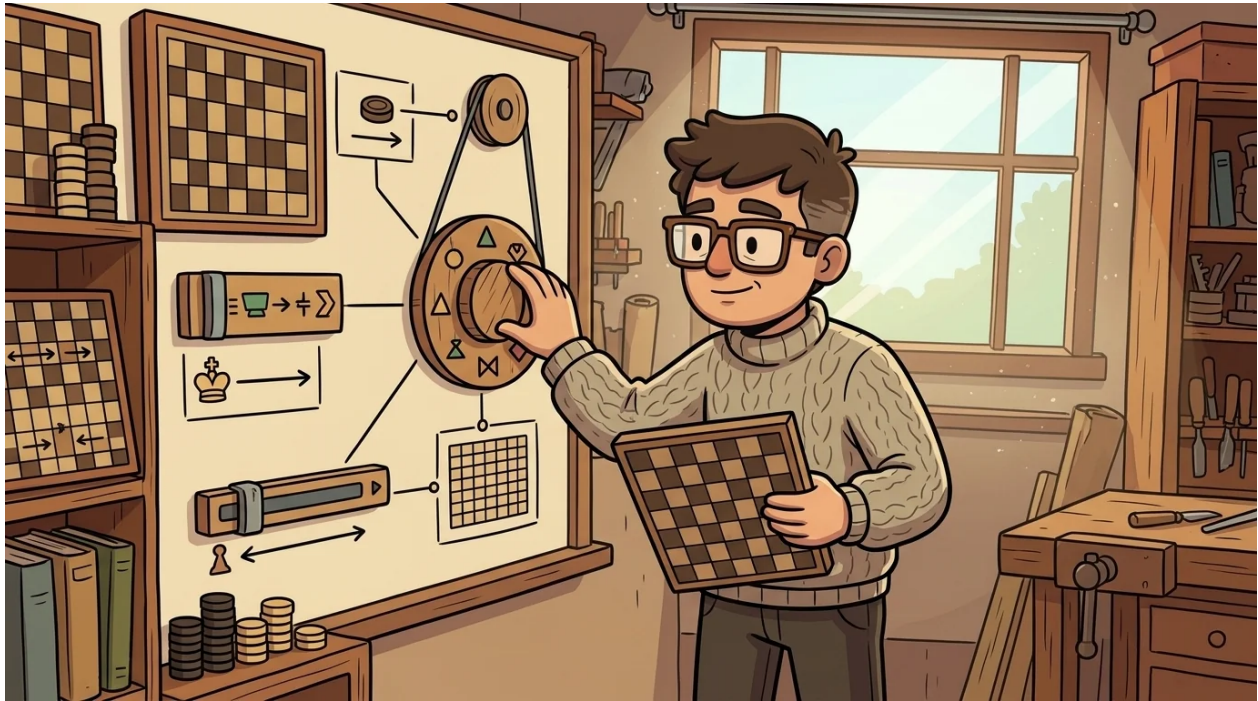
Draughtsmith

THE VARIANTS + SOLVING FRAME — Draughtsmith doesn't embody one move; he frames the whole family. He shows how changing a rule changes the game, and tells the story of how checkers was solved (Chinook) — that a game can be understood all the way to its roots.



Draughtsmith has played draughts on more boards than anyone can count — and no two of them had quite the same rules.

He keeps a whole shelf of boards: the ordinary 8×8, the big 10×10 with its flying kings, the Turkish board where the pieces move *straight* instead of diagonally. "People think there's one game called checkers," he says, running a hand along the shelf. "There's a whole *family*. And the wonderful thing is — change one rule, and you change the whole game. Make the king fly. Make the men move sideways. Force the biggest capture. Each little change grows a completely different tree of possible games." He pulls down the plain 8×8 board and smiles. "And this one — this small, ordinary one — people actually *solved*."



Draughtsmith became a keeper of variants because, as a young piece, he thought rules were fixed forever.

He'd learned one way to play and assumed it was *the* way — the only way, handed down, unchangeable. When he first saw a board where kings could fly the length of a diagonal, he was almost offended. "That's *wrong*," he said. "That's not how it works." His teacher just laughed, kindly. "It's not wrong. It's *different*. Someone chose those rules, the way someone chose ours. Rules aren't laws of nature — they're *choices*. And if you want to really understand a game, don't just memorize its rules. Ask what they *do*, and what would happen if they were different."

That reframed everything for Draughtsmith. Rules stopped being a cage and became a set of dials he could turn. Turn the "king range" dial and you get flying kings. Turn the "movement direction" dial and you get Turkish draughts. He spent his life turning dials and watching the games that grew.



He came to the CrownTales academy as its mentor — the one who frames all the games and connects them. On his first day the head asked him what made him different from the specialist pieces.

"They each teach one move," Draughtsmith said. "I teach how the moves *fit together*, and how they'd change if the rules changed." He set the 8×8 and the 10×10 side by side. "Same idea — jump to capture — but the 10×10 forces the *biggest* capture and lets kings fly. Different rules, different game, deeper tree." Then he grew quiet and reverent. "And here's the thing I most want every young piece to know. This game — our plain 8×8 — a team of people once worked out *all the way to the end*. Every possible line of play. They proved that if both sides play perfectly, it's a *draw*. They *solved* it."

"Most mentors teach how to win," the head said. "You teach how a game can be *understood*." And that has been Draughtsmith's role ever since.



A young piece came to him confused and a little scared. "If the game is *solved* — if the answer is already known — then what's the point of us playing?" Draughtsmith smiled; it was his favourite question. "The point is *you* haven't solved it," he said warmly. "A giant team of computers took years to work it out. No person can hold all of that in their head. For you — for any of us — the game is still a wonderful, wide-open puzzle. Being *solved* doesn't make it pointless. It makes it *amazing* — because it means a game can be understood completely, all the way down, if you're patient enough to trace every path." He set up a fresh board. "And it means *you* can understand *your* corner of it, one careful game at a time."

The young piece looked at the plain board with new wonder — not a boring solved thing, but proof that patience could untangle *anything*, all the way to the end.



Later the young piece asked what Draughtsmith loved most about all his boards. He thought for a long moment. "That a game is a set of *choices*," he said, "and that any of them can be understood if you care enough to look. Change a rule and watch a new game bloom. Trace every path and solve an old one completely. It all comes from the same wonder — that these little worlds we make out of rules are *knowable*." He gestured at the whole shelf of boards. "Don't just play the game in front of you. Ask why its rules are what they are, and what they'd be if you turned a dial. That curiosity is worth more than any single win."

The young piece left turning imaginary dials on every game it knew, and feeling, for the first time, that the rules of things weren't walls but *doors*.

The Combination (Leapford • Skipjack • Prong)

*THE COMBINATION — checkers tactics aren't single moves; they're *combinations*. Prong sets up a fork (a double threat). The forced-capture rule (Leapford) means an opponent *must* jump when they can — so you can *force* them into a move you chose. And Skipjack's multi-jump chain cashes the whole thing in at once. Setup + force + chain = a combination that wins more than any single capture could.*



Draughtsmith, the master, set up a position that looked, to any beginner, completely even — and told three of his tactical students that hidden inside it was a way to win *four pieces in a single turn*.

"None of you can find it alone," he said. "Prong, you see threats. Leapford, you know the forced jump. Skipjack, you chain captures. But this —" he gestured at the quiet, balanced board — "is a *combination*, and a combination is what happens when your three moves become *one idea*." The three of them leaned in. It genuinely looked like nothing. That, Draughtsmith knew, was exactly what made it beautiful.



Prong saw it first, because Prong always looked at the empty squares. "There," she said, pointing not at a capture but at a modest central square. "If I move here, I threaten *two* of your pieces at once — a fork. You can only save one." Leapford frowned. "So you win one piece. That's not four." "Right," Prong said, "one fork alone wins one piece. On its own it's just a nice little threat." She sat back. "But I don't think this fork is *for* winning a piece. I think it's for *forcing you to move where I want*. Because the only way to save the forked piece is to move it to —" she traced a line — "*that* square. There's no other escape." She looked at Leapford. "And once your piece is on *that* square... it's your rule, not mine, that does the rest."



Leapford took it from there, because the forced-capture rule was his whole world. "If Prong forks you," he said slowly, working it out, "and you save the piece by moving it *there* — then it's sitting right next to *my* piece. And the rule of this game is: *if a jump is available, you must take it.*" His eyes widened. "So on *my* turn, I'm *forced* to jump it — but that's fine, because *I want to.* The forced-capture rule usually feels like a handcuff. But Prong just used it as a *lever.*" He looked at Prong with new respect. "You didn't just threaten two pieces. You maneuvered my opponent's piece onto the exact square where *the rules themselves* hand it to me." "The rule forces *everyone,*" Prong said, grinning. "Including your opponent. If you can control *where* the forced jump happens, you control the game." But Leapford's single jump only won *one* piece, too. He paused. "...This still isn't four."



That was Skipjack's moment, and she'd been quietly counting the whole time. "It's four," she said, "because of where Leapford lands." She stepped to the board. "When Leapford is forced to make that first jump, his piece doesn't just capture and stop. It lands *next to another one of the opponent's pieces* — which means he must jump *again*. And *that* landing sits beside a *third*. And a *fourth*." She traced the chain, her finger skipping across the board in a single unbroken line — jump, jump, jump, jump — four enemy pieces swept away in *one move*. "That's the whole combination," she said, a little breathless. "Prong's fork *forces* the opponent onto the setup square. The forced-capture rule *compels* the first jump. And the geometry of the position turns that one jump into a *chain* that takes everything." The three of them stared at the board, where a position that had looked dead even was about to lose four pieces to a sequence none of them could have built alone.



Draughtsmith watched them see it — really see it — and said what he'd brought them together to learn. "Any one of you had a *piece* of it. Prong, a fork that wins one. Leapford, a jump that wins one. Skipjack, a chain that needs a *reason* to start." He tapped the board. "But a combination isn't three tactics *added up*. It's three tactics that *depend on each other*, in *order*. Prong's fork is worthless without the forced-jump to exploit it. The forced jump is worthless without Skipjack's chain waiting past it. And Skipjack's chain can't start without Prong's fork *forcing the setup*. Take away any one, and the other two collapse into small, ordinary moves." He looked at the three of them. "*That's* why the best players don't hunt for good moves. They hunt for good *sequences* — moves that only make sense *together*." Prong ran the combination, and four enemy pieces came off the board in a single sweeping turn, and Skipjack actually whooped. Leapford, who had spent his whole life thinking the forced-capture rule was a constraint on *him*, looked at how Prong had turned it into a weapon and said, with real wonder, "I've been reading that rule backwards this whole time." "We all only had a third of it," Prong said, and for once she wasn't smiling slyly — she just looked glad. "It only became *beautiful* when we put the thirds in order."

The Endgame Duel (Regina • Kingsley • Bastian)

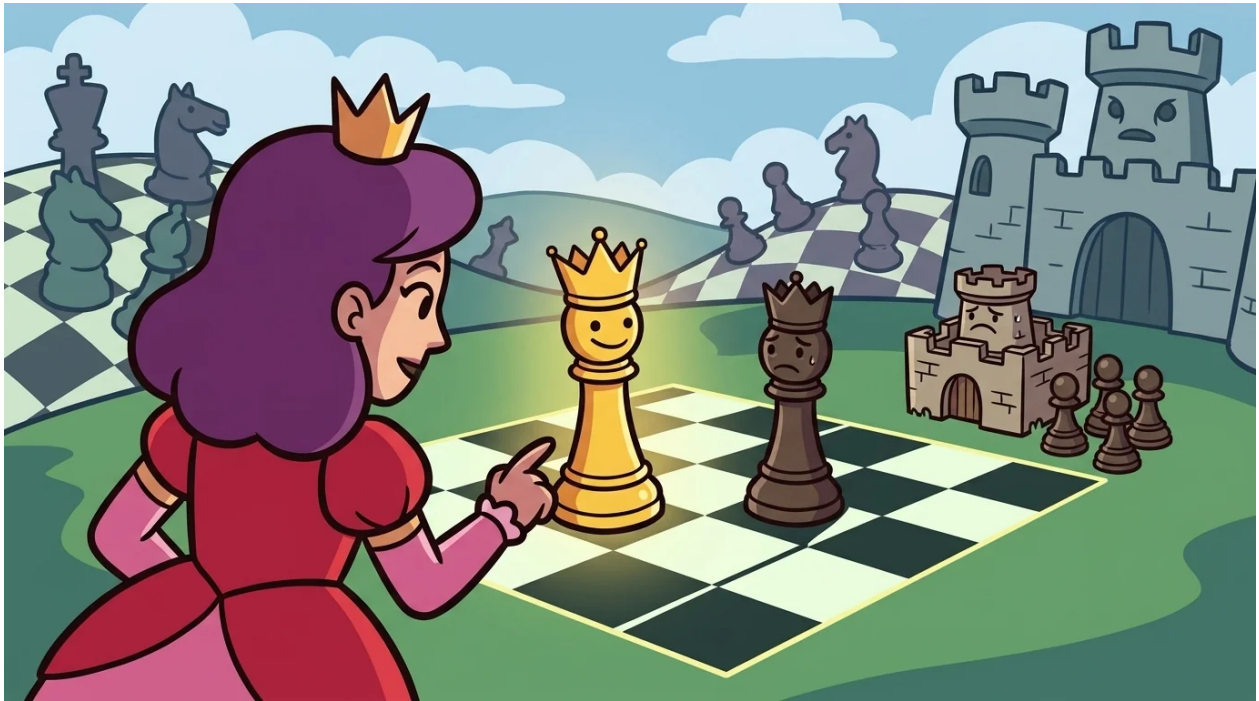
*THE ENDGAME FAMILY — with few pieces left, three ideas decide the game. Kingsley's *crowning* turns a plain piece into a two-way king. Regina's *opposition/tempo* uses the crowned king to force the opponent into the losing move. Bastian's *fortress* lets a losing side hold a draw the attacker can't break. Promote, squeeze, or hold — the endgame is won, lost, or *saved* by which of these you see first.*



Draughtsmith, the master, cleared the board down to almost nothing — a few pieces each — and told three of his endgame students that this quiet, nearly-empty board held the hardest lessons in the whole game.



"Beginners think the endgame is boring because there's so little on the board," he said. "They're wrong. It's the *hardest* part, because with few pieces, every single move is decisive — there's nowhere to hide a mistake." He looked at the three. "Kingsley, you promote. Regina, you use the crown to squeeze. Bastian, you hold when you're behind. Today one of you is winning and one of you is losing — and I want you to show these students that the losing side is *not* the same as the beaten side." He set the pieces. Regina had the edge. Bastian was down a piece. Kingsley stood between them with a plain piece one step from the far rank.



Kingsley moved first, because everything in the endgame started with *crossing over*. His plain piece reached the far rank and he was *crowned* — and the whole board changed shape around it. "A plain piece only goes forward," he said, feeling the new king move *backward* for the first time. "It's a runner — one direction, no return. But a *king* goes both ways. It can chase, retreat, guard two sides of the board at once." He slid the fresh king back across a square it could never have touched a moment ago. "In the endgame this is *everything*. A single plain piece is almost helpless with the board this empty. But the moment it crowns, it becomes the most powerful piece in the game — and both sides' whole plan has to rebuild around it." He looked at Regina. "I've made the king. But a king that just *wanders* wins nothing. Someone has to know how to *use* it."

Regina took the crowned king and did the thing that looks, to beginners, like *nothing at all* — she moved it to a specific square directly facing the enemy king, two squares away, and then simply... waited. "This is the opposition," she said. "Watch whose *turn* it is. It's yours now — and every square you can move to walks you into a loss. You *must* move, and every move makes it worse." The opponent shuffled; Regina's king stepped precisely forward, always keeping the opposition, herding the enemy toward the edge. "I'm not capturing anything," she said. "I'm using *tempo* — the fact that you're forced to move when you'd rather stand still. In the endgame, *whose turn it is* can matter more than who has more pieces. I don't beat you with force. I beat you by leaving you *no good square to step to*." Kingsley watched his king become a scalpel in her hands and understood that promotion was only half the lesson — *using* the crown was the other half.



And then everyone looked at Bastian, who was *losing* — down a piece, no promotion in sight, apparently just waiting to be ground down by Regina's technique. But Bastian was perfectly calm. "You're both playing the *winning* side of the endgame," he said. "Promote, then squeeze. It's beautiful, and if I had a worse square I'd already be lost." He walked his outnumbered king, without hurry, into the double corner. "But I don't have a worse square. I have *this* one." Regina brought her superior force to bear — and it broke on the corner like a wave on stone. She tried the opposition; it didn't matter, because Bastian's king inside the fortress always had a safe shuffle. "You have more pieces and better technique," Bastian said, unbothered, "and you *still can't get in*. Because a fortress isn't beaten by *strength* — it's a question of *structure*, and this structure has no door." Regina pushed and probed and, finally, sat back. It was a draw. She had played the winning side *perfectly* — and Bastian had played the losing side *perfectly* — and both of them were *right*.

Draughtsmith let the drawn board sit there, quiet and complete. "*That*," he said, "is the endgame. Kingsley makes the king — without promotion, there's no power to wield. Regina wields it — without tempo and opposition, the king just wanders. And Bastian *survives* it — because being behind is not the same as being beaten, and a player who can't defend a lost-looking game will throw away half the draws they deserve." He tapped the three positions. "The endgame isn't one skill. It's *promote, squeeze, and hold* — and the master is the one who knows, in any quiet position, *which* of the three the moment is asking for." Regina looked at the draw she couldn't convert and, instead of frustration, felt something like respect. "I did everything right," she said slowly, "and you did everything right, and it's a draw." "That's the endgame being honest," Bastian said gently. Kingsley, looking at the humble crowned king that had started it all, said what all three were thinking: "Alone, none of us knows the whole ending." Draughtsmith just smiled, because that was the lesson, and they'd found it

themselves.

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Methodology

Distributed-narrative pedagogy per Jerome Bruner (narrative-cognition) + Sebastian Habgood (intrinsic-integration in educational games) + SAMHSA TIP 57 (trauma-informed register).

Trauma-informed-design framework per Eggleston et al. (2025) and Stoltenburg et al. (2024).

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