

GO

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“No Temu, not there. You leave yourself open on the lower right.”

Temu just smiled across the go board at his father. That face, so hardened by a lifetime of labor out under the sun, seemed incapable of changing. No one would describe it as young, and yet it seemed to Temu as if it had not aged at all within his own scant span of ten years. Rather, it was a face that had long ago experienced all the aging a human face was capable of. And yet, it had changed. Until this moment, it had been a face of infallible wisdom. Now it was merely human.

“You see Temu,” said his father as he placed his next stone, “now your territory in the corner can't survive.”

Temu made his next play immediately, as if a delay might allow the stones to rearrange themselves and bring his plan to ruin. His father picked up his next stone to make his reply just as quickly. Did he not yet see it? Temu's last move should have forced at least a moment's pause to

reconsider the board. Or did his father see something that Temu had overlooked?

Just before the stone touched the board, Temu's father stopped. His face passed from sudden confusion to deep thought, finally melting into a broad grin.

“Very clever... very clever. I resign.”

Despite the long hours his father spent in back-breaking labor each day tending the family farm, he had never missed a night of playing go with his son for as long as the latter could remember. And this was the first time Temu had bested him. He had told his son that it would train his mind. It would give him wisdom to earn a fortune for himself and his children so they would not be lowly subsistence farmers killing themselves with hard work only to barely produce enough to survive.

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“I wouldn't have expected to find a player of your quality way out here.”

The soldier stared hard at the board, not looking up as he spoke to Temu. Now nearly twenty, and having lost both his parents some years ago, Temu continued to care for his family's land alone. These outer regions were seldom visited by the armies of the warlords as they engaged in brave battle to expand their realms. The man sitting across from Temu was the leader of a division that had escaped a bloody rout. What remained of his forces had arrived starved and flagging on Temu's land two days before. Temu had gladly provided what provisions he had, and now they were nearly strong enough to return again to the civilized world.

At last the soldier placed his stone. Temu made a quick reply. The soldier lost himself once more in deep thought. Many silent minutes passed before he at last spoke.

“I'm as stubborn as the next guy, but only a fool refuses to admit when he's been beaten. You win.” He stood up and extended his hand to Temu. As Temu shook it, the soldier continued, “You have talent – a real mind for strategy. Have you ever considered leaving this farm and doing something with

your life?”

Temu's mind reeled. This was his father's life's work coming to fruition. All those late nights when he had forced his tired body to train his son's mind had been for such an opportunity as this. Temu had known this, and from a young age had been waiting for this moment. Now that it was here, however, the temptation of a familiar life flooded over him with an overwhelming surge. No, he could not let him down. He would not let his father's life be a wasted one.

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Two things had never left Temu from his old life – his love of go and his heart for farming. It was with his farmer's eye that he saw that the surrounding fields had not been cultivated to their full potential. Some had clearly been under-irrigated, despite the presence of the nearby stream. Others sat empty, a sign of some distraction during the planting season. No doubt the ceaseless threat of invasion by some warlord or another had played a role in that.

It was his love of go that had allowed him to be such an asset to the armies he served. How else but for the mental training of that greatest of games could a farm boy become a trusted military advisor in the space of a few years? It was also his love of go that drove him on his present task. A passion for the game was a part of the very fabric of the country, and as such, it was not uncommon to find strong players even among the most uneducated of villages. In this latest village, which had been brought under his warlord's command without battle, he had heard of such a local champion.

She was stronger than most of the villagers he had played since joining up with this army. Her fundamentals were sound, and she had a flare for improvisation that almost caused him to stumble. But he had been able to read out her plan and pivot his own sufficiently to secure a victory.

“You play well. I was especially impressed with that stone you played there. It was quite innovative,” Temu said, pointing to the indicated stone.

“Thank you. You play almost as well as Sedol himself.”

“Sedol? Who's that?”

“He is the greatest go player to ever play the game. In his younger days, he would travel from village to village, defeating anyone he could find who would play him. His games were of such beauty... I can still remember every move of the game he played against me. Shall I show you?”

“Yes, of course,” replied Temu eagerly, “but first can you tell me where I might find him?”

“I don't know. Rumor is that he doesn't travel any more. I've heard that he lives by himself somewhere in the outer territories.

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There had been many victories over the last decade, but this one was different. Temu was no longer fighting to expand his master's territories, but his own. This had been the reward from the warlord he served for all the riches he had won him.

Gently rolling hills rippled out to the horizon in all directions. The hilltop where Temu sat upon his horse allowed for a good view of the surrounding land. He was no longer a subsistence farmer, working for no greater goal than survival. Now he would oversee farmers, craftsmen, and merchants.

“Sir,” came the voice of one of his men riding up to meet him, “we heard a bit of news in one of the villages that we thought would interest you. That go player we've been hearing rumors about from village to village, the one that's got you so intrigued, he lives only a few miles off from here. Shall we have him brought to you?”

“Sedol? You've found him? No, no, don't bother bringing him to me. It's a fine day and I don't mind going for a ride. Find someone who knows the way, and the three of us can ride out together to find him.”

The guide was soon brought and the journey begun. As they rode in silence across the

monotonous countryside, Temu's mind wandered through visions of the game he loved so dearly. It was so much more than the endless challenge of tactics and strategy. It was the embodiment of a loving father's wishes for his son.

The rules of go were simple. Surround more territory than your opponent, and you win. In order to be a successful player, one had to tenaciously pursue area on the board by whatever means available. Sometimes one had to strike out boldly. At other times, it was better to build one's defenses and wait for their opponent to over extend. No single strategy could be blindly followed if one wanted to succeed. Always one had to possess the flexibility of mind to adapt to their opponent's strategy and take what was left open.

So too was it with life. One had to be ever ready to adapt and take what they could from the world. Life was short, and no one was afforded more than one turn at it. A cunning and ever-vigilant mind was required to extract all one could from it. Temu looked up at the land they were riding through, the land that was now his, and smiled.

“Here it is, sir.”

It was their guide's voice that awoke Temu from his reverie. The house was small with only a meager garden beside it – certainly too small to sustain even one person. His father had been the last person to beat him at go, what seemed like a lifetime ago. Now, at last, he was about to play the fabled master who, if he lived up to even half of his reputation, would give him the game of his lifetime. He caught himself trembling as they approached the door.

As the three men entered, they found an old man seated on a cushion by a low table studying the go board atop it. The table was the only piece of furniture in the one-room house. Reverently, they stood in silence, waiting for the man to finish his contemplation and acknowledge them.

After an indeterminable amount of time, the man looked up and said, “So, do you wish for a game?”

“I do, sir,” said Temu, stepping forward.

“Then please, have a seat.”

Temu sat at the table opposite Sedol and helped him clear the board.

“How many stones handicap do you wish?” asked Sedol.

“No handicap, please, if that's not too presumptuous of me. But I will take black.”

Temu was nervous as he looked at the empty board, but once he played the first stone he forgot all about his opponent's reputation and lost himself in the game. Sedol's opening was a novel one, forcing Temu to think carefully about his every move. No matter how long he thought before he played, however, Sedol answered immediately. The early game came to a quick end and the players soon found themselves in an intricate battle, struggling over every piece of territory. Their pace quickened as the fighting became more intense. Temu was so worried about survival that he had stopped keeping track of territory and was uncertain who was winning. Finally, after playing more stones than he had ever played in a game, Temu paused to see where the game stood. He had to count up the territory twice to confirm it, but he was up by two. Silently he scanned the board again.

“I won.”

Temu had not meant to say it out loud, and even as it was, it was scarcely audible. Over and over again he looked at the stones, replaying that glorious game in his mind, until he was interrupted by the hearty laughter of Sedol.

“You call that a win?” Sedol managed to gasp out between fits of laughter.

“I have more territory than you.”

“What is the goal of go?”

“To surround the most territory possible.”

“You answered correctly, even if you do not know what you mean. Look at that board. See how it is choked with stones? In the end, there was scarcely any territory left for either of us.”

“Well yes. There were some intense battles, but I ended up with more territory.”

“*More* territory, yes, but was it the most possible? You were so focused on limiting my territory

that you ended up limiting your own.”

Temu thought back about the game. He thought back about all of his supposed victories at the go board, on the battle field, and in life. He understood Sedol's words, and realized that the entire time he had been keeping score by the wrong rules.