

Cyrus Lakdawala

# Nepomniachtchi

move by move

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# About the Author

**Cyrus Lakdawala** is an International Master, a former National Open and American Open Champion, and a six-time State Champion. He has been teaching chess for over 40 years, and coaches some of the top junior players in the U.S.

## **Also by the Author:**

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*The Slav: Move by Move*

*The Trompowsky Attack: Move by Move*

# Contents

About the Author	3
Bibliography	5
Introduction	7
1 Prodigy: 2003-2009	13
2 Gathering Power: 2010-2018	67
3 The Road to Magnus: 2019-2021	218
4 What Would Nepo Do?	366
5 Solutions	380
Index of Opponents	428
Index of Openings	429

# Introduction

Before writing this book, my knowledge of Ian Nepomniachtchi was scant, as he was somewhat under my radar. Since then, I have learned the following:

1) His name is unbelievably difficult to memorize for spelling purposes, so much so that GM Anish Giri wrote the following in *New in Chess*: “People usually stop writing Ian Nepomniachtchi’s name after four letters because of the chaos that ensues around letter number 8!” Maybe the proper title for this book is *Nepomniachtchi: Letter by Letter*.

2) Every online commentator refers to him affectionately by his nickname “Nepo”.

3) He is a gifted video game player, at a semi-professional level. Nepo was introduced to the video game *Dota* in 2006 and became a member of the team that won the ASUS Cup in the Winter 2011 *Dota* tournament. He also served as a commentator at the ESL One Hamburg 2018 *Dota 2* tournament, using the handle *FrostNova*. He also plays *Hearthstone* and introduced fellow Russian grandmaster Peter Svidler to the game, after which the two GMs provided feedback to *Hearthstone* developers.

4) Perhaps influenced by the Buddha, Nepo stylishly wears his hair in a man-bun.

5) Ian majored in journalism and graduated from Russian State Social University.

6) Nepo excels in attack and open and irrational positions, so it isn’t such a big surprise that he cites Tal as his all-time favourite player and the one who most influenced his chess.

7) He is one of those stratospheric players who have actually accumulated a plus score over Magnus Carlsen in classical time control games (four wins to one, with six draws) – although, for full disclosure, a number of them were played when both were children. In the coming world championship match, we are about to see a clash of two great players in their primes. We can be certain that Magnus is salivating to settle a long, unavenged vendetta, since world champions insist on a plus score against everyone! On the other hand, there is no greater animosity than that of number 2 for number 1, so Nepo will be equally determined to unseat Magnus and take his crown.

Ian Alexandrovich Nepomniachtchi was born on July 14th 1990 in Bryansk to a Jewish/Russian family, still during the Soviet Union era, over a year before its collapse. He was born into a literary family, and grandfather Boris Iosifovich was a well-known lyricist. Nepo learned chess at the relatively early age of four and it soon became apparent that the child displayed extraordinary talent. He was that kid for whom every answer in class came easily.

So much so that his natural abilities made “ordinary” prodigies feel dumb by comparison.

His first teacher was his uncle, Igor Nepomniashchy. GM Valentin Evdokimenko then took over, coaching him from age five to thirteen. Right from the start, Ian looked like he was on a clean trajectory to potential world champion. He won European Junior Championships three times: the under-10 category in 2000, and the under-12 in both 2001 and 2002. In 2002, Ian also won the World Junior Championship U12 category, edging out another prodigy, Magnus Carlsen, on tiebreaks. In their individual game Magnus played the Black side of Alekhine’s Defence and lost a level game to Nepo. At that time Ian’s Elo rating was almost 100 points higher than Magnus’, and Nepo was considered the more gifted prodigy of the two. So it must rankle with Nepo to play second fiddle to Magnus, since there is no horror greater than being passed by a player who was once lower rated than you.

Ian became an International Master at age 13. In 2007, he finished second in the C group at Wijk aan Zee, earning his first Grandmaster norm. Nepo picked up his second and third norms later the same year: at the European Individual Championship in Dresden, followed by the World’s Youth Stars tournament in Kirishi, which Nepomniachtchi won on tiebreak, having scored  $2\frac{1}{2}/3$  against his three rivals. So by age 16, Ian became Grandmaster Ian. (For context, Abhimanyu Mishra holds the record for youngest ever GM title at the age of 12 years and 4 months, while Magnus became a GM at 13 years and 4 months!) He kept steadily improving, raising his rating and winning numerous tournaments (I’m not going to fill the next page with a list of all his victories from age 16 to 28!). In December 2020, he won the Russian Championship with  $7\frac{1}{2}/11$ , edging out former Carlsen challenger, Karjakin, by half a point. In 2021, Nepomniachtchi won the 2020/21 Candidates tournament with  $8\frac{1}{2}/14$  (+5-2=7), this time half a point above Maxime Vachier-Lagrave – which is the impetus for this book, since that tournament victory gave Nepo the right to challenge Magnus Carlsen for the World Championship. His FIDE ratings at the time of writing are: 2784 at the classical time control, 2778 rapid, and 2785 blitz.

## **The Match Against Magnus in Dubai**

This book is about Ian Nepomniachtchi, yet the giant shadow of Magnus Carlsen looms over it. For us, chess is a game. When it is played for the world championship, it is no longer just that. Magnus’ persona is that of a rock star who fills every seat in the stadium. In other words, he is already a player whose name stands with the all-time greats. Nepo has yet to prove himself at the very highest level of a world championship match. Nepo’s obstacles are formidable, yet if he wins the match his name will become enshrined in the elite group, alongside Lasker, Capablanca, Alekhine and so on; if he loses then he gets downgraded to challengers who tried for the supreme title and failed, like Tarrasch, Bogoljubow and Korchnoi. No pressure!

How does one qualify for the process of chess canonization? To be a chess saint, one must become world champion. To get there, a player must pull off multiple miracles:

- 1) They must first reach an elite level in the chess world.
- 2) They must win the Candidates tournament, which picks the challenger, and in so doing must push aside a group of ridiculously talented grandmasters.
- 3) As challenger, they must dethrone the reigning world champion.

Of these, number three is the most difficult to achieve – and how much more so when your opponent is considered to be a strong candidate for all-time greatest chess player?

This is a book about a player whose most important games haven't even been played yet (unless of course you buy it *after* Nepo's match with Carlsen).

The first rule of a match is to be observant of the opponent's habits, stylistic likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses. Those observations can then be weaponized. This is the part of the movie where the manager massages his underdog fighter's shoulders and gives the inspiring pep talk in the ring, just moments before the fighter faces the heavyweight champion.

Is Nepo going to be the next world champion, or will he be another name on the list of challengers dispatched by Magnus Carlsen? I don't really know, but it is at least possible to consider whether they are competing on an even playing field. Let's analyse:

**1) Openings/preparation:** I give the edge to Magnus for two reasons. Firstly, Magnus' repertoire is more varied and therefore more difficult to prepare against, meaning that Nepo must spread his pre-match preparation more thinly. Secondly, Nepo specializes in high-risk openings such as the Najdorf Poisoned Pawn (here is the *Poisoned Pawn for Dummies* game plan: get in, grab the b2-pawn, get out as quietly as possible, don't lose your queen, don't get mated!) and Grünfeld, either of which may not be that well suited for match play, where the goal is generally play for a win with White and hold a draw with Black. When it comes to these two lines, Nepo is a true believer and protector of the faith. Magnus' repertoire, on the other hand, contains both risky and safe options. But maybe Nepo doesn't want to play it safe, even with Black. Who knows, he may even score wins with the black pieces.

**2) Endgame technique:** Carlsen, of course, since every other player's endgame technique is peasant-like in comparison. I rank Magnus in the top three endgame players of all time. Nepo is a brilliant endgame player but still a level below Magnus.

**3) Attack:** Nepo! In my opinion Nepo is the most skilled attacker on the planet and his games are studies in pre-meditated acts of violence.

**4) Irrational positions:** Nepo thrives on anarchy and chaos, and if I had to pick the top player in the world in irrational positions, it would be him. On multiple occasions he has burned Magnus when the world champion attempted to generate head-spinning complications.

**5) Strategic understanding:** Magnus is the strongest strategist in the world, perhaps tied with Fabiano Caruana.

**6) Open positions:** Nepo excels in open games, and I predict that Magnus will try his best to evade them in the match.

**7) Initiative:** Nepo. Nobody in the world is more lethal with the initiative.

**8) Intuition:** What we all want, don't have, and can never get, is near-perfect chess intuition. Only a handful of players in chess history have had it and only one player alive today. Magnus is the new Capablanca and nobody in the world possesses his level of intuition. Magnus moves a piece to a certain square and then, 15 moves later, by magic, it just happens to be perfectly placed.

**9) Defence:** You can't kill your enemy twice, unless he is Magnus Carlsen, in which case you must, since he has a strong claim of being the greatest defensive player in chess history. Even though Nepo is an excellent defender, Magnus dominates this category. Anyone who is capable of surviving 125 classical time control games without a single loss, against a rating average over 2700 Elo, is one of the greatest – if not *the* greatest – defenders of all time. So in this match we come upon the paradox/rivalry between the irresistible force and the immovable object.

**10) Assessment abilities:** Kasparov once noted that the main reason Magnus is number one is his ability to assess even the most baffling positions.

**11) Nerves/Coolness under pressure:** The tension of a world championship match is almost beyond comprehension. Make one powerful move in a key game and your name lives in chess history; botch the move and your name becomes a footnote. This category is a tie. Neither player is the nervous type and both are phenomenal under pressure. Of course, the rules tend to alter in world championship matches. The expectations for Carlsen are crushing; anything below dominance is interpreted by the critics as failure. Magnus was criticized (unfairly!) for his super-safe play in his matches against Karjakin and Caruana, both of which he failed to win in the classical portion of the match. What the critics failed to factor in is that Carlsen was unafraid of a tie at that point, since he was rightfully confident he would beat both players in the rapid and blitz games. And he did just that. For Nepo, it's now or never, since you generally don't get a second shot at a world championship title (unless your name is Korchnoi). So the pressure on him is also unimaginable.

**12) Clutch player:** Magnus is the Michael Jordan of chess, in that he always seems to dig deeply and pull out a win when he needs it. In his match against Karjakin, Magnus was a point down with four games to play and managed to level the score and then easily win the rapid/blitz games. The last time I saw him play online, at the Crypto Cup, he faced elimination five times. Magnus won all five of those games when he most needed to and ended up winning the tournament. If that isn't a description of a clutch player, then what is?

**13) Creativity/risk-taking:** Neither player is afraid of the dark and both tend to allow free reign to their imaginations. Both are willing to give up a lot to seize initiative, attack, or even complicate. These factors are not necessarily an advantage; in a match setting they may even be a minus! Sometimes a super-aggressive risk-taker may be their own worst enemy, even more so than the actual opponent. I rate Magnus as the more creative player, while Nepo and Magnus are tied in the appalling-risk taking category. Restraint is neither player's strong suit! And there are other types of courage besides sacrifice. It also takes

courage to grab material and allow your opponent the initiative or an attack for it, and both indulge in this – Nepo, right from the opening, with his Poisoned Pawn Najdorf. The new 14-game format means there may be more risk-taking, since there is more time to recover from a loss; whereas a loss with fewer games to play is a potential disaster. I have no idea whether either player will go high risk this match, but if one or both do, the result is impossible to predict.

**14) Natural ability:** Are great chess players born or do they arise from great toil? The answer is both, but the former seems more important, since there have been, by their own admission, some comparatively lazy world champions (Capa and Spassky come to mind). Although both players are gifted with staggering levels of natural talent, my guess is that Magnus possesses more of it.

**15) Self-confidence:** A world champion's super-power – especially a dominant champion like Carlsen – is that he tends to instil fear in his rivals. But what if one rival isn't intimidated? Magnus' "invincibility" factor took a hit when he sunk into a slump at the end of 2020 and well into 2021. I call this one a tie. It is the psychological nature of a world champion to have supreme belief in his own ability. Yet Nepo must enter the match with confidence as well, since he has a plus lifetime score over Magnus and knows he can be beaten. On the other hand, Fischer had never beaten Spassky before their world championship match and yet won with relative ease.

**16) Motivation:** This category is a tie. Nepo has trained for this moment his entire life, while Magnus is playing a difficult opponent and wants to prove that he can beat *anyone*.




**17) Psychological advantage:** Nepo has the edge here. It wasn't until 2019 when Magnus finally won his first classical time control game against Nepo, whose lifetime score remains at 4-1 in his favour. Magnus confessed: "And yes, my score against him is bad. Even in games from 2011 onwards, he leads 2-1. So I do think about turning this around to a positive score during the match." Furthermore, Nepo has in the past been Magnus' second, which means he probably got a closer look into the inner workings of the world champion's mind than the other way around.

**18) Match experience:** This is a no-brainer. Magnus wins this category by a mile, since he has already faced Anand (twice), Caruana and Karjakin. So he understands the pressures involved in a world championship match, whereas this will be new to Nepo and we have no idea how he will handle it.

**19) Rapid time control skills:** Advantage Magnus, whose stats are higher. The ratio: Magnus leads 20-10, with 32 draws.

One infallible law of life is that if you obtain something precious, there is always someone who seeks to take it from you. That someone this time is Nepo, who wants Magnus' title, which no previous challenger has been able to take. Does Nepo have the power to bring about Magnus' Götterdämmerung? Although there have been only a handful of upsets in world championship history, no player – no matter how great – is exempt from an upset loss in a title match against a top-ranked challenger. The following come to mind:



-  Alekhine taking down an over-confident and under-prepared Capa.
-  Euwe defeating an alcohol-weakened Alekhine.
-  Kramnik defeating Kasparov, who refused to give up trying to break down Kramnik's Berlin Wall.

Will this match be another upset win for the challenger? I saw an article about an Indian clairvoyant (who doesn't even play chess!) who claims that Nepo will win the match. Every time a world championship match approaches, Everyman expects me to predict the outcome, as if I were both clairvoyant and a prophet. Obviously I'm neither, but let's give it a shot anyway. If I have to choose, I'd make Magnus a 60-40 favourite, to win the match by two points with, say, a score of three wins and one loss. I also checked the Chess.com survey and a whopping 84% predicted Carlsen will win the match and retain his title, while only a fringe 16% predicted a new champion. Having said that, nobody actually knows the scope of Nepo's true power until the match is over. Can Nepo prove the 84% majority wrong?

The games in this book are arranged in chronological order, so Nepomniachtchi essentially becomes stronger and stronger as you progress through it – until you reach 2021, where he becomes Magnus Carlsen's official challenger for the World Chess Championship.

May your own understanding of chess rise from the study of Nepo's games.

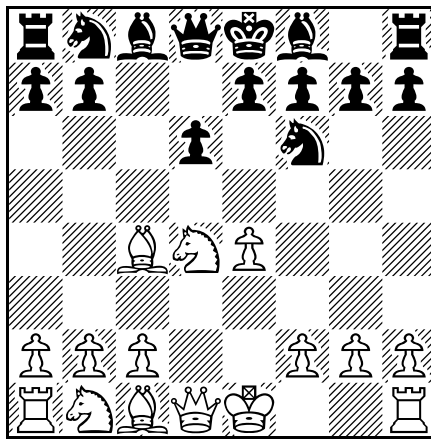
Many thanks to Ville Matias (Father Vasilios) for his help in researching Nepo's life; and thanks as usual to Nancy for proof reading.

Cyrus Lakdawala, July 2021

One trait both Nepo and Magnus have in common is that, occasionally, both go clinically insane, give away all their material, and then fail to mate. The only reason you won't see much of that from Nepo's side is that we aren't showing his losses in this book!

Game 44  
**Ma.Carlsen-I.Nepomniachtchi**  
 Carlsen Invitational (rapid) 2020  
*Sicilian Defence*

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♗xd4 ♘f6 5 ♕c4!?



In psychiatric terms this move would fall under the category of shock therapy. Magnus attempts to lure his opponent out of mainstream theory as early as possible.

**5...♗xe4!**

This pawn grab is a reliable equalizer. After 5...e6 6 0-0? ♕e7?! (6...♗xe4! is even better now; see the next note) 7 ♕d3 ♗c6 8 ♗xc6 bxc6 9 c4 0-0 10 ♗c3 e5 (10...d5 may be more accurate) 11 ♕e3 ♕e6 12 ♖e2 ♗d7 13 ♖fd1 ♖c7?!, Ma.Carlsen-M.Vachier Lagrave, Carlsen Invitational (rapid) 2020, Magnus could have gained a strategic advantage with the trick 14 ♗d5!, when Black must lose the bishop pair, no matter how he responds.

**6 ♖h5**

It's not quite Scholar's Mate, but it's a close knock-off.

Note that 6 ♕xf7+ isn't as brilliant as it first appears: 6...♔xf7 7 ♖h5+ g6 8 ♖d5+ ♔g7 9 ♖xe4 e5 10 ♗f3 ♗c6 11 0-0 d5 and I already prefer Black, who owns the centre and bishop pair, J.Cacko-P.Sekowski, correspondence 2015.

The Morphyan sacrifice-for-development 6 0-0? isn't very inspiring either, scoring a depressing 9.1% for White, who gets little to no compensation after 6...e6 7 ♖e1 d5.

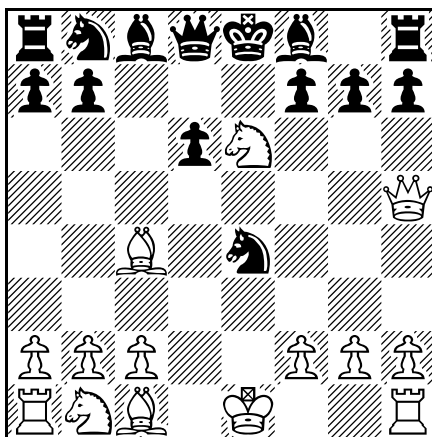
**6...e6**

**Question:** Why invite a sacrifice on e6 when Black can just play 6...g6 and gain a tempo?

**Answer:** You just fell into a trap! 7 ♖d5! e6 8 ♜xe4 wins a piece.

7 ♜xe6?

Magnus would have been wise to assume the attitude of a penitent and settle for 7 ♜b5+ ♜d7 8 ♜xe6 ♜ef6 9 ♜xd8 ♜xh5 10 ♜xd7+! (this way White's d8-knight isn't trapped) 10...♜xd7 11 ♜xb7 ♜c6 12 ♜a5 ♜xg2 13 ♜g1 ♜e4 14 c4, though Black stands at least even due to the bishop pair, J.Jordan-We.Müller, correspondence 1995.



Okey dokey, suicide it is. Like Icarus, who flew too close to the sun and then came plunging back to Earth with a splat, Magnus succumbs to a case of temporary insanity with an unsound piece sacrifice. It may be true, as with Emanuel Lasker, that it's no simple matter to respond to Magnus' unsound ideas, who counts on colossal natural ability to bail him out in the complications. On the other hand, a piece is still a piece.

**Exercise (critical decision):** Black can play 7...♜xe6 immediately or throw in 7...♜e7. One line is level, while the other wins for Black. Which would you play?

**Answer:** Chopping the knight at once gives Black a winning position.

7...♜xe6!

This is pretty much a refutation of White's sacrifice. After 7...♜e7?, as in B.Sawyer-M.McCue, Dallas 2002, White had 8 ♜b5+! ♜c6 9 ♜d5! ♜d7 10 ♜xe4 ♜xe6 11 ♜d5, when he escapes to an equal position.

8 ♜xe6 ♜e7!

This move is the problem. White's bishop is unable to move off the e-file without allowing Black a lethal discovered check.

9 ♖xf7+

Now if 9 ♖b5+ ♗c6, Black keeps the piece since 10 ♕d5?? ♗c3+ picks off White's queen.

9... ♖xf7 10 ♖e2 ♖e7 11 0-0

**Question:** Doesn't White still have a considerable lead in development?

**Answer:** Unfortunately for Magnus, it isn't considerable enough! Not enough to justify having given up a piece.

11... ♗f6 12 ♕e3

Or 12 ♖d1 ♖f7 13 ♜e1+ ♕e7 14 ♖xd6 ♗c6 15 ♗c3 0-0 and White's two extra pawns aren't enough for the missing knight.

12... ♗c6 13 ♗c3 d5!

Threatening ...d5-d4.

14 ♖f3 0-0-0

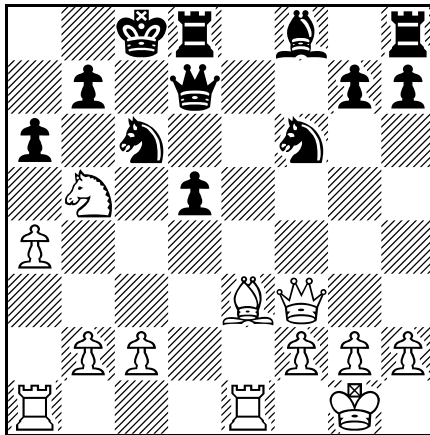
Or 14...d4 anyway, since 15 ♜fe1 0-0-0 16 ♕g5 ♖f7 17 ♗e4 ♕e7 is winning for Black.

15 ♜fe1

Threatening discovered attacks on b6 and a7, which are easily avoided.

15... ♖d7 16 ♗b5 a6 17 a4!?

If 17 ♗d4 then 17... ♕d6 consolidates.



17... ♖g4!

White's chances fall close to zero with queens off the board. The engines may want to grab the knight: 17...axb5!? 18 axb5 ♗b8 19 ♕b6 ♕d6 20 ♜e3 ♗e4 and Black is winning; but no human would pick this line over the one Nepo played in the game.

18 ♖xg4+ ♗xg4 19 ♕b6

19 ♗a7+ ♖c7 is completely hopeless for White.

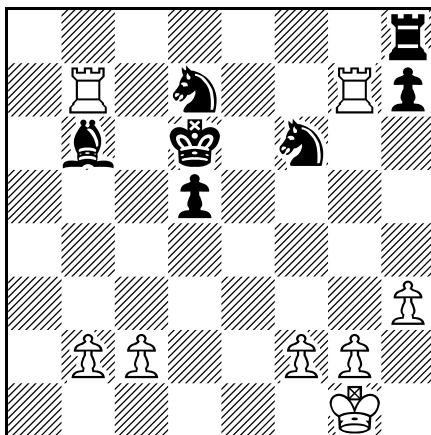
19...axb5 20 axb5 ♗b8 21 ♕xd8 ♖xd8

Black's three minor pieces will soon overwhelm White's extra rook and two pawns.

22 h3 ♘f6 23 ♖a7 ♚c7 24 ♖e6 ♙c5 25 b6+ ♙xb6 26 ♖e7+ ♚d6

Again Nepo opts for the simplest, most forcing solution ahead of anything like 26...♘bd7 27 ♖a3 g6.

27 ♖axb7 ♘bd7 28 ♖xg7



**Exercise (combination alert):** Calling this a “combination” is a bit of an exaggeration. How did Nepo force resignation in a single move?

**Answer:** Trapped piece.

28...♚c6! 0-1

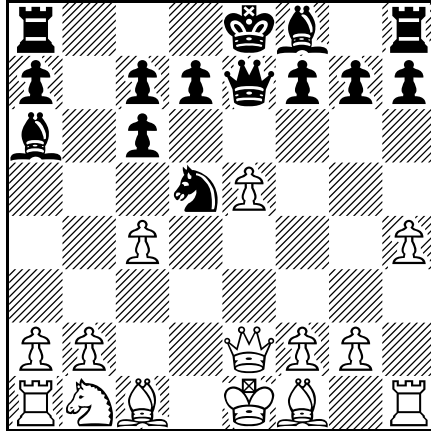
White loses another exchange.

### Game 45

## I.Nepomniachtchi-Ding Liren

Legends of Chess (rapid) 2020  
Scotch Game

1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♘c6 3 d4 exd4 4 ♘xd4 ♘f6 5 ♘xc6 bxc6 6 e5 ♚e7 7 ♚e2 ♘d5 8 c4 ♙a6 9 h4!?



Apparently, chess principles are only for the ordinary and not for the elite. Even great players can love a shady line and, for their forbidden love, later suffer cruelly.

**Question:** It's difficult to believe the solution to a lag in development is to waste more time! Isn't this move obviously an error?

**Answer:** I suppose the mind of imagination considers orthodoxy a vice which should be suppressed. On the other hand, such a blatant violation of principle probably lurches past risky into the realm of dubious. The ideas behind the move:

1. To meet a future ...g7-g6 with h4-h5.
2. Pushing the h-pawn allows the h1-rook to enter the game via h3
3. Black nearly always challenges the e5-pawn with a future ...d7-d6 or ...f7-f6. With a rook on the third rank, White can respond with ♖e3 (assuming we chase Black's knight from d5 first).
4. It prevents Black from playing the ...g7-g5 option.

The trouble is that these don't make up for White's massive development deficit.

### 9...f6

Principle: *Create confrontation and open the position when leading in development.* Or perhaps castle first. 9...0-0-0! is a superior response, backed up by *Fat Fritz's* approval, after which White scores an alarmingly low 35%. For example, after 10 ♖h3 ♖e8 11 f4, P.Dachter-Z.Sanner, correspondence 2003, and now 11...f6, White's position already looks difficult.

### 10 ♖h3

Nepo seems intent on bringing out major pieces before minor. Believe it or not, this is a book move, the idea of Dutch GM John Van der Wiel back in 1987. The rook can later swing across to either a3 or e3, once Black's knight is induced away from d5.

### 10...fxe5

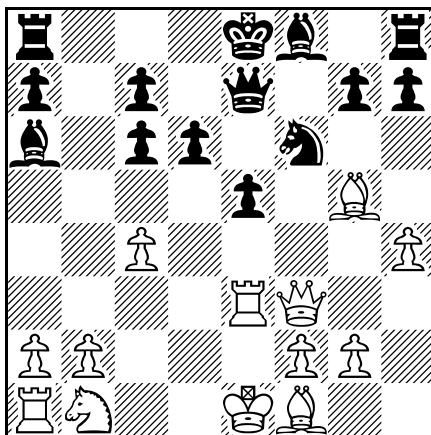
## Nepomniachtchi: Move by Move

10...♖b6 is a safer option; e.g. 11 exf6 ♖xe2+ 12 ♙xe2 ♙xc4 13 fxg7 (or 13 ♖e3+ ♔d8) 13...♙xg7 14 ♙h5+ ♔d8 15 ♘c3 ♘c8, P.Dukaczewski-I.Seitaj, Moscow Olympiad 1994, which the engine calls even, whereas I prefer Black due to the central pawn majority.

**11 ♙g5 ♘f6 12 ♖e3 d6?!**

This natural move doesn't work out well. Instead, 12...0-0-0! 13 ♖a3 (not 13 ♖xe5? ♖b4+ 14 ♗d2 ♙xc4) 13...♙b7 14 ♖xa7 ♖e6 and if 15 ♘c3 ♙c5 16 ♖a5 ♙b6 17 ♖xe5?!, R.Vaishali-Lei Tingjie, Women's Speed Chess (blitz) 2021, then 17...♙xf2+! 18 ♚xf2 ♘g4+ 19 ♚g1 ♘xe5 20 ♙xd8 ♖xd8 is better for Black.

**13 ♗f3!**



Unpinning the c-pawn while gaining a tempo on c6.

**13...e4**

Black has also tried:

a) 13...♙b7 14 ♖b3 0-0-0, D.Szczesny-R.Polaczek, correspondence 1988, and now 15 c5!? e4 16 ♗c3 dxc5 17 ♘d2 looks good for White, since only an abstractionist artist would approve of Black's tripled pawns.

b) 13...♗d7 14 ♙d3! (threatening ♙f5 at once; not 14 ♘c3? ♙e7 15 ♙d3 0-0 16 ♙f5 ♖e8 and Black was better in I.Nepomniachtchi-L.Aronian, Chess.com blitz 2020) 14...♚f7 15 ♘c3 ♙e7 16 ♙xf6 gxf6 (16...♙xf6 17 g4! is also awful for Black) 17 ♖h5+ ♚f8 18 ♙f5 ♖e8 19 ♖h6+ ♚f7 20 ♘e4 and White has a decisive attack.

**14 ♗d1 d5?!**

Already Ding has a single solution just to stay in the game, and that is to play ...♙b7, ...0-0-0 and ...d6-d5 in some order or other. The correct one was 14...♙b7 15 ♘c3 d5 16 cxd5 0-0-0 and even then Black is clearly worse.

**15 ♘c3!?**

Simply 15 cxd5 ♙xf1 16 ♚xf1 cxd5 17 ♙xf6 ♖xf6 18 ♗xd5 would win a pawn. It seems Nepo is now after more than that.

**15...♙b7**

Or 15...0-0-0 16 cxd5 ♖b7, and not 16...♙xf1? 17 ♖xf1 cxd5 18 ♗b5! a6 19 ♗d4, which is heavily in White's favour.

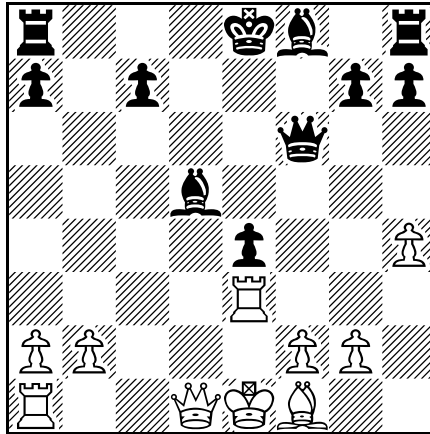
**16 cxd5 cxd5?**

Ding is no longer ahead in development and therefore shouldn't be in a rush to create central confrontation. 16...0-0-0 was obligatory, as indicated above.

**17 ♙xf6!**

Principle: *A lead in development supersedes the bishop pair.*

**17...♖xf6 18 ♗xd5 ♙xd5**



**Exercise (combination alert):** For the moment White's plan is an abstraction. Now comes time for the specifics. What is White's strongest continuation?

**Answer:** Step 1: Zwischenzug.

**19 ♙b5+!**

White can disrupt by first giving check on b5 and only then regaining the piece.

**19...♙c6**

19...c6? runs into 20 ♖xd5!

**20 ♖xe4+!**

Step 2: Pinned piece.

**20...♙e7**

Forced. 20...♙f7?? 21 ♖b3+ ♙g6 22 ♖g3+ ♙h6 23 ♖e3+ ♙g6 leads to mate in ten after 24 h5+! ♙xh5 25 ♙e2+ ♙g6 26 ♖g4+ ♙f5 27 ♖f4+ ♙g6 28 ♙d3+ ♙f7 29 ♙c4+ ♙g6 30 ♖g4+ etc.

**21 ♖d5!**

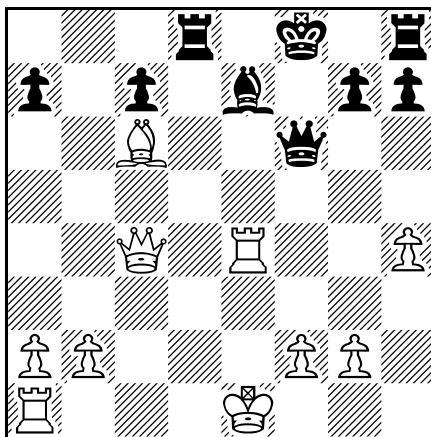
Nepo continues to play upon pin tricks.

**21...♖d8**

Since 21...♙xb5? 22 ♖xa8+ ♙f7 23 ♖d5+ picks up a rook as well as the bishop.



22 ♙xc6+ ♚f8 23 ♖c4



Threatening ♜f4. Black is busted due to the principle: *Opposite-coloured bishops favour the attacker*, which in this case is clearly White, whose grip on the light squares is the significant factor.

23...♙d6

Preventing ♜f4. If 23...♚xb2 24 ♜c1 g6 then 25 ♚f1! ♜d2 26 ♜f4+ ♙f6 27 g4! leaves Black busted.

24 ♜d1!

Threatening ♜d3 and ♜f3. Castling is pretty strong too.

24...g6

Ding hurries to give his king an escape hatch on g7.

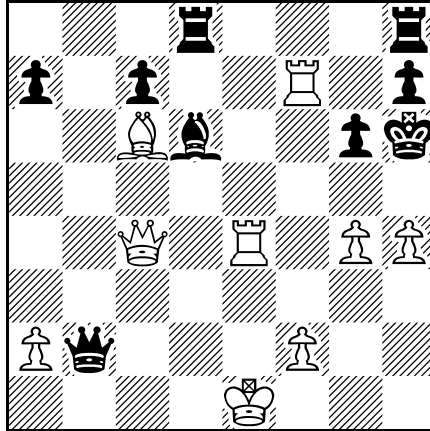
25 ♜d3 ♚g7 26 ♜f3 ♚xb2 27 ♜f7+ ♚h6

Going to g8 allows mate in two. At this stage Black's king is the escaped prisoner in the swamp, attempting to evade police and tracking dogs by breathing through a reed.

28 g4?

When you achieve a winning position, don't expect smooth conversion without incident, since your opponent is desperate to ensure that it doesn't happen. This is a serious mistake which gives Black the chance to draw.

The correct and necessary move is 28 ♚f1!, when all back rank checks can be met by ♜e1, while after 28...♜hf8 29 g4! Black is soon mated.



**Exercise (critical decision):** Black must somehow get to White's king. He can accomplish this with a queen check, followed by the clearance shot ...♙b4!. The question remains: Should Black's queen check on a1 or b1? One version holds the draw while the other loses. Take your pick.

**Answer:** Only the check on a1 holds the game.

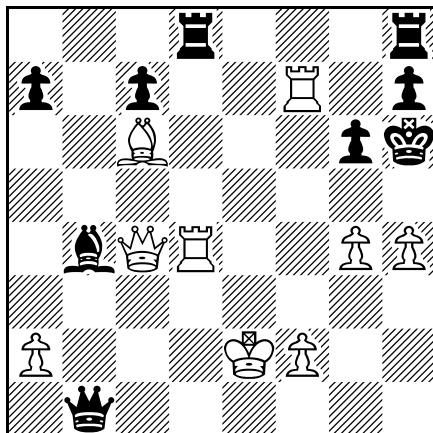
**28...♙b1+?**

Ding missed 28...♙a1+! 29 ♖e2 ♙b4!! (clearance) 30 g5+ ♖h5 31 ♙d5 ♙e1+ 32 ♖f3 ♙h1+ with perpetual check. Note that White can't take the bishop: 31 ♙xb4?? loses to 31...♙d1+ 32 ♖e3 ♙d3+ 33 ♖f4 ♙f3+ 34 ♖e5 ♙xf7 (threatening ...♙f5 mate) 35 ♙f4 ♙e8+! 36 ♙xe8 ♙xe8+ 37 ♖f6 ♙d7! and, amazingly, White doesn't have a single check on Black's hopelessly placed king, whereas White's own king is mated in two moves.

**29 ♖e2 ♙b4**

Threatening 30...♙d1+ 31 ♖e3 ♙d2 mate, or if 30 ♙xb4?? then 30...♙d3+ 31 ♖e1 ♙d1 mate. Unfortunately, the idea no longer works since White seizes control over d1.

**30 ♙d4!**



This couldn't be played with Black's queen on a1. The rook now blocks his intended ...♖d1+, while vacating e4 enables g4-g5+ and ♔f3+ mate.

**30...♖he8+**

If 30...♖b2+ 31 ♔f1 ♖xd4 then 32 g5+ ♔h5 33 ♖f4!! ♖xf4 (or 33...♖d3 34 ♖e4!, intending ♖f3+ and mates) 34 ♖xf4 ♖b1+ 35 ♔g2 leaves Black helpless to prevent the white bishop's transfer to f3; e.g. 35...♖d1 36 ♔f3+ ♖xf3+ 37 ♖xf3+ ♔xh4 38 ♖g3+ ♔h5 39 f3! and 40 ♖g4 mate.

**31 ♔f3!**

White's bishop is worth a lot more than Black's rook, and 31 ♔xe8?? would allow 31...♖xe8+ 32 ♔f3 ♖h1+ 33 ♔g3 ♖g1+ with perpetual check.

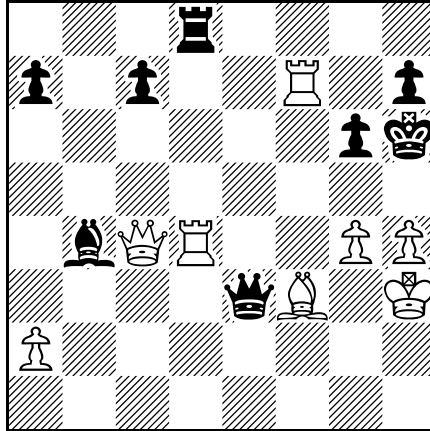
**31...♖h1+ 32 ♔g3 ♖g1+ 33 ♔h3!**

Threatening g4-g5+ and either ♖xh7 mate or ♔f3+ and mates next move. Black has run out of useful checks and must hand over a rook just to keep checking.

**33...♖e3+**

We don't really worry about financial insolvency when the alternative is death. It's either this or get mated even more quickly; e.g. 33...g5 34 hxg5+ ♔g6 (or 34...♔xg5 35 ♖d5+ ♔g6 36 ♖g5+! ♔h6 37 ♖f6+! ♔xg5 38 ♖f4 mate) 35 ♖d3+! ♔xf7 36 ♖xh7+ ♔e6 37 ♖g6+ ♔e7 38 ♖f6 mate.

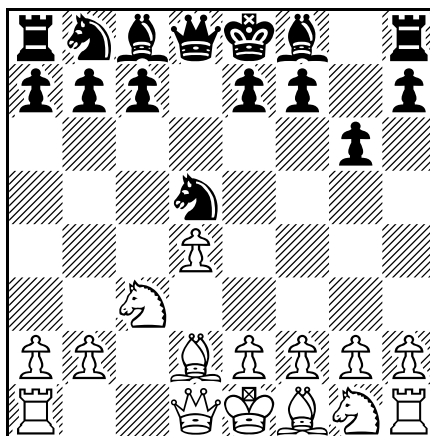
**34 fxe3 ♖xe3+ 35 ♔f3! 1-0**



White's last move not only blocks, it also renews the threat of g4-g5+. Black resigned in view of 35...♙e7 (or 35...g5 36 ♜f6+ ♚g7 37 ♜f7+ ♚h8 38 ♜xd8+ etc) 36 g5+ ♙xg5 37 hxg5+ ♜xg5 38 ♜h4+ ♜h5 39 ♜f4+ and mates.

Game 46  
**A.Giri-I.Nepomniachtchi**  
 Legends of Chess (rapid) 2020  
*Grünfeld Defence*

1 d4 ♞f6 2 c4 g6 3 ♞c3 d5 4 cxd5 ♞xd5 5 ♙d2



A successful fighter must discover the opposition's secret weakness in order to destroy him. Giri most certainly knew that Nepo didn't have a stellar score as Black against this line.

**Question:** Isn't this move rather passive?

**Answer:** It's actually quite an aggressive line for White. The idea is that if Black plays ...♘xc3, White recaptures with the bishop and, at some point, plays d4-d5 to swap away Black's powerful dark-squared bishop and go after his king.

5...♙g7 6 e4 ♘xc3

6...♘b6 is played slightly more often. The idea is to gain a tempo against the d4-pawn.

7 ♙xc3 0-0

Nepo lost a painful miniature after 7...c5 8 d5 ♙xc3+!? 9 bxc3 0-0 10 ♖d2 ♗d6 11 f4 e6 12 ♘f3! exd5 13 ♙c4! ♙e6? (13...d4 looks okay for Black) 14 0-0 d4? (one move too late; he had to try 14...♘d7 15 f5 ♘e5 16 ♙b3 c4 17 ♘xe5 ♗xe5 18 ♙c2 gxf5 19 exf5 ♙d7 20 f6, still with a dangerous attack brewing for White) 15 f5!! (where did that come from?) 15...♙xc4 16 e5! ♗d7 17 f6 1-0 V.Anand-I.Nepomniachtchi, Online Nations Cup 2020. Black is mated in four moves at the most after 17...♘h8 18 ♗h6 ♙g8 19 ♘g5 ♗h3 (it isn't a good sign when the engine gives a move as ridiculous as this as Black's best option) 20 gxh3 and mate next move.

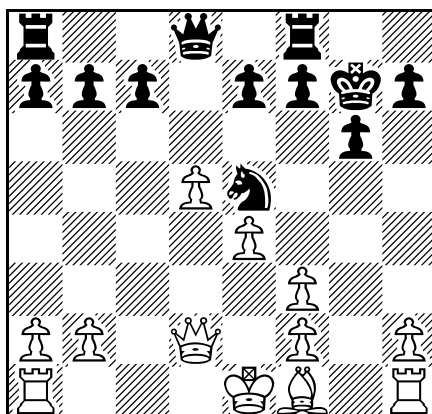
8 ♖d2

More aggressive than 8 ♘f3, since White has the option of castling long and turning the game into opposing wing attacks.

8...♘c6 9 ♘f3 ♙g4

Increasing the pressure on d4.

10 d5 ♙xf3 11 ♙xg7 ♙xg7 12 gxf3 ♘e5



**Question:** Does Black already stand a shade better, in view of White's potential bad bishop?

**Answer:** First of all it's not yet a bad bishop since the central pawns remain unfixed. Secondly, Black's king looks more exposed than White's, whose position I slightly prefer.

**13 0-0-0 c6**

13...♗xf3?? is a monumentally dumb decision which hangs a piece to 14 ♖c3+.

**14 ♖c3**

Later in the year Magnus crushed Nepo with 14 ♕h3 ♔g8 15 ♖c3 ♗b8?? (15...♖c7 is necessary) 16 d6! exd6 17 f4 (oops, Black's knight is trapped) 17...♗e8 18 ♗he1 a5 19 ♖b1 a4 20 fxe5 ♗xe5 21 f4 ♗c5 22 ♗f6 a3 23 b3 ♗h5 24 ♗xd6! ♗e8 (or 24...♗xh3 25 ♗ed1 and wins, since there is no remedy to the coming ♗d8+) 25 ♕e6! (interference; not yet 25 ♗ed1? ♗xe4+ 26 ♖a1 ♗d5! and White's king is suddenly a target) 25...fxe6 26 ♗ed1 1-0 Ma.Carlsen-I.Nepomniachtchi, Skilling Open KO (rapid) 2020.

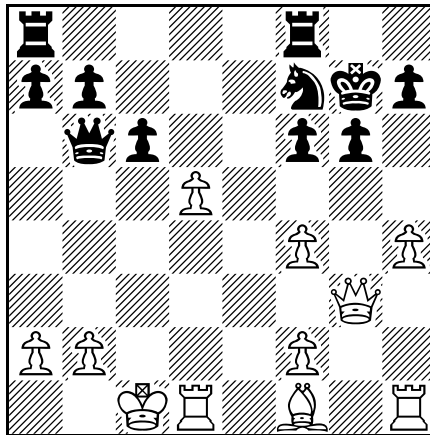
**14...f6 15 f4 ♗f7 16 d6 exd6 17 h4 ♗b6!?**

A novelty, though it's not obviously better than just playing 17...d5 at once; e.g. 18 h5 ♗e7 19 exd5 ♗e4 20 ♗h4 cxd5 21 ♕d3 ♗f3 22 ♗d2 ♗d6 23 hxc6 hxc6 24 f5, as in T.Biedermann-L.Chesakov, correspondence 2018, when chances look balanced after 24...g5 25 ♗g1 ♗f7.

**18 ♗g3**

Protecting the f2-pawn and increasing the pressure on the kingside.

**18...d5 19 exd5**



**19...♗ad8**

In the third and final game of their mini-match game Nepo switched to 19...cxd5 20 h5 ♗ac8+ 21 ♖b1 ♗fe8 22 hxc6 hxc6 23 ♕d3 f5 24 ♗dg1 ♗f6 25 ♗f3 ♗h8 26 ♗xh8 ♗xh8 27 ♗xd5 ♗d8?! 28 ♗xf5 ♗xf5 29 ♕xf5 ♗d6 and was lucky to have held a draw, A.Giri-I.Nepomniachtchi, Legends of Chess (rapid) 2020.

**20 h5 ♗c5+ 21 ♖b1 ♗xd5 22 ♗c1! ♗d4 23 ♕c4 ♗c5?**

He had to try 23...♗dd8 24 ♗hg1 ♗e4+ 25 ♖a1 ♗d2 26 hxc6 hxc6 27 ♕e6 ♗d6 28 f3 ♗d3 29 f5 g5 30 ♗h4! ♗f7 31 ♕xf7 ♗xf7 and hope to survive.

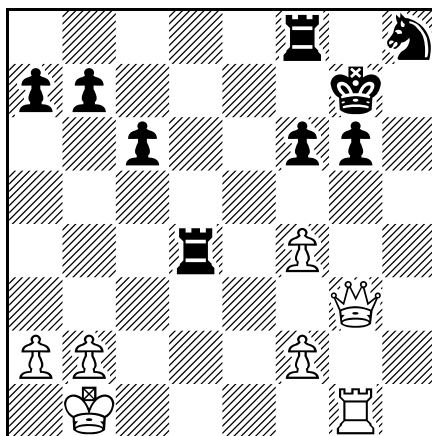
**24 hxg6 hxg6 25 ♖hd1**

This is highly favourable. Even stronger is 25 ♖cg1! g5 26 ♟xf7 ♚e4+ 27 ♔a1 ♟xf7 28 ♚b3+ ♜d5 29 ♚xb7+ and Black is completely busted.

**25...♜xc4**

No choice. If 25...♚e4+ 26 ♟d3, it's time for Black to resign.

**26 ♜xd4 ♜xd4 27 ♜g1 ♞h8**



It's pretty clear that the opening and middlegame have been a disaster for Nepo, His rook, knight and pawn for the queen aren't materially so bad. The real issues are:

1. It won't be so easy for Black to hang on to his queenside pawns.
2. Black's king isn't terribly safe since White can pry it open with f4-f5 and f2-f4.
3. His frozen knight on h8 is one only Nimzowitsch could love.

**28 f5 g5 29 f4 ♞f7 30 fxg5 fxg5 31 ♚c7!**

Pawns are about to fall and at this point earning a draw would be a miracle for Black. Then how much more so actually to win from this wretched position?

**31...g4**

There is no choice except to allow his queenside pawns to fall, since 31...♜b4?? loses on the spot to 32 ♚e7!, intending 33 ♜xg5+ ♟h7 34 ♜g1! with mate to follow.

**32 ♚xb7 ♜fd8 33 ♚xc6**

Threatening ♚g6+ and f5-f6.

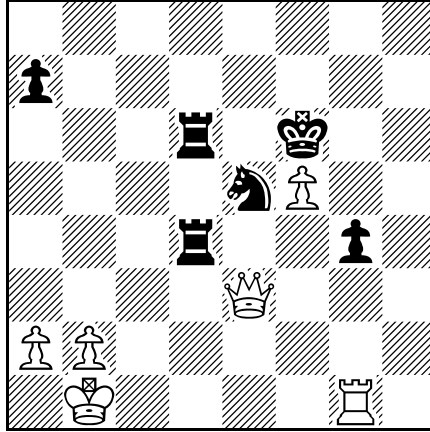
**33...♜d6 34 ♚f3?!**

From this point on the evaluation keeps dropping for Giri. Better was 34 ♚c3! ♞e5 35 a3 ♟f6 36 ♔a2 ♟xf5 37 ♚c8+ ♟g5 38 ♚c5 ♟f4 39 ♚xa7 and White should win comfortably.

**34...♞e5 35 ♚e3?!**

After 35 ♚h1! ♟f6 36 a3 ♟xf5 37 ♚h5+ ♟f4 38 ♚h2+ ♟f5 39 ♔a2 Black has no way to advance his g-pawn.

**35...♟f6**



**36 ♖h6+?!**

The great luxury of the rich is that they can waste without fear of negative consequence. It is with this feeling that Giri is happy to offer his f-pawn, probably thinking that he will later be able to exploit the open lines to reach Black's king. 36 ♜g2 is more accurate.

**36...♙xf5 37 ♖f8+ ♔g5 38 ♖e7+ ♙f4 39 ♖f8+ ♔g5 40 ♖g8+?!**

Here 40 a3 keeps winning chances alive.

**40...♙f4 41 ♖b3 ♜d3 42 ♖b4+ ♜3d4 43 ♖b3 ♞f3**

At this point the evaluation drops to even. The problem is that Giri continues to overestimate his position, perhaps believing that he can deliver perpetual check any time he pleases.

**44 ♜f1**

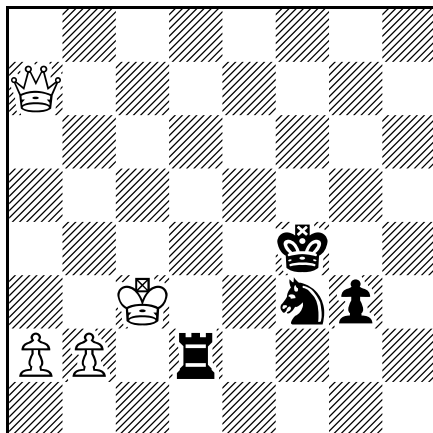
After 44 ♖f7+ ♔e3 45 ♜c1 g3 46 ♜c3+ ♜d3 47 ♖xa7+ ♔e2 48 ♖e7+ ♙f2 49 ♜c2+ ♞d2+ 50 ♙a1 g2 51 ♖h4+ ♔e2 52 ♖g4+ ♙f2 53 ♖h4+ White has to be satisfied with perpetual check.

**44...♙g3 45 ♖e3 ♜d3 46 ♖f2+ ♙f4 47 ♖xa7 ♜d1+!**

Now Black's king is perfectly safe, so perpetual is the best White can hope for.

**48 ♜xd1 ♜xd1+ 49 ♙c2 ♜d2+ 50 ♙c3 g3**





Power usually usurps wealth on the chessboard. White's extra material is clearly temporary since the passed g-pawn has taken on dangerous dimensions. It's clear that only Black can win now, while White is the one who should be looking to draw.

**Exercise (critical decision):** White can give a queen check on b8, c7 or f7. Which one would you play?

**Answer:** Checks on b8 and c7 draw; the one on f7 loses.

**51 ♖f7??**

Principle: *If you screw up your previously winning position, don't dwell on that fact, live in the moment's position, not one which only existed in the past.* Giri just can't bring himself to take the draw, since he keeps remembering the time when he had a completely won game. But by failing to act, there is not even a draw for White.

Giri should have taken that with either 51 ♖c7+ ♔g4 52 ♖c8+ ♔f4 53 ♖c7+ etc, or 51 ♖b8+ ♔g4 52 ♖g8+ ♔h3 53 ♖e6+ ♔h2 54 ♖h6+ ♔g2 55 ♖e3 ♖f2 56 a4 ♔f1 57 a5 g2 58 ♖d3+ ♔g1 59 a6 ♔h1 60 ♖h7+ ♔h2 61 a7 ♖f3+ 62 ♔c4 g1♖ 63 a8♖ ♖c1+ 64 ♔d5 ♖xb2 and the game should be drawn with correct play.

**51...♔e3 52 ♖e7+ ♔f2 53 ♖c5+ ♖d4!**

White is weirdly helpless against the advance of the g-pawn and, frustratingly, is unable to deliver perpetual check. Giri may have expected 53...♔g2? 54 ♖e3 ♖f2, transposing to the 51 ♖b8+ drawing line above.

**54 ♖f5 g2 55 ♖c2+ ♖d2 56 ♖g6 g1♖ 57 ♖xg1+ ♔xg1 58 a4**

Let's just say this promotion attempt is a wee bit optimistic.

**58...♖d8 59 a5 ♔e5 60 b4 ♔c6!**

This move freezes the pawns.

**61 a6 ♖b8 0-1**

After 62 ♔c4 ♔a7 White's pawns aren't going anywhere.