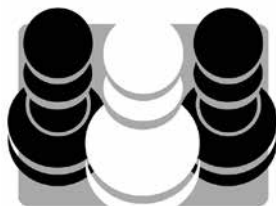


# Chess Metamorphosis

By

**Nikita Vitiugov**



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# Foreword by Ian Nepomniachtchi

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As you may know, the author of this book has a pretty decent command of Spanish. Shortly after the 2023 World Championship match in Astana, Nikita sent me a small database with analyses titled *Camino*. My Spanish is stuck at a basic ‘restaurant’ level, so I checked with an online translator. The suggested translations were:

*The Path*

*The Road*

*The Route*

*The Way*

Which was most appropriate? We can discard the third option right away, since we are not using a GPS navigator here. The fourth one, to my mind, sounds a bit too lofty. Of the remaining two, I’m more inclined towards the first.

The manuscript of this book reached me at an inconvenient time, and for a long while I couldn’t get myself into the right frame of mind to read it. But when I finally pulled myself together and opened the text file, I couldn’t tear myself away. It was not only exciting to relive numerous thrilling moments from my chess career, but also incredibly interesting to look at them – and at myself – from the outside. What matters most to me is that the narrator is not some random chess columnist or commentator, of whom there is no shortage these days, but rather my friend, one of the strongest chess players in the world in recent years, whose chess path first crossed mine back in the winter/spring of 2001 in Smolensk.

The path is set. Enjoy the journey.

# Preface

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*I had seen and experienced little, but I liked many things, and I always believed that a flight to the Moon would encompass everything I had passed by, hoping to encounter it later, once and for all; how was I to know that the best things in life are always seen only out of the corner of one's eye?*

– Viktor Pelevin, *Omon Ra*

The day starts at 07:00. My son sleeps restlessly. He wakes up at night and asks for juice. I take him to nursery by 8 o'clock. My wife heads off to work. The double-decker buses in London – a tourist's dream – run irregularly. Recently, I saw a woman fall from their steep stairs – she got distracted for a second as the bus started moving. No one warns you about the flip side of life. I stay at home. Exercise, tea, breakfast.

In the United Kingdom, chess is not recognized as a sport. This has long been the case in this traditional country. Many of us speak different languages from one another – and not just literally. I'm adapting to the local realities. It's a process. It requires effort from both sides.

In spring 2023, in the players' lounge, I was giving final advice on exactly what to play in the decisive moment of the World Championship match. For me, chess is life, sport, creativity, self-overcoming, self-fulfilment, and work. It shaped me as a person, gave me unforgettable moments of struggle, and allowed me to see many countries and meet all sorts of people. In my new world, it's more of a board game, leisure, a tool for developing cognitive skills.

I won't judge what's right. In chess itself as a game, there's often no clear-cut answer.

After a year-and-a-half of living in London, my accent has fully shifted to coaching activities. It transpired that I wasn't ready to play as a professional at my "B" level chess. The "A" time has passed. Old tournaments are disappearing from my calendar. New ones aren't appearing. Occasionally, I play weekends in the Bundesliga.

Twice a week, I go to Pilates classes. Professional chess, with its sedentary playing and training style, negatively affects health, so you need to recover in time. Joseph Pilates developed his exercise routine for soldiers injured in the war. I'm 39, and I significantly lower the average age of the group.

On Fridays, it's football time. I'm lucky – my friend's company rents a field and, when we get a full team, we play against some IT guys. Many of them play better than I do. Gradually, I'm getting back into shape. Sometimes after football, I buy meat at a butcher's shop in Islington. When I get home, I make broth from it. On Saturday morning, I use it to cook soup – either *borscht* or *shchi*.

In summer: rhubarb and strawberry pies. An English dessert. I love cooking. In the last century, on our allotment outside St. Petersburg, we also had a rhubarb bush...

I sit at my laptop, looking out of the window. People dressed in black on electric bikes, not dressed for the weather. These are teenagers out to steal phones. Once, they even stole a smartphone from our nanny. It's mostly a good neighbourhood, but every place has its problems.

At the end of August 2023, I transferred to the English Chess Federation. In March 2025, I was eligible to play in the national championship for the first time. I became the British Rapid Chess Champion. I'm not discouraged. My journey in adult chess began with a victory at the 2005 St. Petersburg Rapid Championship.

At the time of the transfer, I had spent more than a decade in the top 20-30 of world chess. A rating of 2700, considered the mark of elite class in chess, seemed like a given, as did the grandmaster title, which I had long stopped thinking about. At the time of writing, I am around 50th in the world. My rating and results have declined. There are no grounds on which to believe it's temporary.

While writing this book, I once again realized what a significant role the events of February 2022 played in my personal life. Would I have devoted all my time, energy, and ideas to working as a second or a coach if I could have played in those tournaments myself? I don't think so. For me, it was a way to be part of the events I wanted to reach as a player. I'm talking mainly about the Candidates Tournament. For various reasons, I wasn't able to do that back in my time.

I have to be honest with myself – there was never a single moment in my life when I imagined myself as a participant in a World Championship match. Perhaps one day I will write a book about my journey to make sense of it. This book is of different nature.

The laws of sports are merciless. The energy of youth brings hope. You move forward, opening new doors. Over time, speed drops; growth slows. You hit a ceiling. Not so much of your own development, but of the available opportunities. It's well known that if you're not climbing upwards, you eventually start regressing. Not everyone finds the motivation to repeat at 40 what they did at 20. I didn't. You lack energy, because you understand that everything in life comes at a price. If you gain something somewhere, you lose something elsewhere. You lack time, especially if, alongside your sporting life, you're also living a human life.

Circumstances forced me to write this book. I wanted to play chess – but I had no tournaments. I wanted to coach, to help others unleash their potential – but I had no students. I wanted to record a course on openings – but my English wasn't fluent enough. Wait, that's on me. Just like my choices are.

This book came into being because I wanted to write it. I went through events that changed me profoundly. I gained rich, in some ways unique, experiences. I lived through Candidates Tournaments and a World Championship match from the inside. It seemed to me that readers might find this interesting to learn about.

At the same time, I am writing this book for myself. To preserve on paper a vibrant period of my life. To relive it through the process of writing and thereby free myself from it. It's about me. About competition. About what it means to be a player, a second, a coach. About tension, about the sporting struggle. About life in the pivotal years of the 2020s: pandemic, war, relocations, changes of federations.

There is a second main character in this book. Almost all the games included were played by Ian Nepomniachtchi. He is an outstanding Russian chess player who, as of today, has played in two World Championship matches and won two Candidates Tournaments on his way there. I want to tell the story of his journey – the part of it that I was able to witness firsthand, up close. The part in which I had the chance to participate.

The book features many high-level games. But first and foremost, it is about people. I hope it may be interesting not only to chess lovers and top-level professionals, even though I discuss my transformation as a second, our struggles in Candidates Tournaments, and the specifics of preparing for a World Championship match.

I hope that someone, after reading this book, will become passionate about chess, captivated by its unique world – just as I was more than thirty years ago. Although both the world and chess have changed over that time, the essence of things remains the same. It is still a game played by people.

Nikita Vitiugov  
London 2026

There's a mild sense of panic in our taxi. I can see we're almost there. But first, we have to let others pass, then make the turn...

- *Salimos aquí*, I tell the driver.
- *Vale, lo conocéis?*
- *Sí, no te preocupes.*

It's handy to have your own guy on the ground, Ian notes.

We take a wrong turn, but we still make it to the venue without trouble. The tournament is held at the Palacio de Santoña.

### Ding Liren – Ian Nepomniachtchi

Candidates Tournament (1), Madrid 2022

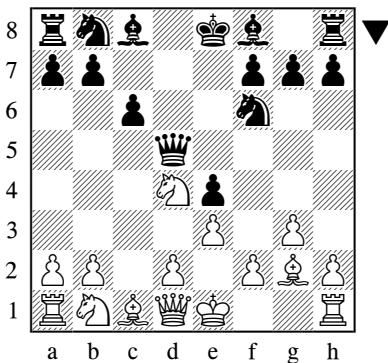
#### 1.c4

Ding's repertoire is built around lines featuring a fianchettoed bishop on g2, making the English Opening a natural fit.

#### 1...e5 2.g3 c6

A couple of months later, Ian will experience the difference between 2...c6 and 3...c6 – and the cost of that lesson will be quite high:

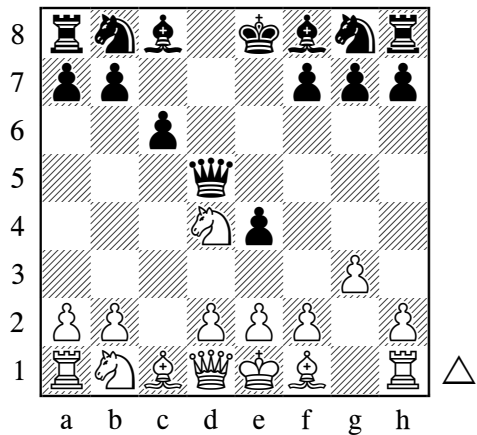
2...♘f6 3.♙g2 c6 4.♘f3 e4 5.♘d4 d5 6.cxd5 ♗xd5 7.e3



And now 7...♙c5 isn't as great as with bishop on f1 and the knight on g8: 8.d3! ♙xd4 9.dxe4 ♘xe4 10.exd4 White has a little bit of an initiative going.

Thus, Ian chose 7...♘a6?! but it only made things worse: 8.d3 ♙b4† 9.♘c3 ♙xc3† 10.bxc3 ♘c5 11.c4 ♖e5 12.dxe4 ♘cxe4 13.0-0± There was no real compensation for White's bishop pair in Firouzja – Nepomniachtchi, St. Louis (rapid) 2022, a game which White went on to win, thus clinching the tie-break for that year's Sinquefeld Cup.

#### 3.♘f3 e4 4.♘d4 d5 5.cxd5 ♗xd5

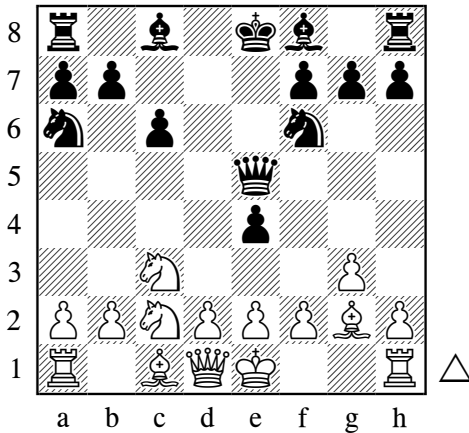


#### 6.♘c2

In this version, there is no real choice for White, as after 6.e3 ♙c5 Black equalizes easily: 7.♘c3 ♖e5 8.d3 exd3 9.♗xd3 ♘f6 10.♙g2 ♙xd4 11.♗xd4 ♖xd4 12.exd4 ♙e6 13.♙g5 ♘bd7 With comfortable, full equality in Svidler – Nepomniachtchi, Internet (rapid) 2022.

6...♖f6 7.♘c3 ♚e5 8.♙g2 ♘a6

A typical even if odd-looking move, once questionable but now universally accepted. It's the engine recommendation after all. At this point, White has a few different options.



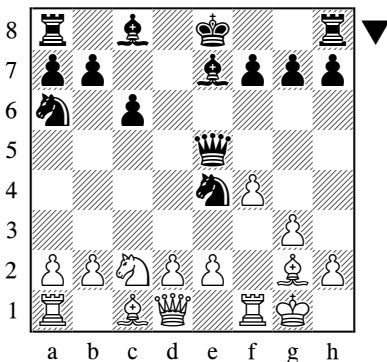
9.0–0

The main alternative is delaying castling by 9.♖b1, when a characteristic example continued: 9...h5 10.d4 exd3 11.♚xd3 ♘b4 12.♘xb4 ♙xb4 13.♙f4 ♚f5 14.e4 ♚d7 15.♚c2 h4 With complex play in Matlakov – Ter-Sahakyan, Isle of Man 2023.

9...♙e7 10.♘e3

A temporary knight sacrifice got some attention back then, but now it has been reduced to a memory test, nothing more:

10.♘xe4 ♘xe4 11.f4



11...♚d5!

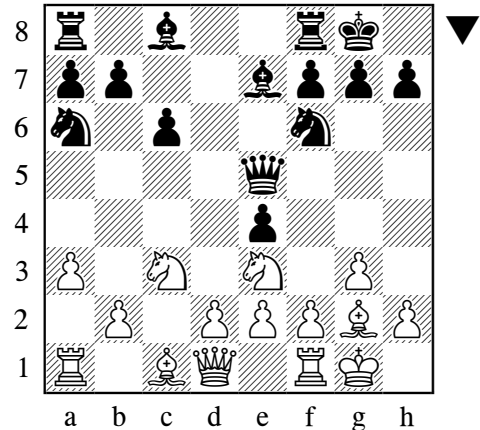
The clean solution.

11...♚e6 led to a suspicious position after 12.f5 ♚d5 13.d4 ♙f6 14.g4 0–0 15.g5 with some initiative for White in J. van Foreest – Navara, Prague 2021.  
12.d3 ♙c5† 13.♘e3 ♙f5! 14.dxe4 ♙xe4 15.♚xd5 cxd5 16.♙xe4 dxe4

That was Shimanov – Ter-Sahakyan, Internet (rapid) 2024, reaching an endgame that is considered to be quite solid for Black.

10...0–0 11.a3

White's play comes down to an eventual queenside expansion with b2–b4.



11...♗e8

A good but quite complex direction.

There is nothing wrong with the natural plan of bringing the a6-knight into play: 11...♘c7!? 12.b4 ♘fd5 13.♘exd5 ♘xd5 14.♙b2 ♙f5 15.♚c2 ♘xc3 16.♙xc3 ♚e6 That was Niemann – Adams, London 2023, and I might even prefer Black at this point.

12.b4 ♘g4?!

Nepo was trying to recall his preparation and misremembered, which led him to playing this strange move. I can't say I was thrilled to see it. The pawn sacrifice is playable, but by no means necessary.

More natural was 12...♔f8 13.♙b2 ♚h5, but I believe he had some idea that the bishop might need to go to f6 instead of f8. That's the burden of deep preparation: sometimes, it backfires on you!

**13. ♙b2**

13.♙xe4!? is also possible.

**13... ♚h5 14.h4?!**

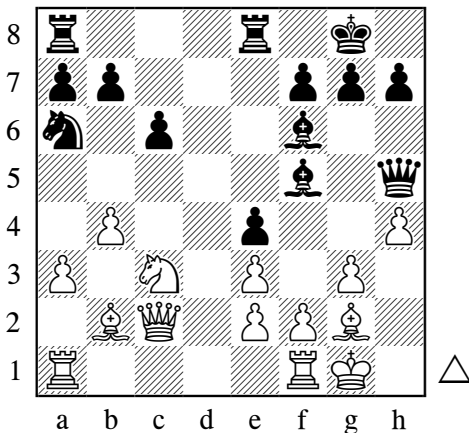
Again rejecting the pawn on offer. That's a very timid response. Ding was visibly not at his best that day. I can only speculate as to why, but the lack of activity and the slow decision-making were evident.

I am not sure why he rejected 14.♘g4 ♙xg4 15.♙xe4. Yes, Black has some compensation, but let's not forget that White has cleanly grabbed a central pawn. For example: 15...♙f6 (15...♘c7! is the engine's preference, but humans have a strong tendency to prefer forcing moves in pawn-down situations.) 16.f3 ♙h3 17.♞f2 White is very solid.

**14... ♙f6 15. ♚c2 ♘xe3 16.dxe3**

White king is optically safe now, but the fate of the bishop on g2 remains a big question.

**16... ♙f5**



**17. ♘a4?**

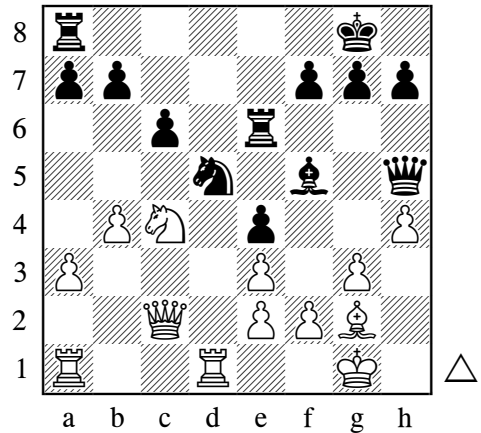
From now until the end of the game, 17.b5! looked logical. Maybe White is even a bit better after the immediate break. But somehow Ding thought playing it slowly was better, which makes us think he probably severely underestimated the risks he was facing on the kingside.

**17... ♙xb2 18. ♘xb2?!**

This signals that White is heading for a5 with the knight, but it again shows an underestimation regarding the long-term danger faced on the kingside. White doesn't have all the time in the world.

18.♚xb2, with the idea of having ♘c5 whenever Black plays ...♘c7, is a far better direction.

**18... ♘c7 19. ♘c4 ♞e6 20. ♞fd1 ♘d5**



**21. ♞d4?**

According to the engine, White is lost after this. The most punishing way isn't easy to spot but, even after a normal move such as Ian's response, White is in practical trouble.

21.b5 was an absolute must.

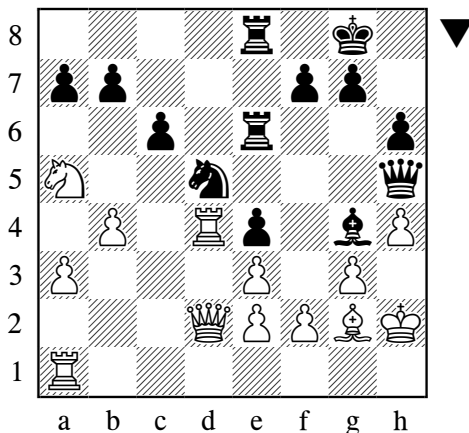
**21...h6**

21...g5! would be more energetic. After 22.hxg5 ♖xg5 I guess Ian might have missed that Black can always start with ...♖h6, and ♜d2 is never an option because of ...♜xe3. For example, 23.b5 ♖h6 (not 23...♖h5? 24.♜d2! and the knight is back) 24.♜d2 ♜xe3! and Black wins.

**22.♖d2?**

Another slow move, and White won't really be given another chance.

22...♖ae8 23.♔h2 ♚g4 24.♜a5

**24...♖f6**

A decent practical decision, sending the king back to g1 before ♖h1 can be played.

24...g5 would allow 25.♖h1 gxh4 26.♔g1, when after 26...h3 Stockfish evaluates the position as bad for White. But at least the house is protected for the time being, and Black's win isn't obvious.

**25.♔g1 g5 26.♜xb7**

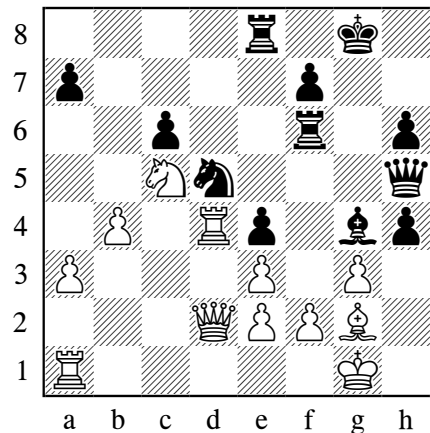
Wrong pawn. The key one is on c6, and it should have been challenged by 26.b5!, as was true many times before.

**26...gxh4**

Now there's no going back. Black has crashed through.

**27.♜c5**

Black has many ways to win. Nepo executes it flawlessly.



27...h3 28.♖xc4 hxg2 29.♖xe8† ♔g7 30.f4  
30.♔xg2 allows: 30...♖xf2† 31.♔xf2 ♖h2†  
32.♔f1 ♚h3† 33.♔e1 ♖g1#

30...♖h1† 31.♔f2 ♖xa1 32.♔xg2 ♚h3†  
0-1

A fantastic start to the tournament for Ian. That's the second time he starts the Candidates with a win with Black.

The Chinese grandmaster is clearly dejected after the game. But in a tournament like this, everyone has their own challenges, and we won't return to thoughts of Ding until the second half. Like Ian, Caruana starts with a win, making the second round feel especially important. Traditionally, Fabiano prepares one opening for the Candidates and studies it in extreme depth. Then again, the same can be said for other contenders aiming to win the tournament. But for now, it's only the second round, and even Caruana's first move remains a mystery.



*Nepomniachtchi at the 2022 Candidates Tournament in Madrid*



