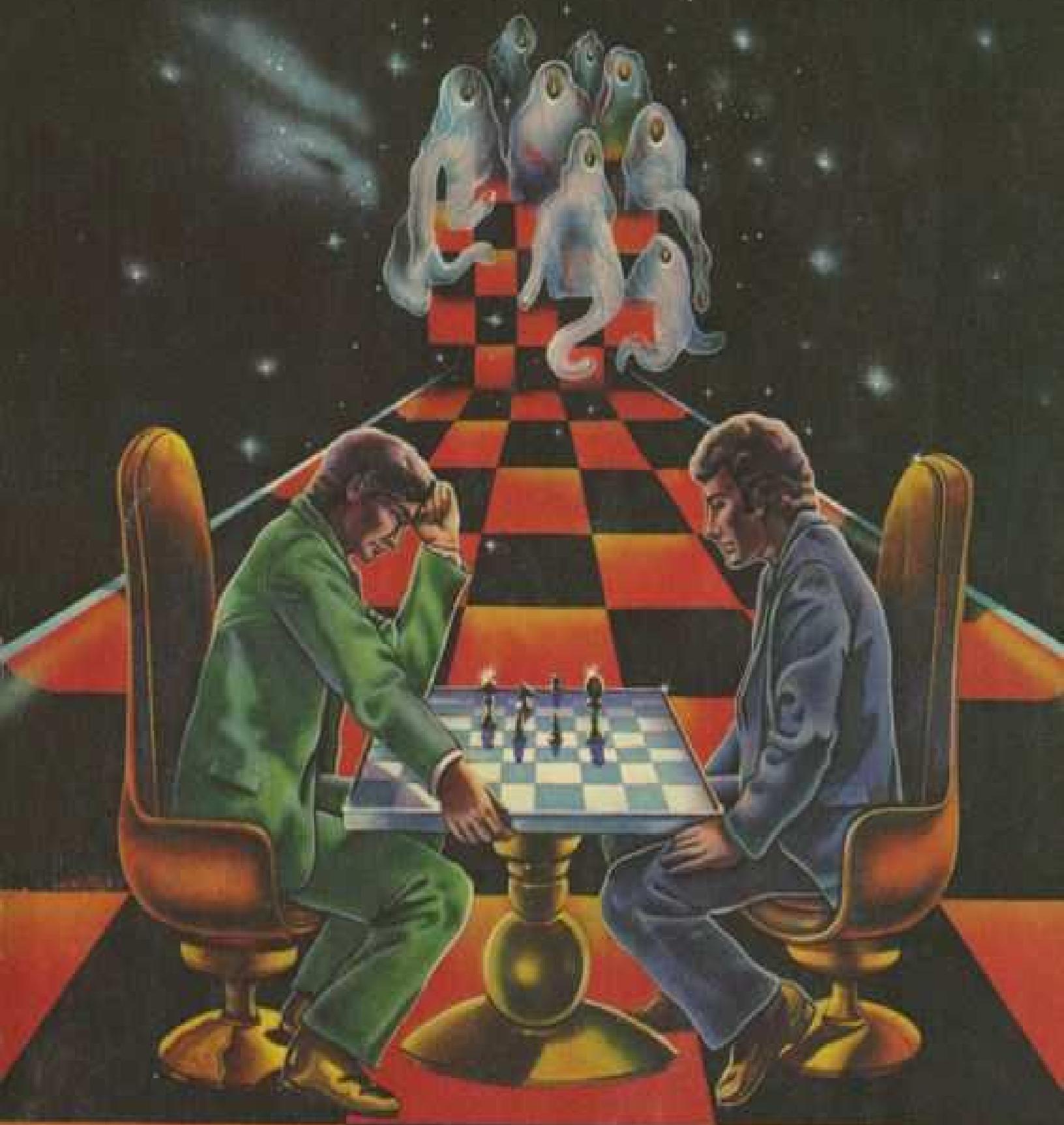


Tactics of Conquest



Barry Malzberg

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PROLOGUE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

FIFTEENTH GAME RUY LOPEZ

<u>W</u>	<u>B</u>
P—K4	P—K4
Q—B3	QN—QB3
B—B4	QN—R4
Q X B MATE	

The fifteenth game, superficially a Fool's Mate in Four, was found to be one of the most interesting of the series and there is no reason for followers of David, Black in this match, to despair. Although his game appears to have collapsed, this four-move match is actually characterized by great subtlety and originality of play on both sides and had it not been for the unfortunate blunder on move three in which Black attacked the Bishop rather than protecting his own situation, the outcome might have been quite different.

Most experts interviewed after the match feel that all would have been dead even with a slight advantage, perhaps, to Black, barring the blunder. It is assumed, thus, that when David returns to the White for the sixteenth match two days hence in the Orion Cluster, the verve and invention shown here, given the initiative, may well give him a victory. Certainly, with at least eleven games to go, the

series must be seen as in its early stages, and the ten-to-five margin by which Louis has taken the lead, statistically insignificant.

Fans and followers are thus advised that the series remains a tight struggle. Supporters of Louis may, while proud of his victory, take no assurance that he has an "easy set." On the other hand, David's many followers throughout the billions of worlds of the colonized universe may take heart from the courage and daring of his play in the fifteenth match, and may rest assured that their proponent has "just begun to fight," as he often says.

Interviewed briefly after the match, Louis said, "Yes, it was a good match for me and I was surprised to win so easily in four. But David is a shrewd and cunning grandmaster and was not shown to his best advantage today. If it had not been for his one small blunder the game would have been even after four and I was girding myself for a long, hard struggle. I am sure that this is going to be a difficult series. I will repeat what I said after my seven-move victory two days ago: We have not yet seen the real David but he is rounding into form and when he begins to play to his potential this will settle into a very tight contest."

David would not be interviewed. Sources close to him report, however, that his spirits remain high and that far from being dismayed by this four-move game his "will to fight" has now been sparked. "He's pretty angry now," an informed source stated, "and when he gets angry, well, you know him, he starts to play quite brilliantly. I do think that this match has now reached its turning point."

Although this game was distinguished by its brevity—it may someday be known as one of those "little masterpieces" or "miniatures" with which grandmaster chess is never abundant, but each is a treasure—there are many interesting aspects to be unearthed in commentary.

White's opening move P—K4 is a conventional Ruy Lopez but Black's responding P—K4 indicates that he is in a "fighting mood" and ready to "join the battle." White's second move, an over-ambitious posting of the Queen, indicates an open game; Black's response, a quick development of the Knight, shows that he is following for the moment convenient lines of Ruy Lopez still.

It is at White's third move, B—B4, that the match becomes truly original, making its first contribution to the literature on outstanding contests. It is an obvious attempt to play a fighting game in the center of the board: The temporary abandonment of the Queen further reveals the true openness of the contest. Black's response, attacking the Queen, is a rugged joining of the battle. Deviating from the Ruy Lopez on the third move and its conventional Sicilian, Black has shown himself willing to move into truly uncharted waters. One can only admire and be awed by the depth and profundity of this move!

White's sudden capture of the Black Bishop, forcing mate, is, of course, unfortunate in that it could be said to bring the game to a swift conclusion, although grudging credit must be given for its ingenuity. Though it fails to answer so very many of the central, deep, profound and pressing questions raised by the initial three moves, White cannot be blamed for taking the opportunity when it came along, of course. The mate has, then, a certain beauty and logic of its own as well as a crushing finality.

However, the depth and profundity of the game Black had prepared in the brief moves allotted him cannot be ignored and we can be sure that we will be seeing more of David's modified Ruy Lopez in the future.

The series resumes two days hence in the Orion Cluster.

When these two most evenly matched opponents sit down for a game almost anything can happen and it usually does. Appetites for their next and subsequent matches are keener than ever.

CHAPTER ONE

Pawn to King Four

They had a lot of trouble getting me into this fifteenth game. Playing Black, no less!

None of it was my fault. I was merely acting as would any reasonable man: setting my conditions, setting the price. Furthermore, it was apparent that at this, the fifteenth match of the cross-universal series to decide the fate of the worlds, the turning point had arrived. I was going to *smash* my opponent, tear open his game, render him useless for the remainder of the series, and since there remained twenty-six matches beyond this I did not want to risk, at this relatively early stage, the demolition of the series.

Reasonable? Reasonable! Better, I figured, to carry Louis along, *split* the matches as we moved further toward the Outer Celestial Ring and there, having contrived a twenty-to-twenty tie for this last suspenseful encounter, having controlled matters toward a situation of the utmost suspense, I would destroy him utterly ... exhibiting as if for the first time the full, dazzling range of my technique and thus bring about—as had been fated from the beginning—the Era of Decency and Kindness.

But timing, ah! Timing was important. In order to maximize the gate, in order to maintain the high level of suspense necessary to bring the largest degree of significance to my inevitable and final victory, it was necessary to carry him along. Even the Overlords would have approved (wouldn’t they?) if I had discussed my intentions with them, but I decided that it was best not to discuss the situation because the stupid creatures believe this to be an honest match and want absolutely no semblance of cheating.

So I settled upon this decision in what I like to call the channels of my mind: the necessity to win certain matches, throw others, keep

up a calculated suspense all the way to the end, involving ever-greater numbers of spectators and witnesses in the tremendous struggle. But it became apparent to me as early as game seven that my opponent's game was beginning to crack. No more the deft Ruy Lopez, the transposition of Queen Knight's Pawn, the Fried-Liver Attack which had characterized, if rather erratically, his earlier games. Instead, he took to a solid, unimaginative line without courage or follow-through, sometimes falling into my devastating traps, other times not so much falling in as merely bypassing with a bemused expression, staring straight ahead somewhat dully, his honest and homely old face betraying extremes of emotion which he hardly had the physiognomy to put forth.

Oh, it was most distressing, is what it was. Although I knew that I could beat him literally at will and that the outcome of our matches and hence the fate of the universe was foreordained, it was unsettling nevertheless to see him coming apart so disgracefully. At this rate, I felt, he might not even last out the series, the full forty-one games. On Deneb, therefore, I had to throw a match in a most disgraceful and obvious fashion: I had to deliberately place my King's Rook *en prise* to his ineptly handled Bishop and then leave it there for three full moves until the clumsy fool was able at last to deduce its presence and grab it, putting me into a thunderous check and managing with my eager cooperation to win the game—which I extended to checkmate.

This brought the score of the series to nine games to five in his favor, the last eight of his victories consecutive, but his expression as he left the table, his face white and uncertain, his piggish little eyes literally flooded with tears of exhaustion and humiliation (because he knew that I had thrown the game) was enough to give me a real thrill of fear. Nine games to five advantage or not, Louis was not going to last out the series. He would have a complete emotional breakdown. He would lose control of his spirit. He would begin to fling pieces.

I therefore decided that the next game, due to be played in the fifth planet of the Antares Cluster, would be one that I would have to pass up. Forfeiture by absence, I concluded, would be the best or better policy, it would increase the margin of games won and lost by my opponent to ten and five, and in this way some suspense would be

attendant. Perhaps this plan of mine, to forfeit by absence, was somewhat misguided. I would be the very first to admit this since I am neither a vain man nor an excessively righteous one (unlike most grandmasters, who are arrogant fools). Regardless, at that time, it seemed to be the proper and correct attitude. Forfeit out and save Louis the strain.

I therefore took to my cold and loveless bed (because celibacy during a match is a condition of victory; chess is an *athletic* endeavor) in the Hilton Deneb at the conclusion of the fourteenth game of the series. I refused to arise, even for meals, except for necessary attempts to relieve myself in a large basin in the wretched adjoining room. The Overlords have supplied us with the most luxurious quarters possible and the Hilton Deneb was not lacking in amenities. An enormous structure, lofting hundreds of stories above the planetary level of this rather dismal area, it was not only well appointed but had all of those small luxuries which I still recall as being touches of home from the planet Earth where my odyssey began not so long ago. It was possible, for instance, to look down upon a large, simulated used-car lot which gleamed and sparkled some thousands of feet down, all of its vehicles polished to a high and deadly gloss by loyal attendants. And there was a constant stream of seductive Earth-type females (cunningly provided by the Overlords).

"You are the greatest chess player in the universe and the entire fate of our way of life depends upon you," they would point out to me, "because if you win our way of life will continue to flourish and prosper but if you lose the Overlords by decree will declare the curtain to fall upon our way of life and the thousand years of destruction will begin. But that is not to worry about; you cannot lose, but still we would certainly like to make you at peace with yourself," they would conclude in their provincial, Earth-type accents (I was touched) and then fling themselves against and upon me, their earth-type limbs lunging against mine in a most unsettling and discommoding fashion, their large, Earth-type breasts perching on my mouth (which in more normal postures was pursed to consider the more intricate possibilities of a Knight's Fork). I turned all of them away, of course, some regretfully. Sex and championship chess do

not mix and it is important at all costs to keep the two activities separate but on the other hand I will admit that some caused me to doubt. The Overlords had provided me with an excellent selection of females. Doubtless they were doing the same to Louis in his room (for all the good that that would do them!) but my will can survive such cheap distractions and one and all I cleared them out of my quarters. After the matches, when I save the universe, it will be a different story, of course.

On the third day, when I had not yet arisen from bed to commence my ablutions before departure to the Antares Cluster, the Overlord whom I know only as Five came into the room, somewhat imperiously I thought (they simply have no sense of privacy; it must be a gestalt-culture), and addressed me as I was still lying on the bed.

“David,” he or it said, “it is important that you arise now. The ship is about to depart. Everyone else is on it and waiting.”

“I don’t feel well,” I said without moving. The Overlords and I have cultivated a relative informality of exchange, but I do admit that I feel a certain sense of strain in addressing them. Xenophobes would understand. “I’m not going to leave.”

“Of course you’re going to leave,” Five said. “I told you, the ship is about to leave. We must hurry.”

“I’m sorry about this,” I said, unmoving, “but I really don’t feel well enough to go. I’m afraid that I’m forfeiting the game for illness. But go ahead without me; I’ll catch up later on.”

“I’m afraid you don’t understand,” Five said, rather snappishly, I thought. His tentacles waved, his bipodal body became rather purple. (They are somewhat humanoid in appearance, these Overlords, but one cannot forget at any time that they are malevolent creatures who set up this match in order to impose their way of life upon us and they just are not very nice. The purple enhances the xenophobic thrust.) “This is no time for hypochondria, not when you’re due to board now and all facilities in the Cluster have been sold out for a long time. You have an obligation.”

“No. Screw it, I won’t.” There was an airy feeling of departing from ritual in saying this; chess players relish defiance as do no other obsessives. “I have a sore throat.”

“We will cure it.”

“I have chills and fever.”

“That can be worked on.”

“I have cold sweats, even when I lie at rest, and I am afraid that I am not able to think about championship chess right now.”

“Stop it.”

“Maybe later,” I said. “Maybe in a few days I will have recovered. In the meantime, Louis can give a simultaneous exhibition. That surely will take the place of competition and I’ll be better in no time.”

“I am sorry,” Five said, empurpleing further. “This is wholly irregular. We never contemplated the possibility of illness holding up the matches. I’m afraid that I’m going to have to summon a physician.”

And saying no more he stalked from the room, leaving me in uneasy balance between the sheets. In due course a Terran physician came in, quite awed by his patient, needless to say, and subjected me to a rapid if unflattering examination, ending by studying certain parts of my anal opening in a way which gave me a good deal of pain although, disgracefully, the pain was shot through now and then by the need to giggle. “I’m afraid I have no real diagnosis,” he said when he was finished and Five, getting this word from him shortly thereafter (the Overlords respect modesty), brought him back into the room to say, “This must be a lie.”

“Oh no,” the doctor said, “rather it’s a neurasthenic episode of some sort. His gross motor signs are normal. Actually, this may be a fatal illness,” the Earth-type physician concluded with a rather horrid giggle, “but, of course, I do not consider myself to be a definitive final authority on matters of this sort.” Saying no more he fled the room, the old bastard, little tools of his trade dribbling from his case as he went. Since the commencement of the matches, of course, the Overlords have enslaved the entire populations of all planets on which the matches take place, which might account for the doctor’s nerves. It is always psychologically difficult to be glimpsed as a member of a slave-class, but then again he might have been a neurasthenic specimen already working for the Overlords. They spoke of having undercover agents.

Five turned upon me then a look both querulous and penetrating, allowing the silence to magnify itself over a period, a veritable hush

falling over my little suite (to say nothing of the bed in which I was lying) while he pondered all of my aspects hopefully.

“I hope you’re not trying to make problems,” he said.

“Oh no,” I said a little too eagerly, “no, I’m not trying to make things difficult at all; I just don’t feel well.”

“Because we have an enormous stake in these matches,” Five said. “After all, you must realize that we are poising our entire future plans upon how you and your opponent do, David.”

“Well, of course.”

“You were both carefully selected from many billions to carry on the contest and you had better not fail us now. We don’t like failures.”

“I understand that,” I said. Already I regretted the haste of my action, to say nothing of how impulsively I had arrived at it. Throwing a match through feigned illness suddenly struck me as a rather stupid idea considering, as Five had pointed out, the stakes involved. But then again, as I have noted, I was already too deeply committed to my posture to back out without embarrassing results. “I’m sure that I’ll feel better within a day or so.”

“A day is not satisfactory.”

“In fact it might only be hours,” I said, backing away but still stubborn. “I can’t just leap out of bed, you know. Perhaps the match could be set back—”

“I’m really afraid not,” Five said. “We’re on a tight schedule with these matches, as you know. Commitments have already been made: One hundred and fifty billion intelligent creatures of all species are participating through a complicated communications network and any delay in the matches would have catastrophic results at this time. Also,” Five added rather dourly, “also, we have our own problems, scheduling commitments and so on, of which you must be well aware. If it does go to the final game, the forty-one-match series must be completed by a certain date. Our stay in this universe, you see, is severely affecting laws of entropy and geophysics with which I won’t bore you. If we overstay the period we risk destroying the very fabric of your universe which, as you know, is merely a small and trivial cosmology to us but rather important to you. Also, we would die here with you.”

“All right,” I said, “very well.” It occurred to me, and not for the first time I must admit (everything going on has happened at least twice before), that all of the Overlords, but particularly Five, tend to have a rather melodramatic streak. Like grandmasters themselves, they build up issues out of all proportion to their real worth. It is very difficult for a man in my position to play chess for the outcome of the universe, in short, but this was insignificant to the Overlords. I had a dilemma.

“All right,” I said again, tossing the sheets rather petulantly and then trying to sit, “if that’s the way you feel about it I’ll try to compete. But I must warn you that I’m just not in top form and that there’s a good likelihood that I’ll lose the game. Perhaps I’ll lose a whole *series* of games. One must be in top physical condition to play successfully; it’s an athletic endeavor, as you know, so I can hardly promise you a fair contest.”

The Overlords believe in fairness. They have insignificant morals, true, but have insisted from the beginning that this must be a fair contest, an even match, that we must play at a serious and spirited level, otherwise the exercise will be worthless. So I knew that this would strike Five in an area of grave vulnerability.

“Very well,” he said and indeed did appear shaken. “We will take that into account, the fact of your illness and that you will perhaps be unable to perform at the best level. Still and all ... the matches must go on.”

“Only if I am well.”

“Regardless of your health.”

“Perhaps you ought to check with the others on this. They might agree to a stay.”

“I do not know that it is necessary to consult with others,” Five said, rather sharply. “The decisions are to be made by me alone; in the society which we have evolved there are only leaders, no followers, no committees, and I am perfectly able to make a decision which will be binding upon all of us. So, you will play,” Five concluded on that same pitch of controlled hysteria which I had noted in the examining physician, “you will play the matches! The matches will go on!” He stood abruptly, leaving the room in a rather undignified scuttle,

allowing the door to bang in the Denebian breeze which wafted through the hallway.

Ah, well; slowly and grudgingly I began my ablutions preparatory to leaving for the Antares Cluster. It seemed to me that it was not fair for Five to be so imperious about the matter, but on the other hand it also occurred to me in that I simultaneity of vision reserved for truly great minds that the game must go on, the great series of games to decide the outcome of all possibility; and that when one is functioning at such a high level of consequence it is not always possible to invoke the personal touch. The personal touch. Thinking this way I began to feel better and in due course my garb was donned, my ablutions (I urinated, defecated noisily, gargled, to be specific) completed and I went outside to find certain Overlords—Six, Three, Seven and Twenty-One, I believe—waiting for me. They took me quickly to the spaceport. Although I moped rather sullenly early on, I soon found that my enthusiasm and my sense of conviction returned. By the halfway point of the long flight I had taken out my omnipresent pocket chess set and worked through a series of variations to the Nizimov-Indian Defense which had caught me in the seventh game. *Nirazo-Indian defense*, please excuse, very difficult to keep all of these arcane formulations quite at the tip of the tongue or penpoint.

In other words, getting me to this fifteenth match was difficult for the Overlords. More difficult for them than this, however, was the decision which I reached on the flight: Since they would not cooperate with me, well, then, I would repay in kind.

My original intention, good-hearted and benign as everyone knows, was to string out these matches to the forty-first game, the last possible moment. I have nothing against that sector of the universe, that way of life which my opponent represents. I consider it to have the same validity as my own side, and the specter of billions of innocent creatures being slaughtered egregiously by the arrogant Overlords simply because their representative was an inferior player ... this spectacle of injustice, barbarism, madness most distressed me. Apocalypse may be a sanctifying gesture but there is much blood in it.

So I wanted to extend their lifetime for as long as possible. Why not? Also I wanted to give the Overlords every chance possible to destroy themselves—maybe the damned matches would simply go away. Perhaps the Overlords might wink out of our universe with the same abruptness with which they winked in. They kept on talking about their laws of entropy and mysterious geophysical forces; possibly an extension of their stay might result in obliteration. I hope. At least, it seemed like a sensible idea and I wanted if possible to go on to the very end, to game forty-one, before my victory, in order to give this nightmare time to dissolve. Is this not sane?

But no more. I have reached that decision.

I will change my way of life: If the Overlords refuse to tolerate my position, if my hapless opponent continues to decline, then responsibility will finally shift from me. My ultimate responsibility, after all, is to that half of the universe which I have been called upon to represent: the forces of moderation, light, reason, justice, compassion, etc., and I must no longer confuse polarities. Therefore the decision I have made on the Antares flight is to be implemented; from now on I play without restraint. I intend to destroy my opponent, to smash, pulverize, and humiliate him and by proxy his damned Overlords (they are as much Louis' fault as mine) and then bring this wretched series to a conclusion. I am behind nine games to five: I intend to win twenty-one to five. Sixteen games, thirty-two days from now, the series will be over. Having been stretched to the ultimate of patience I am now convinced only of this: Gentlemen, I will fulfill my commitments.

So here I am. Here I am in the Antares Cluster, another of that damned set of planets and stars through which our series, like a mad, bedraggled member of dismembered or discredited royalty, has wandered these weeks. From Saturn to Alpha Centauri, from Sirius to the Cluster of the Pleiades, my opponent and I have wandered, surrounded by chess sets, chess writings, Overlords, travel consultants, reporters, crewmen, technicians, and equipment, through uncharted light years in the billions. Our little whores' colony

has trundled through the first fifteen of the forty-one high bidders for the Match of the Universe.

On Saturn my opponent had had a cold; the idiot blew sniffles and snot from his nose turned rabbity by his congestion with a quivering forefinger. On Betelgeuse a strange epidemic which caused yellowing and drying of the external genitalia (I did not want to know too much about this) made it necessary for us to play in strict quarantine. In the Pleiades I lost my temper over a missed fianchetto and drank too much. On the Dog Star a referee died in the midst of a match, emitting a strange bark (appropriate for the Dog Star), and collapsing in a gangrenous fit on the floor amidst a little halo of extra chess pieces with which he had been playing ... oh, this series has been chock-full of events, but really it has had a sameness, a repetition of the constants, the same enclosures, the same uttermost delimitation of space.

It used to be the same way in the old days, so I was prepared for this. Pulling little odd clumps and patches of recollection as one might remove the skin from a diseased animal, I know the sameness: Rio de Janeiro one week and Moscow the next; a stopover in Bern for the Interzonals and a series of exhibitions in the Americas. Then up to Iceland for a simultaneous exhibition (two hundred and fifty dollars plus expenses), into Poland to observe the quarter-finals of the Junior Masters and lecture; here, there, and everywhere but always the same board, the same pieces, the same mad, twinkling eyes refracted across the board. Certainly life is being lived now at a more intense and psychotic pitch. It is quite one thing to move over *a world* lacking a sense of locale but I talk now of the universe itself.

Nevertheless, life goes on and here we are in the Cluster.

Here we sit in this huge auditorium, my opponent and I, I and my opponent, Louis showing little corpuscles of red and blue floating under the stricken white of his face as he focuses himself upon the board in a kind of shuddering attention. His fingers twitch. I have known Louis all or most of my life but truly a depersonalization has occurred since this madness began, and now it is hard to think of him as old Louis, foolish, piggish Louis. He is merely the opponent even though the Overlords constantly try to build up the human

interest aspects through the media, encouraging articles about our personal habits as well as the relationship we are supposed to have had in our youth. Photographs are taken, preferences are asked; sometimes I could shriek. I will not allow myself to think of the pig as a person now—the killer instinct is what counts in championship chess—and so I merely watch his swarthy little body across the board. A faint, deadly mask of purpose extrudes itself over his clumsy, honest features.

Well, he has taken a full twenty minutes on the clock for this opening: this almost unprecedented. It is possible to take twenty minutes to *reply* to an opening but when one has the first move it is customary to plot out the nature of the attack the evening before and to then start briskly, confidently, building up time on the clock which can be more judiciously applied later. Nevertheless, Louis has fallen into some confusion; it is clear that he does not feel well—a benevolent utter stupidity masks his features now. When he entered the hall several of the Overlords had to push/pull him to the table, conferring nervously with tentacles, and when he collapsed into the chair, sitting numbly before the pieces for twenty minutes, I am sure that it occurred to the Overlords (and to an audience of many billions—and to me) that the man might be very ill.

In fact, I was waiting for a physician, perhaps the very one who attended me, to come from the side and minister to him, pop or probe an eyeball for refraction of light, but no, no, Louis sat alone, untended, and I was alone, untended, and after a long time a forefinger came out almost imperceptibly from that gnarled, riven, ruined hand of his and he pushed a pawn in the customary manner, raising his eyebrows, looking up at me when the move was complete with a mad little gleam of purpose, and in that light I divined his cunning scheme. He was trying to reduce me to blubbering uncertainty by stalling.

Rumors of my breakdown must have reached him—how could they not? we all travel together although of course we are kept strictly separated by the Overlords—and he was playing upon it in the hope that I might go, literally, to pieces on the stage and in front of some fifty-five billion. How truly cunning of him! How intuitive and vicious! Of course this could *not* happen. Not for nothing have I competed at

the highest level for forty years; not for nothing have I learned the tricks and maneuvers of our deadly game. I stared back at the fool impassively and in due time his face began to shrink like an aging flower, fallen upon itself in little petals and clusters of woe, and then I looked at the board fully, willing him away, bringing upon it the range of concentration. I would now destroy him.

Pawn to King Four.

He *would* open with his standard King's Pawn. He would be looking for a transposition into the Ruy Lopez at the earliest time and I have known this not only in life but in dreams as far as I can remember: The very shape, the very *odor* of his game was apparent to me in those dreams. Looking at his impermeable skull, at the blankness of those eyes, it was as if I could glare through to absolute purpose and this was horrifying. I was not prepared for it.

It was as if I was glimpsing the little ropes and tentacles of possibility by which we all live, strung through the dead or dying meat of the brain locked within his skull, and I became nauseated from too much insight. It was necessary for me to return my attention to the board which I did in little glimmers and shimmers of attention until the nausea passed and in the fullness of concentration I was able to plan my attack.

Throughout the capacious auditorium there are murmurs. As in the first instants surrounding true sleep, I am conscious of them as waves of sound: sometimes assaulting, sometimes receding, carrying me further and further into the darkest heart of possibility, a sea of voices at all times surrounding me, carrying me onward. I am amply conscious of them but there are times—now is one—when they literally overtake and so I look up from the board, peering the other way, staring into that vast, dissonant buzz, the amorphous forms beyond, wishing that they would keep quiet.

I would leap from the board, cursing, make an exhibition of myself once again but I cannot do it. I cannot risk yet another scene lest I gain a reputation for instability. In the early matches, for instance, I protested all the time. I objected to audience noises, objected to the shading of the lights, complained about the behavior of the referees, argued about the weight of the pieces, threatened to withdraw from the match unless terms were met, gave unauthorized interviews and

so on—but none of these ploys were able to gain me more than a few instants' silence and respect before the alarming breach of manners would start again. I am afraid that I struck some observers as insane in those early matches. Comments on psychopathology reached me; I struck fear into the hearts of those who were dependent upon me to save their way of life. This was unfair since I am not at all temperamental, merely a sweet-natured if rather idiosyncratic fellow who must at all times be able to *concentrate* ... but once labeled, twice endangered, and it was necessary for me to demonstrate in many small ways after these difficult early matches that I was not unnerved.

Signing autographs in the lobbies, giving interviews for the intergalactic press, putting on a pleasing public face for the sake of a sympathetic press, helped people forget about my earlier displays. That was the intention, in any event. Certainly, failed or successful, it is too late for me to worry about any of that now. Rather, I bring down the curtain in my mind just as I was able to do from the age of eight, when my chess career began, and rivet my fullest attention upon the board. Always, it must come to this.

In this concentration I vaguely sense that Louis has left the board, has wandered backstage, as both of us do, to sip at the trays of wines put out for our refreshment, nibble then at the pungent little cheeses and the fauna of a hundred thousand worlds—the glutton. No one eats as he does; he belches continually. But I must decide what to do with the maddening King's Pawn, an opening which fifteen hundred years after the invention of the game still has not been solved to the limit of its possibilities. Chess is a trapdoor into uncertainty; standard openings keep that door shut. Perhaps the Overlords have a similar problem.

Surely they must for even now, at the fifteenth game of the match, having lived with this situation for months, it is difficult indeed to deduce their purposes: whether they are, as they say, the controlling forces of limitless space and time (of which our universe itself comprises a tiny segment) or whether, horrifyingly, the Overlords may merely be the agents of *another* race about whom we know nothing and who are merely using the bureaucracy of these empurpled creatures to administer a solution. I have been thinking

along these lines recently; surely this must be psychotic. I would reject this line of thought but it hardly matters anyway; the outcome will be the same, Louis will be defeated.

Still, it would be better if I knew that the Overlords were as they presented themselves, and not merely a cosmic crew of civil servants come to work upon a niggling problem in the Old District. This line of thought will not be pursued. No further. Not in the midst of a complex Ruy Lopez. Forget it. I am sorry that I got into this to begin with.

INTERREGNUM: *King's Rook*

Once, when I was twenty-one, still among the youngest of the grandmasters, a group of the others thought that it might be amusing for them to deposit a prostitute in my hotel room, thus initiating me into the wonders of sex. Of course I knew their purpose and was ready for the moment myself. Therefore I left my door unlocked and open so that their prostitute could enter quietly and without attracting undue attention.

Still, I rather resented the way in which they played me for a naive fool and in truth have never really forgiven them for this episode although I can see their point. Why not?

She was a splendid bitch in her early thirties: high-heeled and with a suitcase which she opened before the door was fully closed to reveal a stunning array of whips, leather, spikes, lingerie and other fetishistic delights. I had done extensive reading in the literature of sex by that time and knew the significance of all these. "Are you a virgin?" she said, kicking the door closed and chaining it. "That's what I've heard. Virgins are fun."

"I am not a virgin," I lied, "but whether I am or not is hardly the question. The question is what you're doing here in my room."

I motioned to the omnipresent pocket chess set, at this time poised in midst of a replay of the Immortal Game, the Andersson Queen

having penetrated to the seventh rank for that masterful sacrifice. "I'm preparing for a match."

"A group of your friends told me I was wanted."

"Well," I said, "aha, well, there was no need for them to suggest that; I'm quite happy and fulfilled and I resent this a good deal." The hotel was in Switzerland, Bern, I believe, although it is difficult to be certain about matters of this sort. As I say, matters tend to jumble together, at least retrospectively, and all cities are the same when one is on the grandmaster circuit. "Perhaps you'd better leave," I said, "come on, get along with you."

"But I can't," she said petulantly. "I mean, I can't do that. They gave me one hundred deutsch-marks to come here and promised me another seventy-five if I would tell them what happened. They said to show you a good time." Petulance modulated to temper, she swung a foot prettily.

This admission, so without true affect, struck a chill. Did they consider me so naive? Did they know that through my analytic powers I had long since deduced from pictorial and written pornography the significance and gymnastics of the sex act, had recreated it in my own mind? They had taken me for stupid and I never like being taken for stupid, particularly since I was then leading the Interzonals five and a half to two and a half, I recall, with only two easy games against those also-rans Barker and Still to come. "I'm afraid that you've been sent to the wrong room," I pointed out. "I know everything about sex and I surely don't want to buy it."

This had a rather sanctimonious air because her attitude became defensive. "What do you think I am?" she said, closing the lid on her suitcase of wonders. "And what do you think this is?"

"Well, all right," I said, an unaccustomed tenderness intruding. I feel the same way when I have destroyed opponents. "I am truly sorry."

"You must think that I'm a whore," she said, turning to excellent German (I am multi-lingual), backing away, the suitcase dangling from her hand like a scrotal sac. "You must think that they sent me into your rooms for the sick purposes of prostitution, rather than education. I am disgraced; you have disgraced my mother and my father and my forebears—" (at this point my transliterative ability breaks down; she perhaps did not speak this formally). "I can no

longer tolerate being treated in such a fashion by such a, young gentleman." She reached a hand toward the door but was entrapped by her own cunning, for the door she had locked failed to open, of course, and instead of a grandiose exit she was forced to a penitent confrontation. "Very well," she said, holding the suitcase awkwardly, "you may now dismiss me."

"I will do nothing of the sort," I pointed out. "It has not occurred to me to dismiss you." At that moment a pure, jolting rage seized me, rage at the other grandmasters who took me for a naive fool, rage at this woman who thought me some kind of crazy fetishist, rage at my own inexperience and choices which I realized for the first time had driven me from knowledge. "I will have my way with you," I said, and divested myself of my clothing, a, shiny one-piece relaxation suit, on the spot. I stood before her, with the collaboration of the zipper, almost instantaneously nude, and what I always like to refer to as my King's Rook stiffened and beat beneath me like a little bird winging its way toward a nest. I pushed against her my massive bearlike hands, conveying her to the bed. The suitcase fell from her hand, bounced like a trampoline on the floor and then a lock gave, disgorging whole units of merchandise: rubber casings of some sort, feathers, a dildo, a false breast. "I will show you my capability," I announced. Dragging her over to the bed, I seized upon her dress with shaking hands and, fumbling and ripping, managed to denude her.

"You are playing light with my honor," she said in poorly translated formalese. "I do not think that I can permit such liberties to be taken with my person or my body." But too late, too late, she was naked beneath me, naked above me and over and under, our two bodies locked together like Pawns meeting in the center of the board in a zigzag confrontation and I felt her Queen's Pawn beneath me beginning to flower with its own purpose, my King's Rook writhing and moving into her inexorably.

"So much for that," I said when I was done, my Rook now moved to the sixth rank, her Queen wiped off the board, "so much for any of that, now you may take your equipment and go." I felt a massive disinterest within me as we untangled. I went immediately over to the pocket board and in an excess of concentration worked out the final

moves of the Immortal Game, paying no attention to her as she reassembled her clothing, restuffed her valise and so on. I held my position of inattention while she went to the door, struggling with the locks, finally opening the door into the dank alley of corridor. "I will tell them," she said, "I will tell them what you have done with me," and then she went quickly, leaving me to my own devices. My elaborate unconcern faded only when I was definitely sure that she had left the hallway. I went to the door, put my entire weight against it and rooted it closed like a rodent, then snapped the locks and went to the bed where I shook convulsively for quite a while, finally deciding that it would be best to don my relaxation suit again and try to think of this no more.

After some time, the next day I think it was, my colleagues asked me rather shyly and with many private glances how my evening had been spent, and I said that it was all right but I still preferred chess (which was only half a lie since I wholly preferred chess). This was some thirty years and two months before the Overlords summoned me to my great and final mission and I give this only in order to yield one of those personal insights which I have been assured are so important to maintain human interest. Actually the event was insignificant.

CHAPTER TWO

Pawn to King Four

It is a routine reply move in the Ruy Lopez; it is a move nevertheless with brilliant possibilities. It avoids the dangerous and untrustworthy Queen's Gambit which, either accepted or declined, is a holy terror; it functions as a blocking response to the dangerous advance of the Pawn to King Five; it shows a brisk willingness to join the issue while actually risking nothing. It is my preferred move in situations of this sort and many articles have been published in the specialist magazines pointing out; that I have brought the Black Pawn to King Four to its highest excess of ramification in this century. It is for this reason as well as many others that the Overlords must have picked me to represent the forces of light.

The way in which I was selected might require some elucidation. In order for one to sympathize with my position as well as vicariously participate in the struggle, exposition of this sort cannot be neglected and I am eager at all times to please. (I should say that these notes are being transcribed directly from the mouthpiece within my neck which was surgically implanted at the start of the games in order that my reflections and recollections would be available to all of the universe, as well as to the Overlords, for posterity; notes of the match, so to speak. All that I have to do is to talk to myself in a high, inaudible shriek and through the miracle of advanced technology

everything is automatically transcribed by stylus by a team of experts located on Sirius. Of this I have been informed.)

Indeed, being summoned by the Overlords gave me rather a turn but I was able to understand eventually that there was no easier way to do it. One moment I was in my pajamas in Warsaw, yawning and scratching myself, thinking of all the events of the sections that day which had put me into third place alone in clean, challenging position below Still (whose game had improved enormously in thirty years and two months). The next moment I was in some damp enclosure infected with murk, confronted by a purple, ten-tacled creature whose rather human eyes looked at me in a stolid but satisfied way. "Ah," the creature said, "I see that the contact has been made, and not a moment too soon, I might add." It burbled with satisfaction (or at least my anthropomorphic consciousness inferred that this was a satisfied burble; actually it might have been a whine of displeasure at my appearance, although this is hard to say). The important point is that the creature was quite repulsive and horrifying and it took all of my self-control and inner strength, qualities developed through thirty-one years of international grandmaster chess, not to lose control in that void and disgrace myself. "Sit down," the creature said.

"Where am I?" I asked. "And who are you, and what is going on, and what is this all about, and so on?" Routine queries all of them, questions one might expect from an amazed and discommoded consciousness, but I must admit that there was little fervor in the questioning and indeed I had no more interest in the prospective answers than the creature might have had in responding to them, for indeed he seemed rather distracted. "All right," I said rather petulantly, "so be it. Don't tell me anything. I just want you to know that if I can't compete tomorrow I'll not only lose the best chance I've ever had of advancing to the Interzonals, I'll completely destroy their scheduling. Games will be lost by forfeit; audiences will be disappointed; revenues collected will have to be returned and the impoverished grandmasters of Warsaw will have to continue to live in disgrace."

Saying this I folded my arms rather sullenly and stared through the murk trying to find some familiar object or geographical site by which I might be able to position myself but it was quite hopeless. It is hard

to describe the surroundings except to say that there was little terrestrial about them (I can doubly confirm this now that I have had the opportunity to investigate the extra-terrestrial artifacts of the universe more closely). "So be it," I said and closed my eyes, opening them immediately as a vivid flare of light penetrated my eyeballs, affording a good jolt of pain.

"I'm sorry," the creature said in its perfect if rather flat English, "but you cannot withdraw. Our time is very limited and we are, in addition to this, already severely behind schedule. I am here to advise you that you have been recruited for an important chess match upon which the outcome of the universe will be decided. You may call me One since I am the first of our race whom you have met. There will be others, and as a group you may refer to us as the Overlords." The creature went on from there to give expository details which I have already discussed: the fact that the universe had reached a difficult point in its development and the Overlords found it necessary to hasten a decision; the fact that the universe which might be understood by my intelligence was in a perpetual struggle between the forces of good and evil, and had now reached a perilous state of imbalance where the two contending forces were evenly matched and could be expected to struggle to no real conclusion for many millennia; the decision of the Overlords that the process could be accelerated through an arbitrary chess match between players representing the two contending forces, at the end of which the winning side could be assumed to have scored a clear victory and the Overlords would then put the other side out of business through the use of incendiary and entropic devices far too complex to be gone into at this time. "You have been selected as one of the representatives," the Overlord concluded, "and at this moment the other representative, similarly recruited, is being talked to. Which would you rather represent? Good or evil?"

I admit that I was rather stunned. "I don't understand that at all," I said.

"Oh," the Overlord said, with a very human shrug, "I forget the system under which you people live, the ethos which penetrates the universe of which I am speaking, the forces and highly charged emotions behind those two qualities. Actually, you know, it's

completely arbitrary. Good, evil—the point is that they are implacably opposed forces in your universe and the struggle and structure of existence comes from contention between those two poles. Actually, we go completely beyond such concepts. They are quite arbitrary, you know. It makes no difference; the important thing, alas, is just to get that struggle over with. Which would you rather have? You were recruited first by a millisecond, so you have first choice.”

“You mean we’re truly going to play for the fate of the universe?”

“Exactly,” the Overlord said, “a forty-one-game chess match to be broadcast throughout all the civilized sectors of your universe so that everyone may witness it; coverage by all races, media, and so on. Consider it an opportunity.”

“But why chess? Why me? Why this planet?”

“Because chess in the judgment we have made is ideal for such a final judgment; it is a, methodical game with absolutely no element of luck and therefore there can be no complaints by the loser that he was unjustly handled. Chess is known only to your planet, and to answer your other question, we wanted two accomplished chess players who were as evenly matched as possible. According to studies carried out over a long period of time by our excellent statisticians, your opponent and you are the most evenly matched living chess players. There’s not a bit of difference between you. No other two chess players are as close in true and potential abilities. There’s no other reason.”

“Well,” I said, “that’s quite astonishing.” Events of this sort are always quite astonishing, compounded by the fact that for all my brilliant, logical play I have a rather superstitious and intuitive cast of mind which enabled me to take this rather amazing interview in context. “Who is my opponent?”

“Louis Wilson,” the Overlord said. “You know him rather well, of course.”

“Louis Wilson!” I said. “Why, that’s absolutely amazing! We grew up together.”

“We know that.”

“I’ve been playing on the grandmaster circuit with Louis for over three decades. How can I possibly play against him for the fate of the universe?”

"Why not?" the Overlord said and brushed the query away with a casual tentacle. "It's better to get involved in crucial issues with friends than with enemies, isn't it? Besides, you know his game quite well, I take it."

"That's absolutely astonishing," I said, noticing a thin, high odor, not unpleasant but strangely sweet and sticky in the nostrils. "Is that cyanide?" I asked.

"I'm afraid it is," the Overlord said regretfully. "We had to select a mutually agreeable environment for this first interview; later on we can build up your tolerance to our atmosphere, of course, but for the moment it was felt necessary to arrive at a compromise of low cyanide content for myself but, unfortunately, rather high for you. We'll have to get you out of here, I fear; you're apt to collapse within a few moments. We still want to know whether you'd rather play for good or evil, however."

"I'd rather play for good," I said firmly, "if that's all the same to you. I certainly wouldn't want to represent the forces of entropy."

The Overlord shrugged delicately and said, "As you please."

"Am I going back to Warsaw now?"

"Oh no. I'm afraid that that tournament has already been disbanded. You are going to be transported to an excellent terrestrial-type environment on the settled moon of Titan, satellite of Saturn, and from there preparations for the match will be made, the match to begin tomorrow on your time schedule. I'm afraid that we're quite behind schedule as I told you," the Overlord said. Then I was whisked away from there at such horrifying speed and with such intensity that my next recollection is of the panelling in the room on Titan which, as the Overlord had promised, was indeed quite terrestrial.

From that moment on I was enmeshed in preparations for the match. I had my own set of seconds, of course, all provided by the Overlords, who did their best to make me comfortable. I also had my own crew of technicians and dieticians and physicians to make my lot easier, and I understand that Louis did as well. Media and publicity, however, were cooperative efforts; the press releases and biographies during the match emanated from the same set of offices

on Sirius to avoid what the Overlord told me would otherwise have been wasteful duplication.

It is odd that of all people, Louis and I should be thrust into such juxtaposition. There are elements of irony here, and the publicity materials have not been shy of those ironies. Although I am a much better player than Louis (stupidly the Overlords got it all wrong; I do not see how our abilities can be compared; he is a plodding, methodical player whereas I am inventive and brilliant, and he has never competed for a world championship whereas I got to the quarter-finals a quarter of a century ago and was defeated only after a stupid blunder which I will not rehash at this point), there is no question of the similarity of our backgrounds, a co-mingling of history and purpose which even now amazes me.

We grew up together in the same neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York; we began to play competitive chess at the same time; we advanced in the spectrum of the chess hierarchy at graduated intervals only weeks apart, and ultimately we traveled through the world together, our careers paralleling, dovetailing with stunning occlusion. All along, of course, it was well known by those who really followed the game that I was a far superior player to Louis and that indeed he had fastened himself upon me, sheer doppelganger, leaching from me the greatest of my own techniques in order to improve his own mediocre game, his defenses and strategies copied from me, even his public image, a mixture of gruffness and deference, stolen from my own personality (which is, nevertheless, far more pleasing than his, to say nothing of the fact that I am also a much handsomer man).

I do not wish to give the impression that I am fond of Louis. Although from the very beginning our careers and personal lives have meshed strikingly, I consider him to be nothing more than a parasite. Indeed I believe that his very decision to be a chess master was one appropriated from me; he showed no interest in entering the National Juniors, for instance, until I declared my own intention, and it was not until I obtained from the Roxbury Press a contract for *Fianchetto and Fork: Bishop Versus Knight* that he expressed

interest in becoming an author and obtained a publisher for his own miserable *To Castle or Not to Castle: The Intricacies of Defense*.

It has always been this way; there have been times, in truth, when I thought that Louis might not be a discrete personality so much as a horrid extension of myself, a phantom, a creation, a literal extension of my own desire not to be lonely, which had led me to create another of similar will and intention with such cleverness that the dop-pelganger could literally pass itself off in the world as an actuality. But one look at Louis twitching over a chessboard in mutual competition, one glance at him shrugging his shoulders and toying with his massive beard while feeding pigeons in Mallorca, and I realized that this was sheer mega-lomaniacal fantasy. It would be nice, but the sheerest vanity, to think that I had invented Louis. He exists as and of himself; he is no less real than I and the unfortunate insight which I have had recently is that he might have selected defense of the forces of evil even if given a choice (this he was not; he had to take what was left), because Louis all of our lives has represented evil to me: corrupt, scuttling, foolish, apologetic, sanctimonious evil cutting into all the corners of existence and painting it with dull little strokes. I would not be surprised to know that this creature engages in devil-worship—having never had an original thought or creation in his life he would be bound to be an admirer of Satan.

Our relations, never cordial, have, of course, deteriorated severely through these initial fifteen matches. I refuse to speak to him and even when we are both away from the table, taking a mutual break or awaiting referees' instructions, I turn from him as would any man of decency, and pay no acknowledgment whatsoever to his presence.

It is unfortunate that the weight of the universe rests upon my shoulders, but it does so only in the abstract, because the struggle is with *myself*; an internal struggle of self-knowledge and self-realization in which Louis himself plays no part. Increasingly he has shown agitation over this attitude, his realization that he is not only beneath my contempt but beneath the contempt of all those who support the cause of justice to which I am dedicated and which must prevail; his realization, as I say, has acted to diminish him, and I am

given to understand from recent published reports that he is having incidents of stomach trouble, attacks of vertigo, a general if slight decline in his physical condition, which I think is directly attributable to the psychic powers I have brought to bear upon him.

It is necessary, however, that I defeat him in chess just as I have in person and therefore the wretched, exhausting, miserable series of matches must go on although now that I have decided to assist the Overlords no longer, to string out the suspense of the final confrontation no longer, the matches will not persist to the degree that they might have before I lost patience.

I leave the stage from the moment that I make my brilliant response, Pawn to King Four. Some lingering perversity, some shred of doubt, however, compels me to remain in my seat until Louis scuttles from backstage like a frog, having been given word by his seconds that he is losing clock-time. He must have been urinating, the poltroon, because a few spots of damp surround his fly (which is split in the middle) and as he passes me, sliding toward his seat, Louis' eyes momentarily connect in a horrid way which refracts into me stunningly ... and I realize that he is seeing his own defeat.

He has dreamed it already a hundred times knowing the depth of his disgrace; now he looks at the pieces with a little sigh of despair and then like a hunchback being carried forth in a chair at Lourdes to another despairing conclusion, he braces his hands on chairside, those little hands turning a disgusting and palpating white, hitches his chair nearer the board, and looking once at his clock, jaws moving, huddles in an excess of concentration, attempting to find some responding move in a game which I know (and if I were him would also know) to be lost.

INTERREGNUM: *Fianchetto*

In my early teens I learned that my father had no grasp of my passion for chess or my great if muddled destiny. Then matters diminished.

"It's madness," he said, talking about the Royal Game, 'It's not an activity but an obsession. You must do something useful with your life; perhaps you should go on and meet people."

"That's not so," I said to him, "you have no right to tell me what to do with my life. Chess is a noble pastime, and you're merely unhappy because since Mother died and you got dead-ended in your job you have nothing with which to involve yourself, nothing with which your intellect and soul can find themselves embraced. So you're jealous and taking it out on me, your only son, your only child." (I will admit that I did not say this to him. The theatrical impulse toward revision—to set up one's life and its scenes as they should have been rather than as they were—is quite prevalent among us practitioners of the Royal Game and in fact the old man reduced me to stumbling inarticulateness most of the time. But I would have said it if I had had the insights I have now. Therefore, I did say it and if none of you likes this impulse to alteration you are quite welcome to change it back again, thereby committing the same lapse of which you might accuse me.)

"Lout," he said, "ungrateful lout," and went on from there to various mumbled threats, imprecations and predictions of destruction but he took no heart from them, apparently, nor did I take any meaning. My career was well in ascent by this time. I had finished third in the Eastern Junior Regionals the year before and was now in deep preparation for displacing Louis from that crown. (He had won on a technicality; the mental illness of the original first-place holder necessitated his withdrawal on the very day of the last round.) "All right," he said sometime later, "I can see that there's only one way to get this nonsense out of your head, only one way to wake you up," and he stumbled then to the cabinet in the dining room of our miserable three-room Brooklyn apartment, sweeping away gin bottles and decks of cards in his desperate attempts to get at something hidden. "Let's play," he said, taking a filthy old chessboard "and pieces from some hidden cavity. *"I'm going to beat the shit out of you, that's all"*

My attention turned inside out, as it were; one moment my concentration had been deep within, working out an ancient compositional problem of fairy chess (a game I have grown to

deplore), struggling over the miserable library text, the next it was as if I unfurled, came inside to outside and projected myself deep within not only the situation as it suddenly emerged but into my father's will and consciousness, obtaining a perception into the old bugger previously missed, a perception, as it were, into his very heart. "I used to play chess too," he mumbled, his hands trembling. He recovered the pieces from their noisome grave, perched the board on the table top perilously and seized a Black and a White Pawn to offer me the usual choice. "If the old man beats the shit out of you even though he hasn't played for twenty years that'll show you. Won't it? Won't it?" he said rather plaintively, determination falling from the panels of his face to reveal a surprisingly defenseless and pleading expression, and then he extended his two tight, shaking little fists to me for the presentation. I slapped forward like a boxer, chose the left hand, the one (even then) which sheltered the forces of light. The great struggle began, that epic game with my father in which, with sublimated patricide, I went out to destroy him.

It was a strange sensation: to play chess with my father under the one dismal bulb of our living room; it was as if that inversion of consciousness continued and instead of being merely myself, that constant trap in which I have managed to work out most of the passions of these fifty years, I was him as well, was my father, could penetrate his consciousness and was aware not only of the nuances of my own attack but of the thin beating of the membranes of his old mind as he plotted his own, so that a simultaneity of purpose overtook me. I knew what I was going to do, but I also knew what he was going to do—and I cannot say which was the more horrifying.

He began with a King's Pawn attack; I countered at the sides, bringing out the King Knight and castling early in a variation of the Nimzo-Indian; a Queen's Gambit he offered was declined, a Knight Sacrifice was declined, a Bishop Sacrifice was declined and after twelve moves, all of his pitiful attempts to launch a premature attack had been blunted; he saw that it was hopeless and sat quivering in the midst of his pieces, his wrists seeming to expand with hematoma as he looked beyond the board to me, then through the wall. "Son of a bitch," he said (my father had never cultivated tournament manners), and attempted to drive through that net through hasty

sacrifice but this time, taking his Queen's Pawn with my Knight, the sacrifice was accepted and the Knight almost instantly set up a dangerous pin of his Queen's Bishop, locking in that hapless piece so that he was unable to initiate any kind of activity, and it was as if then I fell straightaway into the sewers of his mind, the chesspieces the conduits into his psyche, so that I could poke and prowl those dull corridors to the limit of curiosity, seeing the thin little lights of purpose gleaming in the forehead, winking for just a moment in their feeble light before collapsing.

I saw that mixture of grief and resentment which was all that my father could bring to life in terms of an attitude, and then something about the Queen's Rook caught his attention, something about its possible positioning, so that four moves later, Rooks doubled, he could venture an attack against my King. He reached forward a hand to touch that Rook; simultaneously I was hurled from his mind like an insect tossed from a mat being furled and flapped outdoors, fell back fifty miles gasping into my own head on its customary tilt and watched as he moved the Rook. Then, clasping his hands, he looked at me with an expression as open and helpless as any that I had ever seen on another human's face. "Do you think that will do?" he said. "Do you think that this gives me a chance?"

I had literally broken the man, caused him to come unstrung within thirteen devastating moves, and now he was asking me out of his torment whether or not his move was satisfactory. "How do I know?" I said. "How can I tell you what's right and what's wrong? You're my father, aren't you?" and saying this reached out to make my own response move, a move of the King's Knight, which would have guarded my own at the same time that it unleashed an attack against that very square on which his Rook would perch two moves subsequently. Concentration swathed me, giving me vast feelings of power and connection.

The world dwindled to a beating heart, which was the board, but as I reached forward to touch the piece that would initiate the attack that would lead to his final humiliation and my victory, a strange reluctance seized me; I do not know if it was a fear of patricide (which after all is a very profound if common archetype according to the teachings of Freud). Most likely it was that uncommon perception

of my father, that feeling to which I have already referred, that I literally dwelt within the tortured man and could see the effect that my victory would have upon him.

In any event, for whatever reason, I found that I could not make that move, my hand hanging above that board in paralysis like a dangling scrotal sac might overlay a trembling vagina (I can use explicit sexual imagery when I dare; I am not, for all my lack of experience, naive about the matter of sex), the little scrotal sac of the hand bulging with power (or maybe it was only reluctance), and I could not force my hand to move; it hung above the Bishop, I could not get it to move forward; it trembled above the Bishop and at that moment my father's own hands reached forward across the depths of the board and *gripped my pieces, my Rooks*. "J'adoube," he said apologetically, a wisp of a smile on his face, "*je merely adoub'e*," and one glance at the old failure's face and I could divine his purpose, perceive with that new-found and cunning ability on which I have dwelt the depth of his purpose. But I was frozen then, unable to move, unable to challenge him and slowly his brown, gnarled, speckled hands brought my two Rooks into their fists, brought those fists down upon the board it-self ... and the board quavered, the board rocked perilously upon the table, and then it fell to one side. I heaved out a knee, I unbalanced the sliding board completely and it fell to the floor in an explosion of pieces, Pawns and Bishops vaulting into the air, the stricken Kings rolling underneath my scrambling, scurrying feet. A faint halo seemed to come upward from the board, little firmaments of light streaking my father's face and my own, the light coming from the dead-center of disaster.

"Clumsy old fool," my father said meditatively, "my, that was stupid of me, I do want to apologize," and stood, pushing back the chair with his calves, brushing imaginary specks of dust or lint from his pants. "Most regretful," he said, "hate to spoil our game like that but on the other hand I had you on the run, surely you know that; spared you a most terrible and humiliating defeat, my I son." He turned then to leave the premises—or at I least I think it was his *intention* to leave the premises—but with a sheer and terrible growl of frustration I launched myself upon him, my hands going for his neck; beating and beating away at him I started to choke the life out of my father

(which by all accounts is a very profound experience—the killing of the father in Freudian terminology being associated with many other levels of meaning which are hard to explicate in this context but no less painful).

“You old bastard,” I said, “you can’t do this to me, I was going to win the game, I had you trapped, I had you obliterated.” I continued to wring and saw a way at his neck; pure droplets of terror came from his mind, coalescing as little spots on his face, and he began to thrash within my grasp. “You can’t do this to me,” I pointed out, “it isn’t fair, I had the game won, you know that I had the game won and now look at what you’ve done to me.” But there was no power in my gestures, no true force in my voice, and after a moment my hands fell away from him like paper, little diseased claws opening and closing in the harsh spaces of the room.

“Anyway,” I said, “you play a lousy game; I could have Fool’s Mated you in seven if I had set up the attack that way.” He paled, he turned from me, he scuttled from the room at great and increasing speed, leaving me standing there all by myself, looking at those hands which hung from my wrists now, little knots of implication.

I find it hard to recall if I had further relations with my father or whether our dealings were stopped at this point; I find it hard to remember if he lived for ten years after this disastrous game or chose that very night to die of a massive cerebral hemorrhage (if I ever get the chance I must go into the files of family history I compiled and look this up). My mind is blurred by the tension of the match in which I am engaged, but of one thing I am quite sure, and I have little doubt on this point: My father and I never played chess again, and when I returned to the apartment much later I found that the board and pieces had been discarded in the garbage. Like dead minnows, the pieces nestled amidst the waste, as sullen and ungiving in this aspect as I like to think Louis is when one gets inevitably into the question of higher strategy.

CHAPTER THREE

Queen to Bishop Three

Now, feeling already blocked, my P—K4 having blunted for all time his fiendish intention to take over the center of the board, Louis has pushed his Queen peremptorily.

It is a characteristic of his. The man tends to panic, tends to respond to pressure poorly by bringing out his heavy pieces before the pace of the game has really given them range or sweep. Now, seeing his Queen emergent, seeing the peculiar, nauseated expression on his face as he quickly looks over the board and then bolts, I know that the game must be mine.

For I have already won. The quick movement of the Queen is Louis' concession that midway in the second exchange of moves I have *already* overpowered him. I feel a certain sympathy for him at this moment, knowing that backstage he must be in the hands of seconds, gasping, sweating, his face agonized while they try to convince him that he still has a chance ... but he will be vomiting in the lavatory now. (There is a center bowl which I use myself in circumstances of this kind. Surrounded by walls and space it is possible to make the act of regurgitation an almost sacramental and sacrificial one. The sounds of vomiting, I have always thought, are very close to the sounds of prayer.) And a little after that he will be back at the board to see my own devastating response move which will plunge him even further into gloom. Truly, Louis is in a difficult situation and well he might be, for he represents all of the evil in the world.

It has occurred to me at least once during the course of these matches that I might attempt a secret consultation and rapprochement with Louis, to try to work out something between us to alter or at least extend the course of the matches. As is customary in a series of this sort (the Overlords have set up the match protocol and regulations very much as our own recollected international matches have been; they have no original ideas to contribute), Louis and I stay in the same lodgings, deal with the same people, use the same facilities, although at different times, and are often left to ourselves for hours without supervision, nominal "rest and recuperation" periods during which we are free to wander through the controlled atmospheres of the enclosures in which we have been stationed. (The atmospheres of most of the systems we have visited, of course, would kill us in a trice.) It would be easy, thus, to arrange some secret meeting with him in a deserted part of the hotel; the Overlords for all of their sanctimony are quite stupid in many areas and would probably not even know that such a meeting had taken place. Thus I could find Louis in a corridor or a room of some sort and make a suggestion, say, that we throw games alternately to one another, extending the series as much as possible; and that we then, at the forty-first game, engage in a series of grandmaster draws—shuffling the pieces around three or four moves and then with bearded nods and smiles conceding a willingness to settle for a draw. It would be possible if we did this to extend the series indefinitely.

The Overlords are authoritarian creatures; they take the rules of their contest quite seriously, and they would be quite unable to challenge a decision, mutually arrived at, to extend the series indefinitely through a series of draws. We might be able to play for the fate of the universe through several months or years, extending our tour indefinitely until finally one or the other of us would die of sickness or old age, throwing the plans of the Overlords into chaos. Meanwhile we could keep on going.

I am a reasonably compassionate man and this thought has at least occurred to me. I know that the eventual outcome of our match can only be disastrous for half the population of the universe. Evil creatures by the billions are going to suffer and die when I vanquish

their representative, and even though I am opposed to evil implacably, and have dedicated my life to its conquest—it was not a casual decision for me to represent the forces of light—it is still a rather painful thing for me to think of all those billions winked painfully out of existence, noisome as most of them must be. I am vaguely acquainted with theology, not by any means being one of those chess ignoramuses of whom you have often read who knows little beyond the confines of the board. I know that many of those who have been enlisted now in the cause of evil do not think of themselves as evil at all but have merely been arbitrarily assigned, unhappily caught up in circumstance. These creatures, being no less sentient than those whom *I* represent, have just cause for concern. In any event it has occurred to me at various points of our tour to make this proposal to Louis.

“Look,” I could say to him, sitting in a rather plush, Earth-type lobby on a far star (the winking globes and lights above giving hideous reminders of what it was like to stay in the Hotel Lucerne in New York during one endless week’s tournament twenty years ago), “we can work this out together. We can draw games indefinitely. I They know little of the intricacies of master chess, I these Overlords, and in any event, it would be entirely fair by the rules of the game. Why not extend this?”

“I won’t even think of it,” he would say (I know Louis so well that the conversation uncoils itself as easily as the moving out of Knight-and-Bishop preparatory to a castle). “Why should I collaborate with you at all? I’m going to destroy you.”

“But you don’t understand, you fool, that I’m going to destroy *you* and in any event, whoever wins, many, many billions of creatures are going to die. Think of all the suffering.”

“There will be no suffering. Anyway, that’s hardly my problem, is it? I’m merely doing a job.”

“Listen, Louis, I’m trying to be reasonable about this. The fate of the universe is still in our hands, regardless of what the Overlords say. Besides, wouldn’t you like to extend the matches indefinitely? There are whole sectors of the universe I that we can see; it’s hardly an experience available to most Earthmen.”

“I’m not interested in that,” he says stubbornly. Really, the man is impossible; a rigid, authoritarian personality, reaction-formation I think they call it. “That’s not my problem at all; my duty is to play out the match, represent the forces at my command, demolish you and bring an end to this.”

“Really, Louis, you’re being most unreasonable. Don’t you understand that I’m going to beat you? Besides that, you represent the forces of evil.”

“It’s not a question of what I represent. Remember, the Overlords have instructed us that it’s completely arbitrary: What we think of as good and evil mean nothing to them. Anyway, David, you haven’t got a chance in these matches. I’m already leading five games to two and I haven’t even attempted anything original yet.”

“We could at least draw a couple of matches, couldn’t we? There hasn’t been a draw so far, which is very unusual in grandmaster chess. If you change your mind and come around to my way of thinking, it’s going to look strange to the Overlords if we start to draw without having established precedent. Let’s stalemate a few, anyway.”

“I’m sorry, David, but you do not understand the conditions.” A certain pomposity overtakes Louis at odd moments; it would assault him now. “You’re asking us to cheat by prior agreement and that’s against the rules. We could even be brought up on charges.”

“By whom?”

“By—”

“There’s no governing body, there’s no federation, it’s all going to end.”

“I’m sorry, David. You’re counseling collaboration. I have half a mind to go to the Overlords on this. They’d take strong action; in fact, you might be disqualified. You wouldn’t like that. You’d be in worse trouble than you are already.”

“You’re impossible.”

“No, you are.”

“You’re a pompous, officious fool. Don’t you have any loyalty to a fellow grandmaster?”

“I’ll report you to the Overlords, David. I really will.”

“I dare you to do it.”

"I'll recite the full contents of this conversation 'to them. I'm sure they'll be interested enough to want to take it up with you further. I have nothing more to say; you are no man of honor."

No. This would not work at all. It is clear why Louis and I can reach no arrangement. The match must go on its accustomed course, straight through to his destruction. Nevertheless, this must be said and in the network of the mind I will say it: I have tried. Surely I have tried. His condition is not my fault.

Queen to Queen Bishop Three. Queen to Queen Bishop Three. While Louis vomits somewhere in a rear stall, the putrid waters of his intestines merging with the chemically treated fluids of the Deneb System, I contemplate this move. Louis has always had this tendency to develop his majors too rapidly; it is a serious failing. Commentators have noticed this. I have brought it to their attention.

Well I remember how in the Berlin Interzonals Louis wedged open his Rook file with a stupid and premature castle which allowed Barker, his opponent, to penetrate to the seventh rank with his Queen. The mop up was deadly and almost immediate: A Rook doubled the Queen and placed Louis into almost immediate *zugzwang* and his resignation followed but five moves later. Barker (whose game has improved although still well below my level) discussed this with me later over cruller and tea, having accepted Louis' collapse with a rare grace which touched me although I would rather that he had spat in the fool's eyes.

"He has aspects of brilliance," Barker conceded, "but he cannot handle the majors properly. It is a pity." He stuffed the cruller into his mouth, began to chew with a series of rather disgusting noises and gestures ... quite repulsive, really.

"I think that his basic problem might be a lack of patience," Barker said, "although again—" taking a sip of coffee, swilling it around, mingling the fluid with the crumbs of cruller, "—perhaps he overestimates his abilities and finds himself more surprised than any of us when time and again his premature attack with the majors finds itself most thwarted. Difficult to say," Barker added, putting the cruller in the coffee, twirling it until it became encrusted with sugar and the

fluid of the coffee, and then, opening his mouth wide, put the cruller into his mouth like sacrament, rubbing together his palms with a groan of satisfaction. "Don't you think so?"

It was difficult for me, sitting at the table in this rather crowded coffee shop at Bern, to keep a calm and inscrutable expression. But I tried. It is the very *corporeality* of life which I find repellent and this is one of the reasons why I find chess appealing: Here we have a highly abstract, coldly mathematical game devoid of odors, scents, implications, belches, coughs, sniffles, accusations and all of those elements which so contribute to the making of what non-masters erroneously call "real life." There is a certain pleasure in abstraction; I would not diminish it.

This aversion to the normally material waste-and-flow of mortality may be a little abnormal but it is abnormal only in the richer sense of the word, a deviation which raises me to a higher level altogether. So it was difficult, looking at Barker (who now having finished his cruller turned upon me a pair of eyes as brightly impenetrable as a puppy's), to keep good control over myself. "Perhaps," I said, "perhaps. But then again he may be a weak player."

"Weakness is no excuse," Barker said, extending a forefinger, licking it with a flourish, then, his tongue working like a butterfly's, doing the same to the remaining fingers on his left hand. "There are good; players, weak players, brilliant players and unsound ones, but at all levels the personality will hold. Each game is an individual expression of its maker; ten different weak players will be weak in a different way and having done some readings in psychology I think that our friend Louis suffers from a failure of self-confidence. Are you ill? You look sick; I hope that nothing has made you sick," Barker said.

But it was too late. Too late, too late: stomach churning like an engine missing cylinders I was rearing from the table, making my way to the lavatory located by the coffee shop, clutching bowels and intestines. Holding also a terror born of the certainty that I was about to disgrace myself, I was able, tentatively, to make it all the way into that enclosure before losing lunch. The scar of that encounter, I wish to make quite clear, remains deep within me even though the information imported by Barker was quite useful and has

helped me in further encounters with Louis. Beyond question he does indeed bring out the majors too quickly. He lacks self-confidence. This last move of his bespeaks that tendency more eloquently than ever I could.

Louis has retired behind the screens now. Vivid images of his humiliation scuttle across my mind as I lean forward intently to the board, plotting out what will pin him further. But at that moment—

Ah, well, chess is inconstancy, and there seems to be a kind of disturbance in the audience. I sense a fluttering. Billows of light cascade over the stage and there is a series of choking screams which necessarily rivet full attention. Concentration completely broken, I stare across that expanse of stage where I see that a large man has somehow broken the security cover and has rushed the stage, struggling with several guards. The guards are of various races; some are humanoid while others appear to be more exotic and the aspect of this man being surrounded by an alien and degenerated mass is quite shocking. It reminds me of certain magazine covers I recall from my difficult youth in which Humanity was seen to be Struggling in the Grip Of Disgusting Aliens. The aspect is so shocking and yet so interesting that the chess-pieces literally dwindle. Haze consumes them and I look at the intruder.

He is trying rather desperately to flee the security personnel, but he cannot break their grip. Nevertheless, driven as he is by some demonic strength he is able to pull away just enough to close further ground between himself and me and all of the time he is talking, inexhaustibly talking.

"You must stop this," he says, "it's totally unreasonable; we cannot go on this way."

Is this true? Conviction can sometimes carry the day; I give it credence, hunched over, saying nothing. This situation is the problem of the security personnel, of course, and not for anything would I interfere with them. I see that they have the intruder under at least partial control; he is trying to reach me but there is no way that he can break the wall of arms, legs, tentacles, appendages and horns which surround him and therefore he must settle for desperate bellows.

“Something is terribly wrong!” he is shouting. “It’s not fair, it’s not right, do you understand, this match must now stop at once!” Then some aspect of his voice, his posture in struggle, connects and he becomes familiar to me. I remember who he is. Strange that I would not have known it immediately but I am of course under mental strain.

He is a senior official of FIDE, the Federation International, which controls Earth-type chess. He is furious. “This is ridiculous!” he shrieks. He must have stolen aboard one of the spaceships, smuggling himself away like precious contraband. Then again, he may have won approval from the Overlords to come along as a representative of the International. Who is to know? “We have not approved this match,” he is saying, his honest face streaked with rage and pain. “We have not certified this competition; we have not selected these competitors. This match is being conducted in violation of the statutes which control and organize our great game itself!”

Finally, at this last outburst, the guards establish some control over the struggling figure, and with a series of vicious clouts and punches, they hustle him off the stage. “I am going to protest!” he shouts. “The match is disallowed!” Then there is a thud and wholly discommode he collapses, surrounded by a mass of guards, and is taken off the stage by a back exit.

It is a horrifying breach of match etiquette, to rush the stage. It is further complicated by the fact that the felon is a representative of the governing body of chess on our planet. But the match must go on, and I am able with some difficulty to restrain rage. I rub my hands against one another, feeling the gnarled palms come into themselves with the aspect of chipped glass. I wring them, shake my head and attempt once again to project myself into the board.

It is not as easy it was before, however, and momentarily the pieces shimmer, glisten, take on a different aspect, become almost gelatinous as if they were to melt and begin to run through the squares of the board in red and black. There is an instant when I think that I might faint, so horrifying has been this assault on my concentration.

Instead I come to my feet, avoiding only at the last instant that deadly contact which would sweep the board from the table, and stagger toward the rear of the stage through haze and smoke (all races, all audiences smoke incessantly—time and again I have cited my asthma but they will not listen) and for a deadly moment kinesthetic sense, and memory itself, desert me. I am stumbling through an amorphous mix like an amnesiac animal, unable to deduce my identity or the reason for my being here.

Then I find myself surrounded by Overlords, more of them than I have seen at any time heretofore. Ten or eleven of them have surrounded me, having leapt from their observation posts. Their tentacles grip. A projective device zooms in, cold steel glinting; undoubtedly a closeup of my tortured features is at this moment being beamed to billions throughout the universe. “I can’t take it,” I find myself groaning and gasping, “I simply can’t take it.”

“Don’t worry about this,” an Overlord says, “a mistake.”

“I’ve tried to be reasonable. I’ve tried to cooperate but I can’t have this kind of demonstration. I can’t have the stage being rushed by members of the audience. How can I concentrate?”

“It is highly unfair,” another Overlord agrees. Their voices and personalities are interchangeable. I have never been able to successfully individuate them except by the numbers. Nevertheless I suspect that this one might well be my old friend Five who more than any of them has shown me the sympathy and understanding I am truly due.

“We’ll see that this person is taken care of,” the Overlord says. “He must be severely disturbed.”

“I mean,” I say, surrounded by tentacles, burying my forehead in a rosily purplish substance which feels like the scales of a fish, but obscurely comforting for all of that, “I’m doing the best I am able.”

“Of course you are.”

“It isn’t easy here. The least you can do is to give me a decent environment in which to play. How can I tolerate this otherwise? Consider my position and all of them out to get me anyway. I tell you, I can’t stand this any more at all!”

“Of course you can’t stand it,” the same Overlord agrees sympathetically, “and there’s no reason why you should. I promise

that this individual will be dealt with most severely." There is a sense of murmured consultation among the many forms which surround me: seven I think it is, although in this enmeshing of tentacles and stalks it is difficult to enumerate, it might be as few as four and then again it might be as many as twelve. Who knows? The physical aspects of the Overlords have always been something about which I wished to remain ignorant; call me xenophobic and be gone. "Most severely," the Overlord says once again. "And now I suggest that you put this most unfortunate incident out of mind and return to the board. Your clock is running, you know, and it would be unwise to use up time. We can't stop the clocks simply because you're having a breakdown."

"And besides," I say as stumps and tentacles begin to prod me back toward the board, "it's not even true what he's saying; the match is being properly conducted under all FIDE rules."

"Of course it is, and you have no reason for concern."

"We're using the clocks, we're using seconds, and a team of referees, and we're playing under all the approved conditions. He has no right, absolutely no right at all," I point out, "to say that the match isn't sanctioned." My chair grates into my shins, I feel little stabs and shivers of pain. "The trouble with FIDE is that it's a completely trivial organization," I say, managing to sit once again while Overlords surround me, massage my shoulders protectively, bring cool cloths across my face, tickle the back of my neck. "They're not interested in chess, in improving the structure of the game, they're only interested in their miserable little prerogatives, in continuing to maintain a stranglehold over the game."

I shift nervously, aware that I am receiving a great deal of attention. "It's a petty bureaucracy," I say, "it's completely arbitrary and stupid and I won't have anything to do with it any more. Instead I'll chart my own course. That's what I'm going to do."

The Overlords murmur their agreement, apparently enjoying my forthrightness, still working over me, the cloths gathering in the center of my face to form a cool, open tent in which damp I would gladly disappear. But, of course, the towels are taken away.

"All right," I say then, the glaring light even more offensive after this momentary retreat to darkness, "all right, I'll go on and do the best I

can, but I want you to know that I won't be responsible. I won't be responsible for anything that happens from here on in. After all, it's your responsibility to keep the stage clear, and I can hardly play my best or come to a sufficient level of concentration if I'm going to be subjected to stuff like this." Once again they indicate agreement. It is obvious that they are trying to placate me for their own reasons.

Well, certainly they want the match to go on but somehow the thought that I am being humored strikes a cold and deadly rage into my heart and I turn upon them once more, conscious that more booms have been lowered, that the lights are even brighter and that I now address the largest, most involved audience in the history of sentience. "I warn you," I say, "I want to warn you that this kind of thing makes the match itself suspect; it is possible that the winner can be disqualified, that the match can be wiped out because of the kind of incident we've seen. I'm not at all sure that the results of this match would stand up in any kind of examination procedure."

And having said this I turn my fullest attention to the board once more, already tossing the Overlords from consciousness. Let them stew about that for a while! Let them think of what this might do to their own timetable, to their eagerness to get the match rolling, let them deal with their own headquarters and superiors as they will. It is not my problem: It is definitely theirs, and they will have much to ponder for a while. Only the board matters.

Momentarily purged I manage to swaddle my-self in concentration again although I cannot quite forget the image of the FIDE official rushing the stage. His face was congested with blotches of the sheerest fury. It must be difficult. It must be very difficult for him. It is a strange match and one being run without the consultation of the Federation. As I have already pointed out, this petty bureaucracy severely dislikes having its prerogatives disturbed. Of course it is quite likely that aspects of behavior like this will put them out of business. I would not mind that. I would not mind that very much at all; I have never had much use for FIDE or for any of those governing bodies, for that matter, which I consider to be little more than elaborate collection agencies contriving to harass the pure and dedicated practitioners of this Royal Game.

The first internationally recognized chess champion, Paul Morphy of New Orleans, never played after his twenty-fifth birthday. The refusal of the British master, Staunton (after whom the contemporary competitive design was named), to play Morphy while the younger man was on a European tour is supposed to have driven Paul insane: He spent the last thirty years of his life as a non-practicing lawyer, scion of a wealthy family, walking the streets of the city and mumbling to himself about humiliations. Later in his life Steinmetz, the first official (as opposed to merely "recognized") world champion, begged to meet Morphy who finally agreed only on condition that the meeting was for ten minutes and chess was not discussed. Morphy eventually died of tuberculosis. Annals do not reveal if he and Steinmetz ever met.

The world champion of the nineteen-thirties and forties, Alexander Alekhine, stands as a collaborator with the Nazis (author of a scurrilous monograph on "Jewish chess" represented by Reshevsky and others, a cowardly, conservative game) and also urinated on flowers, floors, tables and opponents during matches. It was not the urination so much as disrobing during the act that distressed the keepers of the clubs. Alekhine also drank heavily and would occasionally vomit during tense moments in key matches, occasionally on the board.

Adolf Andersson, author of the Immortal Game, challenged God publicly, in his last years, to a game of chess. "I'll give him Pawn and move," said Andersson.

Robert James Fischer, the reigning world champion at the time the Overlords came, was famed for his many eccentricities, including reactionary politics, an expressed desire to "really smash people and make them suffer," a compulsive tardiness, a refusal to deal with women because they were "weakies" (that is, lousy chess players), and a difficult relationship with his mother. Shortly after winning the world championship to whose possession he had dedicated his life Fischer went into seclusion amidst rumors that his mental balance had disintegrated.

Boris Spassky, the man Fischer defeated for the world championship, daydreamed a lot. Pictures of the match catch him in

a series of odd postures, eyes soft within the head, reeling within, a strange tentative clutching in his hands simulating embrace.

Chess, it would seem, is afflicted with a madness which has skewered masters of all generations. Whether it is a madness of the genes which drives one to chess or whether it is merely the effect of undue concentration forced on an initially normal psyche is not now known. In any case, chess masters are commonly considered to be among the least stable of individuals. Perhaps as a group only science-fiction writers have a similar collective insanity, and it is thus doubly surprising that in this welter of madness I have been able to cultivate my own stability, a fresh flower amidst the mud, a pure, bright rose in the stink. I am known as "the gentle grandmaster" and in no way at all have I ever betrayed this superb image.

But if there were ever a time to come apart, to be sure, that time would be now, what with the pressures and tensions. But despite my unfortunate outburst toward the FIDE official I have rarely felt more in command than I do at this moment. In fact, the outburst over, various pockets of instability emptied, I am even calmer than previously and once again my attention tests itself against the board.

The question is how I will take best advantage of the premature Queen exposition. One way is to immediately bring out a Knight for a slashing check and subsequent Queen-trap. (This was the technique which Spassky the dreamer used against Fischer the eccentric in that immortal eleventh game of their series.) I find the concept of peremptory check somewhat dull. It would work, of course; it is book chess, precisely what the standard texts and practitioners would recommend ...

But I have dedicated my life to playing with originality, to finding the unconventional solution to the conventional mysteries. I would not wish to do anything so unimaginative as to merely Queen-check. Better to begin an attack of my own, a slow, proficient gathering of the forces, terminating some eight or nine moves hence in a slashing, definitive attack deep into the corridors left unguarded by the Queen.

There is plenty of time. My clock moves on but the longer that I may extend Louis' agony the better I will like it. There must be some

sadism in my personality which I will not attempt to deny. I like to smash them. I like to torment them. I like to see them suffer.

Louis returns to the board, unaccompanied by his seconds. His gait is weaving and ponderous, his feet seem to meet the highly polished surfaces of the floor unevenly and there is a rather paretic gallop to this walk, an unsightly and unholy gleam to the eyes which I have not previously noted. Undoubtedly he has been drinking back there, although how he has managed to get hold of alcohol during a match is beyond me. There are resources to Louis, however, which I would not deny. The man is a bit of an alcoholic. He has a reputation on the circuit for secret drinking in quantity behind locked doors late at night. For years he has managed to control this habit, to be so secretive about it that it is known only to a few sophisticates like myself who have been with him for many years. But perhaps at this stage of our encounter he does not care any more.

As he settles himself into his seat once again he does so with a little bit of a hop, an unsightly scuffle that masks the trembling of his knees as he eases himself into the huge, stuffed chair. He squints at the board checking to see whether I have made my own move and then, amazingly, leans forward, places a shaking forefinger on my knee and says hoarsely, "David, we've got to talk."

I yank my knee away, huddle over the board, shake my head desperately.

"I mean it, David," he says. "I really mean it. We have things to discuss."

Still I say nothing. I maintain my rigid posture, cross my arms in front of my face. I find it hardly credible that this is going on.

"I'm quite serious, David," he says in an even more determined tone. "We have a number of things to discuss. It can't be put off any longer."

Finally I say something. "You fool," I say, "we can't talk. We're playing chess."

"I know we're playing chess. That's what I want to talk about."

"There's nothing to say."

"We have a great deal to say, David. We've got to go backstage and discuss things."

"You idiot," I say, "don't you know that there's coverage of this match unprecedented in all history? There are cameras and microphones all over the stage. They're listening to every word you're saying."

"No, they're not, David. Remember, it was you who insisted that there be no microphones. They can't pick up a word."

"So they're lip-reading."

"There are no lip-readers here, David," Louis says with an uncomfortable laugh. "There may be lip-readers on television but what difference does that make? They can't do anything to either of us for talking, chatting it up, and that's what I'm doing. Besides, I said we should go backstage, didn't I? We can have privacy there."

"You're got to be crazy," I say. "We have absolutely nothing to discuss."

"Oh, yes, we do," he says with a nervous little giggle. "You'd be amazed at what we have to discuss. Important new information has reached me which is of the highest importance."

"I don't care about your information. I don't care about the highest importance. Stop talking and let me concentrate or I'll call the referee and have you disqualified for harassment."

His forefinger taps my knee again, then, shockingly, his entire palm lies across it, stroking, molding, much as one might touch a woman's breast. "Don't be a fool, David," he says, "this is terribly important. Would I want to talk with you if it weren't terribly important? Believe me, I hate you just as much as you hate me. But this goes far beyond individual disagreements." He loops the other hand in his copious beard, begins to tug and whisk away at little edges. "Far beyond, far beyond," he says in a singing monotone, "and it will be very much to your disadvantage not to listen to me."

"All right," I say, "all right, I'll talk to you. But it can't be here, in front of all these cameras."

"Well, of course not," Louis says, his dishonest face beaming. "What do you think I am, mad or something? I'm going to leave the stage now. At the completion of your next move you can join me backstage and we'll be able to talk then out of sight."

"Won't they think that peculiar? The two of us talking back there, you not coming out here to make your next move? You'll be losing

time on your clock, too."

"Oh, that's perfectly all right," Louis says in a suddenly distracted fashion. "I don't care about the clock-time lost; I'm just going to beat the hell out of you anyway, David, you know that. Besides," he says, "besides, it won't take very long."

He stands, turns, leaves the stage immediately in his strangely rigid posture, his body held tightly as if against unfavorable breezes or tacking winds, making his way to the backstage area. Alone on the stage again I feel suddenly shriveled, exposed; I glance to right and left in a somewhat furtive, paranoid manner, wondering if I am being observed closely or whether our brief, intense conversation has been picked up on hidden devices or listened to by the Overlords.

Everything seems quite normal, however (which is to say that everything is stunningly abnormal, but no different from the way it was a few moments ago). The audience is still murmuring in the background (probably still talking about the FIDE official), the lights are hot and bright, the Overlords are scurrying through the cables in their self-important and purplish way. The team of referees, one from each sector, who have had very little to do with the progress of the match, are in one of their eternal consultations below the lip of the stage, probably fighting, as is their wont, about who will have ultimate authority. It is very difficult to establish any kind of relationship to these referees; as a matter of fact it has been difficult to establish a relationship with anyone during this strange and perilous time. When one comes to think of it, the only friend I may have through all of this is Louis, who at least is in a similar position. Nevertheless, I am bound to destroy him. This compounds the irony of the situation to no small degree.

I have used up enough time. Further brooding over the current state of affairs would get me into clock trouble. Also, I am curious to hear what Louis has in his mind. Unhesitatingly, therefore, I make my second move, the move that has been in the back of my mind through all this, a lovely, shining, jewelled beast, awaiting entrance on its canopy of rose.

INTERREGNUM: *The King*

In Buenos Aires I had the champion pinned on the seventh rank but lost him when he was able to find and leap upon an undefended Pawn. In Rio de Janeiro I had him for certain when he left a Rook *en prise*, but snatching it with the wrong piece (I should have taken it with the Queen's Pawn, and took it instead with the King's Knight), I opened up a deadly file to my Queen and once again he slipped away, enveloping me in a mating net. In Moscow, at the Seniors, I knew I had him for sure, down two Pawns to three in a simple end game. But I allowed him to take timing on me and was forced to blunder my way into a clumsy draw. Frustrating, ah, frustrating! It is expected that the champion will win *most* of his games against other grandmasters, this being after all the definition of a champion. But he cannot by any means win *all* of them; even the greatest have percentages of somewhat lower than eighty percent, meaning that better than one time out of five they can be beaten. But even though the statistical probabilities were in my favor and even though I know myself truly to be the best chess player in the world (the only games I have lost have either been thrown, as in this series, or lost on stupid blunders under time pressure), the fact is that I had never beaten the champion, never once forced him to resign (much less undergo checkmate).

The draw in Moscow was the closest that I had come in our seventeen encounters conducted over a period of five years, and after that draw I went into a raging state of depression which took me from near the top of the standings to the very bottom within a matter of weeks. I could have won that tournament, too. Everyone said it.

But in New York City, in my birthplace, for the Golden Cups & Knights Championship of the Eastern Seaboard, I knew at last that I had him. We drew against one another in the first round and then in the twelfth; in the first I was able to take him thirty-seven moves until my Fried-Liver Attack succumbed to the wedge of his Knights and my Queen fell. Even then, looking into his eyes somewhere around the twenty-fifth or twenty-sixth move, I knew that we had entered into a different relationship. For the first time I had the power over him. He was truly beatable. I knew it, and he knew it too; his eyes refracted that knowledge and it was in a strange, doomed trance that he went through the ensuing twelve moves that gave him the game.

His mind was already filled with dread; he knew that we would meet eleven games hence and I could see him calculating already whether he would be able to avoid me; perhaps some sniffle or pimple could erupt in time to afford him a medical excuse. But even then, the match would merely be postponed until he was well again; a game can be canceled only by mutual consent and I would not let him go. He knew that. I could sense that knowledge as a high, dense odor which came through his pores and into my nose.

Much has been written of the champion, of his behavior in head-to-head matches, of his strange and peculiar ability to mesmerize and destroy his opponents, of his ability to infiltrate them with what the specialists call "Monarchical Misery," in which the opponents seem to lose control of themselves, lose the thrust of their game, and begin to commit infantile blunders of the sort which they have not done for more than twenty years. "Monarchical Misery," the specialists say, may come from some strange, psychic force which the champion emanates, a force which causes otherwise mature opponents to go off their game and begin to gibber like children. Two weeks after the matches they are perfectly normal again, calm, confident that they can beat the champion upon a return match. But there are rarely return matches and in tournaments they never do.

The champion has one of the most amazing winning records in the history of chess, over ninety-five percent, I believe, with the utmost majority of his few defeats having occurred when he was playing grandmaster chess before his fifth birthday and thus hardly counting. Since the age of twelve his record approaches perfection: He has lost two games and drawn thirty-four, the two losses meaningless defeats occurring at the end of tournaments already won, forfeiture by nonappearance. When I speak of the eighty-percent win factor, as you see, I am not speaking of the champion who goes beyond the superhuman attainments of even a Fischer or an Alekhine. He is the champion in all but fact since, of course, he refuses to play under FIDE rules. *Refused* to play, I should have said, of course. I am talking of an earlier, simpler time before the Overlords decreed the end of the universe.

The champion in all but title taunted me, then, in Buenos Aires; laughed at me in Rio; left me torn to shreds in Moscow. But New

York was a different level altogether; in New York I knew that I could get him. When he appeared for the slated twelfth game of the tournament, the tournament of his assured defeat, it was with a certain mask of trepidation visible even to the most uninvolved spectators (miserable creatures in the back row who had come into the club only to get out of the snowstorm and who after paying five dollars for their standing room almost instantly put themselves against the wall in various decrepit postures and went into a semi-doze).

The champion was trembling when he appeared before the board; indeed, by appearing five minutes before the start of our scheduled round I was able to stand by the board to greet him and my gesture of seating him with a rather officious air was both so graceless and audacious as to bring various oohs, aahs and moans from the assembled crowd.

The champion as he dropped sullenly into his seat heard those groans and tried to give no visible acknowledgment, preserving that icy demeanor for which he is most famous, but I could detect a tremor through the cheekbones and his hand, as it moved forward to grasp the White Queen's Pawn, was not entirely steady. I instantly proceeded to set up a devastating middle-of-the-board attack.

By the seventh move it was obvious that I had him in the deepest imaginable straits. A hasty Queen-side development had wrecked his Pawn formation; a questionable Queen's Gambit had left him open-file in a way which enabled me to bring pressure on his King side which was nearly irresistible. Although the champion in all but title has been renowned for the rapidity of his play, almost always leaving more than an hour on his clock after forty moves, almost always moving within three minutes of the start of his clock, he had used up forty-six minutes for those first seven moves, twelve of them on the sixth move alone. As I made my eighth move, springing free a Knight that in another four moves would force him into a hasty Queen-side castle, I saw despair vault like flame into his eyes and then he had bolted from the board, using up valuable clock-time to head for the backstage area where he stayed for several moments, emerging in a slow, aged stagger, seating himself before the board again with a sigh, reaching out with trembling hand to move a Pawn.

I knew then I had him. (I had never been able to look ahead more clearly; I was never more in control of my game; I felt prescience, that rare power which even in tournament chess occurs perhaps once in every one hundred games.)

I was going to inflict upon the champion his first defeat in official grandmaster play in some eight years. In so doing I was not only going to smash him, and destroy him utterly (because I knew that his psychic makeup was fragile), but I was going to measurably advance my own career; I would be for all time now The Man Who Had Beaten The Champion, and this would measurably increase my own following, increase the sales of my own books (which had, regrettably, done very poorly in the marketplace due to Louis' corrupt appropriation of my own ideas, which halved my prospective audience), even raise my tournament fees. I might be able henceforth to ask for five hundred dollars, perhaps even seven hundred fifty dollars expense money in return for consent to enter a tournament. At the thought of this an unseemly, almost megalomaniacal cackle came from the depths of my gut. I was able to keep it down only with utmost concentration, and it was with a physical effort that I prevented myself from rubbing my hands and literally laughing aloud with the pleasure of it. Rio, Buenos Aires, and Moscow faded from me now; there was only the reality of New York, my home city, and the place of my prospective ascension. At the age of forty-eight years, seven months, two days and some hours I stood alone before the throne-room of chess, on the verge of entry.

I looked up then, planning to sweep the board for my next inevitable move, and my eyes, almost as if by accident, caught those of the champion.

He hung over the board like a misshapen thing, his posture a parody of some beast's. From those eyes, however, shined a most unholy light, and looking at those eyes, gauging for the first time the effect of what I had done to him, I suddenly in a rush understood everything, understood even the roots of the so-called Monarchical Miseries.

The champion was a wounded animal; the champion was some great beast thrashing in a trap, but it was not a dignified entrapment. Rather, it was the most squalid and miserable kind of pit in which

he was thrashing and his eyes as they looked up at me bespoke a fear so great that I found myself tearing away from that glance, looking desperately through the room to find the source which could inspire such enormous fear—but there was only me, the chesspieces, and the fascinated spectators. Returning then to his gaze I understood everything, even the roots of the champion's power: He could not be beaten because the fear of beating him was that it would destroy him. Utterly discommoded, weeping, screaming, he would collapse over the board, the pieces hurled every which way, his child's screams radiating through the hall. And I could not do it to him. I could not beat him because I could not, looking at those eyes, be responsible for what would happen to him then.

And so the source of the Monarchical Miseries was not the power of the champion but his *weakness*, the exposure of that warped, broken caricature within ourselves which might have made us chess players, might have not, it does not matter. Tearing free the layers of self, the champion was most dreadful and grotesque, a sight which could not be borne for it was not for sane men ... and dragged into his eyes, slamming down all of the tubes and ridges of himself, I knew that I could not beat him, dared not beat him, would not be responsible for what would happen if he lost this game. I could not do it. Pity me, gentlemen; from the precipice of final accomplishment I drew back. I could not destroy him. I simply could not destroy him.

And so, locked in that position over the board, huddled into myself, I underwent that moment of insight, that moment attenuating itself over a long period of time, swaddling me like a blanket. Faint little moans came from the champion, burps and gasps and little colicky sounds like a smothered baby. Then, shaking my head, I tried to grasp one of my pieces, found it curiously slippery, dropped the piece (it was the Knight again) and picked up the Queen itself, the Queen having an unusually grainy feel to it, the little gnarled head of it between my fingers, the blind eyes of the Queen cutting holes through my fingers, and then, pushing it slowly, propelling that Queen across the board, I placed it, gentlemen, I placed it *en prise* to his Queen's Bishop, losing the Queen for a mere Knight, sacrificing the exchange with a vengeance. Then as the champion's entire aspect changed, as his eyes gleamed fire, as his knees began

to beat like wings underneath the table, I stood, stood in New York as I had stood in Rio, Buenos Aires and Moscow and said to him in perfect flat tones, "I resign, I resign," and walked from the room. The spectators gasped in awe, the judges were confused, the referee appalled. And there in my room on the second story I pounded my cot and cried for hours, doing in private, I realized later, what the champion would have done in public—but no difference, no difference; I had looked upon the long corridors which streaked out from my prospective victory over him, and I had found them unbearable.

I knew then that I had no career.

If the Overlords had not come I might have been out of tournament chess within six months anyway. My game had radically declined since that date. Monarchical Miseries indeed! I tell you I could not face it.

Now you know my piteous little confidence.

CHAPTER FOUR

Queen Knight to Queen Bishop Three

So the aim must be to develop my minor pieces quickly while Louis falls into the lure of launching an early, unsound attack. The incident with the champion was extremely galling and quite central to my existence but I am sorry already that I went into it at such length. I do not wish to give the wrong impression of myself or my game. My game is as strong as ever; stronger now for the fire which has forged it. It was distressing to lose to him in such a fashion, but the important thing is that I *could* have beaten him; the means to beat him lay within my hands and it was pity which led me to turn away, pity and an excess of compassion.

Actually my game has not declined in the least but has improved through the years and I was in top-flight form when this important series of matches began. Now, of course, I am even better. Ignore what I said previously; it is what is called (in the Roman Catholic religion, I believe) a “false confession”—a confession inspired not by truth but by a kind of cunning. But before the eyes of God a false confession has no credibility, neither raising nor lowering the speaker in His estimation. It would be best to put all of this out of mind and go on ahead as I have always endeavored. Setting a good example; doing the best that I can despite certain grievous personality lacks of which I am marginally aware. One must go on at all costs, particularly when the fate of the universe and all the forces of good

are concerned. Ignore it. Ignore all that. Concentrate upon the developing drama.

The aim is to allow Louis to lash out in an abortive attack which will shortly blunt itself; then it will be time, from my closely coordinated position, to lash out and destroy him. Patience is the key to winning chess. Slowly I push my chair away from the table, yawning and rather self-consciously scratching myself to show the assembled billions that I am in control of myself, slightly bored, a little distracted and in need of some refreshment backstage. Surely they can see nothing strange in my going backstage while Louis is still there; it is not my fault, and with my move completed I am entitled to a rest. No one will see anything unnatural in this at all. I am convinced. I am convinced that they are convinced as well.

So my chair goes back on the floor with a faint scratching noise audible to several billions of creatures, all fellow spirits, however, under the eyes of the controlling force in the universe. I hasten backstage, inhaling great drafts of air to calm my respiration. Backstage is vacant except for Louis who stands amidst the vast trays of food which have been set up for us: terrestrial-type food from all the worlds: tasty little Jovian lice, neat snappers and poppers from the asteroid belt, a delicious little Sirian parasite which is initially arid but which explodes to warmth and liquidity when crushed. We have eaten well throughout our tournament. Say this about the Overlords if nothing else, they have provided for our physical needs very nicely indeed. The fact is that Louis and I have gained three or four pounds apiece throughout this short period of time; there is a double chin extruding from his beard of which I have never previously been aware. My own belly tends to shake somewhat ponderously when unencumbered. When all of this is over I will have to go on a diet, bring myself into fighting trim once again. Chess is an athletic endeavor, as I have already said, and there is something vaguely disgusting about a champion who is out of trim.

“Come here,” Louis says, beckoning to me with a forefinger. It is a characteristic of his which I have never liked, in fact always found disgusting: the way in which he appropriates one’s identity, a certain officiousness of demeanor. “Come over here,” he repeats hoarsely, beckoning, taking a breadstick from the table and eating it

ostentatiously. Terrestrial-type food. "This is delicious," he says, "I've never really had anything like this before. This is a new one on this stop. Whoever they are, they've done well for us." He casts a glance ceilingward, makes a motion with his other hand, and all comes clear. He is checking for listening devices, making sure that we are not observed.

"That's ridiculous," I find myself saying. "If they're listening to us, they're certainly listening. There's no way that we can stop them and no way either that we can find out whether or not they are. You're being quite childish, Louis." Truly, I had forgotten until this moment how much I hated him; I had managed to feel even a little pity for him in foreshadowing his imminent defeat but now, looking at this repulsive creature nibbling at his breadsticks, I realize that Louis' position as the defender of the forces of evil is not at all casual. He is beyond a doubt a creature of Satan himself; that great snake in his coils, the world, yearns and bursts. "Forget it, Louis," I say again, "if they are listening, they're listening; that's all there is to it. What do you want to talk about?"

His eyes shift, dazzlingly. "I'm glad you came," he says. "I was afraid that you were going to do something foolish, like not taking me seriously; that you wouldn't come. But you're showing good sense, David."

"I moved my Queen Knight to Queen Bishop Three," I say rather sarcastically. "If I were you I'd get back to the board."

"Well, I *will*," he says rather petulantly, chewing on the remains of the breadstick, exuding a little trail of crumbs from the left side of his mouth. "I certainly *will* I have every intention of getting back to that board, and furthermore, David, your attack is very unsound; you cannot counter a Ruy Lopez in the manner you've adopted. But this is far more important than a chess match and I've got to talk to you. It will only take a few moments."

"What do you want, Louis?" I say, hands on hips. Diet strictures are beginning right now; I would not be caught eating in his presence. "Just tell me what this is all about and quickly, if you please. They're coming back instantly."

"I've got some dismaying information," he says, his eyes shifting once again floor to ceiling, and then he extends a hand, takes

another breadstick, motions for me to come closer. His tongue lolls on the stick. "They lied to us," he says in a hoarse whisper, covering the words with the sound of crunching, "this isn't what we think it is."

"Oh? Come again?"

"No sir, we are not playing for the fate of the universe at all. The Overlords aren't what they represent themselves to be: Actually, they're a very minor religious sect which controls a small portion of the galaxy. We're not playing for good and evil as they say we are."

"Oh?" I say again. It occurs to me, looking at him, that the man is mad. Perhaps he is madder than the Overlords. "Then what are we playing for?" I say to humor him.

"For ourselves, David! This is just an exhibition for the entertainment of an audience of many billions. The winner will be celebrated as champion and the loser put to death in a public torture that will be broadcast through the universe. In process, of course."

"How horrible."

"This talk about good and evil, the fate of the galaxies, that's just to build us up and get us excited. There's no such thing. As I say, they're just a small, very fanatical religious sect who every now and then, over a millennium, are indulged by the central bureaucracy. We're just playing a competition, that's all."

I should find this information stunning, but somehow it passes through me, much as water would go through a sieve. I have never given Louis much credibility, of course; this is part of the problem, but the other part is that I know the man is wrong. I know the consequences of the match. "Where did you find this out?" I say.

His eyes turn furtive. "I can't tell you that," he says, "it's the only thing I can't tell you, but believe me the information is true. It's just an exhibition, David." He finishes the breadstick in a choking swallow, reaches for another handful of lice. "We've been lied to, manipulated, and the joke all the time has been on us. This has nothing to do with anything except the match itself. It's just chess. Not life. That's all."

"If you won't tell me your source of information," I say, "how can I believe you?"

My voice has been somewhat louder than his and Louis raises a sudden, frantic hand to his lips in a "sh!", then hurls a fistful of lice

into his throat. "Keep quiet," he says. "I think that we can deal with them, but not if you shout your head off, you moronic idiot."

"You know, Louis," I say, "I've never really liked you. It's been forty-three years and some months and the fact is I've never liked you at all."

"I don't give a damn whether I'm liked by you, David, or not. I have no interest in that at all," Louis says pompously. "Like or dislike has nothing to do with the issue, don't you understand? I'm telling you the truth; if you don't like the source, it's your problem."

"Listen now," I say reasonably, "just listen." I glance quickly around the backstage area; the high, fluorescent boards, the long table on which the foods are set up, the dull, waxen finish of the floors, the airy, gleaming ducts through which the terrestrial atmosphere pours. "They wouldn't do something like this just to have a chess match, an individual competition. They wouldn't have this kind of expense, this level of interest, for a simple match. No, Louis, you can't face reality. There's something in you: You don't realize the consequences of this match, you're not strong enough to. You've always been the weaker anyway, and now you've constructed a fantasy to wall you off from pressure. But the fact is, and I know it on the best authority, that this is Armageddon. This is it. The big A. Apocalypse. Shake and snake, angels and all that, right over the board."

"No." He bites his lips. "No, it isn't that at all. Oh, how can I get you to understand? How can I get you to accept the fact that we've been conned, both of us?"

"You can't."

"But I have to," he says intensely. "They knew they could only get the best out of us by selling us some line about apocalypse or Armageddon, and you've fallen for it. I did too until I had a chance to see the truth, but then I've always been flexible enough to change and you're not. We've been gulled. They've used us for their own ends, and at this very moment they're laughing at us."

He flings a few remaining lice from his hands, wipes his palms, reaches toward the Sirian Delight on a higher shelf and helps himself to a small dab, his ugly face in ecstasy as the ooze hits him. Sirian Delight is very warm. "Humph," he says choking, and swallows. "You'll learn sooner or later, David."

“All right,” I say. “All right, assuming that this is true, which I don’t concede for a moment, but assuming that it’s true nonetheless, since I’m willing to humor you for the moment, what difference does it make? The match must go on.”

He backs from me, his simple features radiating astonishment, little squirts of the Delight coming from the corners of his mouth. “Are you quite serious?” he says. “Is that serious?”

“Of course it is.”

“David,” he says earnestly, “you must be insane. I’ve known for years that you were mad, all of us in FIDE knew it but we took pity, and joshed you along, and shielded you. But this is really too much now, it’s ridiculous.”

“Don’t *you* talk to me of insanity,” I say. Rage gathers within, a damp ball of purpose lodged in my intestines beginning to move free. “The fact is that you’ve been crazy all your life, Louis, and everyone knows this. But whether it’s just us or whether it’s as I know it to be, for the fate of the universe, I ask you again; What difference is made here? The match must progress.”

“You really don’t understand, do you? If the Overlords have been lying to us, if we’ve been playing for ourselves, then we’re free to make a private arrangement.”

“Private arrangement?”

“Of course,” he says. He flings another handful of lice in, the pig. “It’s one thing if we’re playing for a terrific outcome. If this is apocalypse we’re dealing with it’s impossible to make an arrangement of any sort. But if we’re merely entertaining billions of people, if the Overlords are simply managing a talent show, then it’s a different category of concern altogether.”

“How?”

“Why, we have nothing to gain or lose! We can reach some kind of agreement to our mutual satisfaction. But,” he says, greedily chewing away on the lice, gasping as they hit an air pocket of the esophagus and then belching a pure, fine belch, “I must return to the board, David. I think that we’ve used all the time that we’re able without arousing suspicion. We’ll talk about this later. I’m going to let you win this match, however.”

"Let me win the match. *Let* me win the match! I can defeat you at will, you fool."

He shrugs. I feel that I am about to cry. "But I *can*," I say. His eyes are focused toward something at right angles to us.

"I'm not going to fight with you David," he says. "I know how hypersensitive you often become these days about your abilities—or about your lack of them, I should say—and I'm not even going to *begin* to get into that area. The fact is that by letting you win this, by helping you close up the gap between the two of us, it's possible that we'll be able to come into the forty-first match in a dead tie and then initiate a series of grandmaster draws. Wouldn't that be better? We can extend the matches indefinitely."

Flabbergasted, I look at him, unable to say anything. He gives me a look which mediates somewhere between revulsion and compassion, the two being the same in this creature who is in most ways devoid of any qualities of humanity. He says, "Well, David, I'm sure that you see the point by now. We're playing by ourselves. This is an exhibition match whether you like it or not, and in an exhibition you're able to make your own arrangements. I really think that this would be wise, David. You see, the way we're going now I'm going to wipe you out." Saying nothing more, Louis turns and walks quickly out of the backstage area. His figure, even more ponderous from the rear view than from the front, waddles in an undignified fashion as he departs from me and for an instant an image whisks itself across the panels of my mind: Whining in tearful submission, Louis will concede the absolute truth of everything that I have said; my power, my righteousness, the essential dignity of my position.

So I watch him depart, once again functioning in that high, abstract area, and it is only after he has gone that I realize how deeply shaken I have been by our conversation. Surely my self-control during our dialogue has been absolute; it would have been impossible for Louis to have divined the depths of my disturbance, but after his exit it is a different story indeed; I am sweating and trembling and find that it is necessary to seize a handful of Jovian lice which I fling into the open cavity of my mouth, chewing and chewing away toward forgetfulness, my rising gorge embracing the

food hurled into it and then retracting it with a shudder, placing it deep within the barrel of the body.

Shocking news! The concept that Louis and I have been ill-used by the Overlords, that the Overlords have misrepresented the importance of our match and that what we are engaged in after all is little more than an exhibition. But I remind myself frantically, struggling for some kind of stability and self-control, that Louis has given absolutely no basis at all for his allegation, that he is functioning on the rankest form of hearsay. Since he has a reputation in our circles for lying anyway, there is no reason to pay unusual credence to our situation as he has interpreted it.

Still, it is with knocking knees that I make my weary way toward the backstage door. If there is the slightest credibility to be given to his information, I will have to re-evaluate the entire situation. This much is clear. I am liberal enough to say this. On the other hand, if he has lied to me (and Louis, like most grandmasters, is a compulsive liar in almost all aspects that cannot be directly verified), I am certain that he will pay severely for having done this to me.

It is a puzzlement, a puzzlement indeed, and it is as a much older and wearier individual that I return to the playing area, hearing as always the murmurs and spatters of applause which greet me. A grandmaster, even in these perilous circumstances, has certain obligations: I smile, wave and nod tightly to the crowd, and then I return to the board.

As I sit at the board, awaiting Louis' next move, I daydream. Louis' face is impassive; his arms are wrapped around his knees; he is totally devoted to the concept of the next move as it percolates its way moistly through the corridors of his mind. I do not interfere with those processes, it being an ancient fundamental of chess etiquette that one does nothing to distract the opponent. I would enjoy tapping my fingers on the table: whistling, singing, cracking my knuckles or, like the sainted Emmanuel Lasker, removing a huge cigar from a breast pocket to blow huge clouds of smoke into my opponent's face ... but I do not know whether or not I could get away with this and in any event this, the fifteenth match of our series, would be no time to

start. Ground rules for courtesy should have been set much earlier, if at all.

So I allow my mind to whisk away from the board. Like a busy mop wielded by a chambermaid, it chases itself around in little wet circles, the circles ever widening and increasing around me, and a distraction so close to peace that it might be the same thing entirely overtakes me. Most of chess is daydreaming after all; every grandmaster knows this. One can maintain that funnel of high concentration only for a limited time; most of the period of the match is devoted to waiting for the opponent to make his moves, and it is amazing what the mind will get itself into during these periods.

Looking at Louis, his impassive face, his strong hands nestling into one another across the board, I admire his impassivity. It is hard to imagine, looking at him in this fashion, that not two minutes ago he divulged to me the amazing information which I have reported. Quite to the contrary, his face has flattened now into a grandmasterly scowl; he seems to be almost unaware of his surroundings, projecting himself into the board with intensity. It is odd at this early stage of the game that he would devote so much time to a simple response move, but then I have already given him a good deal to think about ... and in the bargain, it is possible that by slowing down the pace of his play he thinks that he is giving me more time to concentrate upon the information he has given. This is a credible possibility.

I think of the many paths and byways through which I was led into the grandmasterly passion. Certainly, I could have done many other things with my life; I could have been a mathematician, or a physicist perhaps; I could have constructed cryptograms or puzzles for the magazines, any one of those pursuits which combine the beauty of the orderly mind with innovation. But it was chess for me from the outset; from the moment I was given a small board and pieces by my father at the age of eight when I was ill (he lived to regret it), there has been only one consuming interest in my life and that has been chess, that magnificent game which has given me such satisfaction, to say nothing of income, for almost four decades. Last year, the last complete year before this unfortunate instance, I was able to clear five thousand four hundred dollars (above expenses) from

tournaments. Since there is little on which to spend my money, and all of my expenses are provided for, this was an exquisite sum, more than I might have ever conceived previously. Almost all of it nestles in my personal savings.

Louis is beginning to sweat now, faint little trickles of moisture pouring from his high forehead, mingling in his beard. I look at him intently, seeking out his gaze, but his eyes become furtive, his gaze slips downward and folding his hands he stares into the board. It is obvious that he already regrets the information he has given me; our ancient enmity has never been more apparent to him than it is now. Staring at him in this way, seeing this creature winking and blinking, trying to construct his next move, it suddenly occurs to me with shocking precision that he has not been lying. He has been telling the truth as far as he knows it. His reaction is far too stressful to be feigned; if he is not telling the truth, he is at least telling the truth as he believes it to be. I find that this sudden insight twists my bowels around into a strange position; they seem to momentarily reside above my stomach rather than in their customary and comfortable position below, and a kind of nausea overtakes me, waves of revulsion spinning through. The board, that tunnel of concentration, spins beneath me. I am unable to bring further attention to it, and momentarily everything seems to dwindle and assume minuscule proportions.

As if from some great height I look upon a tiny Louis, a miniaturized board, an infinitesimal series of dots upon that board which must be chess-pieces. Is this possible? Am I seeing things, at last, in truest perspective? Have I dedicated my life to an inconsequentiality, narrowed my focus to a series of objects and purposes so slight that they can hardly be said to exist?

The questions are dazzling, but even more dazzling are the series of burps and groans which I begin to emit; I sound like some dyspeptic animal lost in the woods (or perhaps I am thinking of an animal in a slaughterhouse, turned upon huge racks, ready for skewering). Little burbles and gasps escape me, my intestines take a final lurch, the board zooms toward me with great speed, beginning to assume massive proportions, growing and growing in my distorted consciousness, until by some feat of reversal the board seems not to

be minuscule but literally to be overtaking the world. The pieces are *huge*, gallivanting Knights and Bishops swollen to grotesque proportions. As these pieces swarm before me, the horses seeming to open their mouths filled with rows of giant teeth, their riders with lances to skewer me, it occurs to me that I am very ill.

I look over at Louis, who is bloated and swollen as well, a series of red lines streaking the white surfaces of the ballooning face leering out over me. "I am very ill," I say to him. "Pardon me, I am very ill, I need rest, I need recovery, I need aid of some sort." And I push the chair back from the board. It screeches across the floor.

I remember a tournament in Paris at which one of the competitors—Nilsson, I believe it was—suffered a cerebral hemorrhage while in the very midst of a two-Knights' defense and had to be carried out by a crew of seconds, his hands still twitching as if to seize the two Knights. This fills me with even further dread; it is so dreadful to become ill in public. There is something so humiliating about it. Death is bad enough, but to die in public would be in the worst of taste.

Louis stares at me impassively. Desperately I lurch forward from the chair, tottering like a very old man, and take a few staggering steps back-stage. I try to draw air into my lungs, which seem paper-thin, composed of some wire mesh which will not yield to the act of inhalation. Then at last, as I stand there in panic, I feel tentacles surrounding me, purple surfaces, the smooth, slimy scales of the Overlords winding around me. Half-pulled, half-supported by their weight, I am dragged off to the backstage area. Their alien eyes as they peer at me seem to be filled with concern (but then again I am prone to misinterpretation on many levels), and they are not so much aiding as threatening me. Who is to say? Who is to know? Life, this situation, the true motivations of the Overlords, are often as impenetrable as the game of chess itself. As I am pulled backstage amid the murmurous cries of the audience, it is with the feeling that I may never truly get to the end of this and will descend, brushing against the slippery scales, to the receptacle of final uncertainty.

INTERREGNUM: *King's Knight*

In Lima, at the time of those Interzonals, there was some kind of local political problem which made us unable to use the facilities of the hotel for some time; revolutionaries were allegedly threatening the democratic reign of the president, and the president had felt it best to cancel public events. FIDE tried rather desperately to convince him that chess was not a public but a private event, and that there would be no more than thirty or forty spectators, participants, referees and judges in the great hotel ballroom at any given time. (These were the days when chess had not yet achieved its stunning international reputation and high level of public interest; fifty dollars above expenses was considered a reasonable sum to take out of a three-day tournament for an honorable mention.) The president, however, could not be convinced. He feared that assassins in the guise of chess followers would somehow use the tournament as a means to penetrate the hotel and from there set up a guerilla cell to topple the democratically appointed government. South American rulers have always been difficult for me to understand. Our own regimes would doubtless look exotic to South Americans; they have always seemed that way to *me*.

So there we were, in the Hotel Crillon in Lima, Peru (FIDE had found us the only decent hotel within the area). Fourteen competitors, their seconds and two referees, locked up and rattling around in the dank spaces of this enormous hotel. By the third day of our confinement I was so restless that on my own I decided to take the day trip to the city of Cuzco, the lost city of the Incas, where marvelous ruins are surrounded by booths selling replicas of the artifacts. Skittles had long since reached the point of diminishing returns and I knew more about my thirteen fellow grandmasters than I cared to. Chess at the grandmaster level is a very small field, of course: There are only a finite number of grandmasters at any time, much less touring grandmasters, and our little band had trooped that summer from Switzerland to Salt Lake City to Berlin to Lima without any change in our basic relationships—which were bad.

The loathing of grandmasters toward one another is excessive. I am one of the few civil and sane members of the group. Louis is in all ways a more typical example.

Off to Cuzco, then, to see the lost city of the Incas. It was the first time in many years of travel that I had any sense of *place*; chess matches are conducted in partitions, abscesses of gloom which always look and smell the same. Whether one is in Switzerland or Salt Lake City at a given time can often be determined only by the calendar; everything looks the same from the inside, and the game, of course, is unchanging. As any mathematician will tell you, the range of possible moves within even the opening of a game goes into many, many billions but there is still a constancy to chess which cannot be ignored. One is, after all, playing with the same sixteen pieces and facing the same opponents with the same general ideas over and again. The so-called infinite variation is, then, perhaps somewhat less than publicity for the game might indicate.

But in those revolutionary times in Peru, I felt a sudden, desperate need to get *out*, to restore a certain sense of place after too many months in airless rooms pushing around wooden pieces. It was with a sigh that I settled myself into the small plane to make the three-hour flight, noting that many of my fellow passengers already wore somewhat nauseated expressions.

It was only later that I found out that the flight from Lima to Cuzco has a reputation for being one of the most terrifying. Moving into the mountains, the quality of the air changed. The air was much thinner, and we were advised to use oxygen masks since the cabin was not pressurized. My mask, coming against my cheekbones, cut off half my vision. It was frightening, but it succeeded in blocking off views of the mountains to the left and right, sometimes rearing above us, the plane crazily sucked into the banks of mountains as if it were descent, not ascent, upon which it was bent. It was at that time that many people began to throw up into their oxygen masks. Experienced traveler that I was, I did not. But I landed in Cuzco in an entirely shaken condition, trembling for several moments in my seat before I was able to arise and make my way through various greenish and slumped forms toward the cabin door. On the ground, leaning against the plane with a tortured expression on his face, a cap dangling from his rigid hand, was a man in military garb who I later learned was the pilot.

Off to the ruins of Cuzco. It is recommended, I learned subsequently (I did my guidebook reading only in retrospect; a bad policy), that one spend his first day in Cuzco in bed, simply becoming acclimated to the thin air, the reduced oxygen of the mountains. But I did not know this at the time, and had no accommodations anyway; I was merely on an impulse trip and so instead of acclimating myself I immediately arranged for a tour of the ruins thirty minutes after my flight, wondering why my respiration was so uneven and why there seemed to be a small, deadly animal rattling around in my chest.

“Excuse me,” I said when I joined the tour to the guide, an elegant man in robes, “I don’t feel well; it must be something I had back in the hotel. I’m an international chess competitor, a grandmaster as a matter of fact, competing here in an International down at Lima.” I wondered why I was drawing such strange, distracted looks from the band of tourists; it must be something in the air, I thought, something about the curious, thin, dense heat of this area which seemed quite tropical to me as I stumbled into place amidst the tourists. “As a matter of fact,” I pointed out to the guide, enveloping him in a confidential hand-hold and leading him a short distance away from the others, “I would have been playing in the Inter-zonals at right this moment, probably a Sicilian defense, except that there’s some kind of a revolution in your country and the president has cancelled the matches. Bloody little buggers, your revolutionaries, eh?” I said to the guide, whose expression of dismay did not yield. Although I had intended this to be confidential, the tourists seemed to have overheard me.

“Oh well,” I said to them, “if that’s the way you’re going to be about this, if you’re going to be stuffy just because I’m trying to acclimate myself to your country, then I won’t say a word more, not a single word.” Shrugging in an informal posture I had never before discovered in myself, I backed away from the guide, merging with the tourists in what I took to be an inconspicuous posture. “Let’s go,” I said when there was a long, thick pause. “Let’s go and see some goddamned ruins. Unless it’s all a hoax, of course, or unless the tour also has been called off because of your revolution.”

In retrospect it is easy to see that my disgrace was compounded by psychogenic changes, that what appeared to be a certain giddiness and lack of sobriety was only the effect of the atmosphere. But at the time, my conduct seemed to me amazingly controlled and completely rational. I was unable to grasp why a certain pall had seemed to fall over the group.

Nevertheless, the tour began, the guide taking the tickets with an uncomfortable expression. His hand, when it came near mine to take my ticket, revealed a tremor. I was strangely acute, although most of my acuity was hallucination. Then we trundled off, fifteen tourists of various nationalities and myself, poking and prying through the ancient city of Cuzco. My initial giddiness began once again to fade to weariness and a certain regrettable sense that I had disgraced myself.

I decided to be inconspicuous. Now and then these moments of self-consciousness flare up (as I have perhaps pointed out). Often I can be ignorant of my physical aspect for days. Weeks will pass when the only thing on my mind is tournament chess, and then a sequence of events will come to pass which brings out an undue impression of self-awareness, a lumbering physicality, a sensation that I am committing an endless series of blunders which will lead to my exile from the common ranks of humanity.

It may be this embarrassment which overtook me as our little group, dangling cameras and stray pieces of clothing, began to wander through the artifacts of the ancient Incas. It was very important to blend into the crowd, to call no attention to myself. I felt grotesque, distended.

Staring into those piles of artifacts, neatly heaped behind little glass cases in some of the buildings, looking into the large, dark pits in which the guide stated that the golden hoard of the Incas was hidden, I found this sensation of undue clumsiness beginning to dissipate; it was succeeded by a larger, more fascinated aspect.

“Pizarro’s conquest was complete,” the guide informed us, “the ancient Incan civilization was completely destroyed, the Spanish mercenaries soon colonized Peru completely. Nevertheless, not long after the conquest was complete Pizarro was murdered, allegedly by his own men, in a power struggle. It is often thought, however,” the

guide went on, with what appeared to be a wink, "that he was not murdered by his own men at all, and that indeed it was the curse of the Inca nation itself which was visited upon him. We do not know about that," he said, "but it is known that here in Cuzco are the remains of an ancient, vital civilization more advanced in many ways than any subsequent civilization. Through the centuries many men have come to comb through these artifacts and to look for what they think might be the hidden treasure of this civilization. But, of course, they have been unsuccessful."

"Completely unsuccessful?" I said. It was quite difficult to talk, and I had no desire after my earlier outburst to draw further attention to myself, but the question was compelling. "No signs have ever been unearthed?"

"None," the guide said, "none whatsoever." He moved on; our little group went stumbling through the ruins, hanging on perilously for balance at times. The light was lovely and reflective, slow and distant, falling among all those ruins. As we made our way through those spaces something occurred to me: Chess too is an artifact, a set of ruins in which, however distantly, may be perceived the intricate and terrible outlines of a long-perished civilization. All of us, grandmasters and patzers alike, in our obsessive quest across the board, our attempts to find the proper combinations and patterns which will lead to some understanding of the game (the game has never been truly understood, even by Fischer, even by Alekhine) are merely stumbling to unearth some gleaming and true artifact which will bring us the message fully and unlock the way to the secret, hidden treasure.

It is an insight which did not change my life, but it was highly interesting and it comes back to me at this particularly crucial stage of my existence. Chess is an ancient game; it is rumored to have begun in Persia in the twelfth century, although its antecedents in more primitive form can be traced back even further. There is a very definite scholarly point of view, of which I am the sole proponent, which holds that the game was invented in Peru somewhere in the middle of the sixteenth century and that all of the ensuing political struggles of the world can only be seen as a, series of stumbling, halting efforts to get back to its purest inceptions and outlines. One

cannot be sure of this, however. History is a difficult and imprecise study.

CHAPTER FIVE

Bishop to Bishop Four

The hall is equipped with huge megaphones through which the referees can announce the moves as they are made. This takes quite a while, since the announcements are made in at least twenty-five languages for every move, beginning, of course, with English. As the Overlords assist me through an exit I hear Louis' next move intoned. He has selected exactly this point of time to move, a point of time at which I have been forced to leave the game not under my own power. This is exactly in line with his small, mean personality and his exploitation of cheap psychological tricks in order to win dishonestly an advantage he could never win if he were to play in the moral and upright fashion I do. Louis has always sought advantages of this sort but this moment is the nadir of his career: making a move while his opponent, stricken by a wave of illness, has to be assisted off the stage. Still, what is one to do? My determination is unflagging; I vow to myself that I will recover from this illness shortly and make him pay dearly for what he has done to me.

Bishop to Bishop Four. It is precisely the kind of move one would associate with Louis. Clear and stark, the outlines of the board, the posture of the pieces surge into my mind and I see now what he has done. He has continued his amateurish and unsound attack by posting the King's Bishop at an unsafe square, one where it can fall quickly to a series of clever traps and pitfalls which I will set for him. The normal continuation in the Ruy Lopez, of course, would be Bishop to Bishop Five, a more extended posture from which he would be able to defend the Bishop with the King's Knight. But this has never been Louis' style, never at all. Truly he is an unsound player. It is surprising that he has been able to get even this far in grandmasterly chess.

But I cannot, for the moment, bring further concentration upon the game, so overwhelmed am I by my unfortunate illness. "Sorry. Sorry about this," I murmur apologetically as I am conveyed into a large, lush waiting room I have never seen previously. There is a mortuary aspect to this room, with its red curtains, green cot, many pillows scattered throughout, and a box of tissues discreetly placed on a hideous luminescent table to the right of the couch. "I didn't mean it to be this way, don't worry about a thing, the forces of good will triumph after all," I say, while various Overlords minister to me, place me on the couch, bring me tissues by the score with which I can absorb the moisture that comes sopping off my face. "I'll be all right in a second, just a little passing illness, a fit of vertigo." I think of the wretched Timmons, the only grandmaster ever to die during the course of a chess match in the Buenos Aires tournament—suddenly squealing like a pig and upending a chair in the middle of an intricate, winning Nimzo-Indian. He lost on a disqualification. Since then, Timmons has gotten more notice in death than he ever found in life for his gaucherie. It is the secret fear of any chess player (whether he will admit it or not) that he too might somehow be stricken in public, and left to die in the midst of gloomy calculations of the game. Our rather sedentary profession, with its high proportion of aged and aging grandmasters, certainly presents this as a statistical possibility.

Still, it is impossible that this would happen to me; I am barely over fifty and far more active than most grandmasters. Also, I have a

horror of appearing awkward in public. All in all then, as I stretch out on the couch, holding a little halo of tissues to my nose, I feel a faint recovery of strength, although it is hardly of such dimension that I would consider resuming the match. Various Overlords lean over me murmuring consoling words, none of them in any language that I can grasp. Then one by one, talking to one another earnestly as they form a second group at the door, they pass through, closing the door upon me. I find that I am in the room alone with my old friend Five, whom I recognize not only through his hue but by a certain characteristic flexing of the tentacles which could only be his gesture. One of those tentacles touches me delicately now. "Are you feeling better?" Five says.

"Somewhat better."

"We can arrange for a complete medical examination after the game if you wish. I was assured, however, before this even began, that you were in the best of health and you are probably only suffering from some fatigue—"

"There's no time for this," I say. "I'm given to understand that you've lied to us about this match, that we aren't playing for the fate of the universe at all, but that this is merely an exhibition which is being beamed to all ranges of intelligence, and you've built up all these consequences merely to keep us at a high competitive edge."

I am really astonished with the way in which this has burst out, but it is too late to stop. "Why did you lie to us?" I say. "It wasn't nice of you, it didn't show proper respect; after all, we're grandmasters—"

"I'm truly shocked," Five says. His voice has never shown so much concern; the depth of feeling within that voice would be enough to make me weep, if I were more emotional. "Where did you hear this allegation?"

"I won't discuss it."

"And is it the basis for your current illness?" A tentacle delicately brushes my forehead. "This is truly terrible," Five says, "to have rumors of this type get back to you. I knew there were some disgusting elements, representatives of races who are no friends of ours, who were spreading these base and scurrilous lies throughout, but I never expected them to reach you. I would not have thought they would sink this low."

“Then it’s *not* true,” I say. “You’re telling me that they are lies.”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying,” Five says gently. “I’m really horrified by this. It cuts to the center of the match. Now everything is imperiled! We will deal strongly with those spreading lies. What I want to know now is who informed you of this? Was it your opponent?”

Well, there is only one thing to say. “Yes. It was Louis.”

And instantly, like sexual release, there is a flooding sensation of shame, warmth, liquidity: as much as I dislike Louis he *is* a human too, and trapped as I am in this complex and terrible match. Perhaps I should not have betrayed him to Five. I have never been able to get the question of final loyalties and priorities quite straight; I know that I detest Louis and the Overlords as well (although not Five, my confidant), but whether my higher loyalty is to my noxious opponent or whether it is to the Overlords who have treated us courteously is not clear. A little of one, a little of the other. *Cornme-çi, comme-ça.*

“Don’t deal too harshly with him,” I say, “I’m going to beat him badly after all.”

“That is not sufficient retribution!” Five says angrily. I have never seen him in such an emotional state; he has the savage and desperate cast of such creatures in the Book of Daniel and the Revelation of St. John the Divine as those accompanying apocalyptic times: winged beasts, horns, grotesque shapes. “We will destroy this.”

“He said that the idea of this just being a chess match really came from some other source which he couldn’t reveal. Your real quarrel would be with whoever informed him of this.”

“Our real quarrel,” the Overlord says angrily, “must be with those who would interfere with the rules and the progress of the match; our quarrel is with those who would misrepresent to the participants the true nature and terrible consequences of this match, and thus attempt to throw its outcome into jeopardy!” Five stands, seeming to unfurl his scales. “That individual or group of individuals will be dealt with most severely,” he says.

“You mean then that the match is as represented? Exactly as represented?”

“Of course it is, and furthermore, I don’t want you thinking otherwise. We would not lie to you. The match between you and your opponent is for the fate of the universe, the absolute triumph of good over evil, or the reverse. There will be no second chance for the losing side, but only instant and terrible destruction.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” I say. In truth I am; I would not dissemble to Five, whom I consider, as I would none of the others, to be something very close to a friend. “To reach this level of competitive tension, to become this involved in the match only to find out that you had lied to us, misrepresented, that it was merely a match—”

“It would be unthinkably disastrous,” the Overlord agrees solemnly. “There would be very little to be said on behalf of the moral values of creatures who would play upon you in this fashion. But fortunately, no harm has been done; you have told us what is disturbing you and in plenty of time for us to take stringent action.”

“I do hope,” I say, bringing him to an absolute halt in his staggering gait toward the door (the Overlords slide like snakes but with the use of their tentacles are also able to pad along like dogs; their gait, I have discovered, is often a very function of their moods) “that you won’t deal harshly with Louis.”

“Oh, not at all. Not at all.”

“We’re in the middle of a match now.”

“Nothing must interfere with the progress of a match,” the Overlord says agreeably. “At all costs the match must go on.”

“And I will deal with him myself. I think that his defeat will be adequate reprisal.”

“Oh, I should say,” the Overlord agrees ponderously. “I should certainly say.” He drags himself out of the room. “Stay until you feel entirely better,” the Overlord says, “although of course you’ll have to lose some of your clock-time. There’s no way that we can alter those rules; time must be charged against you. But you will be back to play shortly, won’t you?”

“Oh, definitely,” I say. The conversation has taken on a curious formality. “Oh, very definitely, we have got to play under the rules of international chess or there would be no point to this at all. I’m feeling much stronger now. I’m sure that I’ll be able to come out quite shortly.”

"Well, that's excellent," Five says gravely. He vanishes from the doorway, leaving me to my own devices.

It is a very strange room; now that I have an opportunity to inspect it more closely at my leisure, I can see that all the furnishings are exquisitely fabricated; they appear to be cheap, terrestrial artifacts (doubtless this is the attempt of the Overlords to make us feel at home). But when they are touched they fail to yield in the way that normal furnishings would do: Even ordinary wood has a distinct texture, springiness, resilience, willingness to *give* under the pressure of a hand, but nothing in this room seems to yield in any fashion. Rather, putting my hand against the couch, I feel a grainy response, then the material seems to press itself *upward* against my hand in a rather firm and insistent fashion. Then there is a feeling of engorgement, of lips opening underneath my hand and then something which feels like a tongue licks me gently. I start, yank my hand back and look at the couch. It glints pinkly, innocently, Not me, it seems to be saying, it must be purely within your mind.

I leap to my feet and find that I am much stronger than I was when entering the room, and able to maintain a rigid standing posture and a little scuttling walk without weakness of any sort. With determination I stride from one side of the room to the other, extending my scuttle into a stalk. There is no increase in my respiration or heartbeat; it is apparent that my attack, if that is what I must call it, has now passed. The couch and the furnishings look stolid in the room; it must have been some effort of the imagination which had imparted life to them. There is nothing more to be done here. I am using up time on my clock, I go to the door.

The doorknob comes into my hand innocently, shyly, and then with a horrid intimacy it seems to caress me. Something very much like a finger curls its way through my palm, running against the lines of my hand. (I have always associated this gesture, at least in the limited reading that I have done, with sexual invitation of some sort, and therefore the sensation is a rather horrid one.) I bring my hand back from the doorknob as if I had gotten a shock, and look into the moist surfaces of my palm as if for some stain of implication. My palm smiles back at me in little lines, innocent of touch; if anything has happened to it, once again it must have been in my mind. This is,

however, a very strange room. Once more I reach out toward the doorknob and this time it yields and without motion. I open it and step out into the hall.

The murmurs of the arena instantly overcome me. The room I left must have been excellently soundproofed; within its confines I heard nothing. But I have rarely heard an audience as clangorous as this one. There are murmurs, sighs, whispers, even a handclap or two, and although this seems hard to believe I think that I can also hear the sound of booing. Such conduct at a master game is just about unheard of. The audience may not be familiar with the etiquette of these things. Not all the audiences where we have played have been knowledgeable; in fact, there are sectors of the galaxy, the Overlords tell me, where chess is unheard of and where there has been an educative campaign prior to our debarkation. My hasty departure might have been interpreted by the audience as an act of cowardice, an apparent desertion of the game under fire. This knowledge adds fuel to the fire of my posture and I move back into the playing area determined to do nothing to disgrace myself and determined to bring the match now to a rapid conclusion. I can no longer tolerate this. There is no reason for them to have booed me. I cannot make them pay for this disgrace, so I will make Louis pay.

“Wouldn’t it be interesting?” I remember having said to Louis in one or another of the tenements of our youth when we were growing up together, going the Marshall Chess Club route together, discovering and sharing our growing proficiency in chess, our hostility momentarily abated in this sense of shared wonder. (There was actually a period of several years in our youth when we were what might be called “best friends”; prodigies enjoying the attention we were getting at about the same time, for the same reasons. It was only a little later that Louis’ megalomania asserted itself to destroy our relationship, even though, up until the very end of it, I reacted to his loutishness with disbelief and tried to rescue what I thought of as a sentimental tie. None of this, therefore, is my fault. He deserves everything that is coming to him.) “Wouldn’t it be interesting if someday we could play chess for the fate of the entire world?”

“That’s ridiculous,” Louis said. Even then he had a highly literal mind and refused to speculate, refused to investigate alleys and byways of implication which, for me, are the veritable spices of life. “It’s only a game, a silly trivial game.”

“No, it isn’t. It’s war. It’s life.”

“That’s what they tell you in the books. That’s what the so-called experts say because they like to build themselves up and give their readers the feeling that they’re big, important men. Actually, it’s a very trivial pastime, and everyone who’s ever played chess knows that I’m telling you the truth. It has nothing to do with life at all. Most good chess players, masters and such, are snivelling, maladjusted wrecks, and the only thing they can do at all is to play chess well. If they didn’t have that they’d go crazy.”

“Nevertheless,” I said, letting these disgusting allegations go by, “even if what you’re saying is true—and I don’t believe a word of it, not for a second—what would it be like to play chess with the whole world riding on the outcome? That would be exciting.”

“Why not the whole universe? Why stop at the world?”

“Don’t make a fool of me,” I said, irritated. “Come on, Louis, admit it: The prospect tantalizes you.”

“Nothing tantalizes me because anything would be even worse than what we’ve got now.”

“I don’t understand you, Louis. But think now, I everybody watching us, knowing that we held their fate in our hands. The tension, the suspense, as if their very lives were under our control (which of course they would be). Louis, if we were playing for the fate of the world, or—all right, even the universe—then we’d be in command.”

“It would be one hell of a universe if they had to play chess to decide its fate.”

“Not necessarily. It could be fun.”

“No, it wouldn’t,” Ye said, rolling on a clear spot in the Canarsie junkyard to lean on an elbow, looking out toward a blanket of clouds which came across our vision suddenly. “What kind of a universe would it be now if you had to play chess to decide how it was turning out?”

“You’re not looking at this the right way. Come on, Louis, admit the truth. Does chess make any less sense than God?”

Louis thought about this for a while as we looked at the clouds. Queens, Knights, Bishops, Rooks, Pawns swam across our field of vision along with certain other pieces known only in fairy chess: the Dragon, the Caretaker, the Drowned Giant. I regarded them with speculative interest, fairy chess being a game for which I have great contempt though a lot of grandmasters like it. Feeling myself momentarily suspended in a kind of perfect peace, I was in accord with the elements, which one rarely is in this world or out of it, the junkyards of Canarsie possessing a kind of vague bucolic charm. In the air was the smell of fish and frogs, and an errant flight of birds stalked the clouds and then disappeared. "Probably not," Louis agreed after a while, "when you come to think of it, it doesn't."

"Right, Louis." I had come in second in the Marshall Juniors the week before, a stunning show of strength—Louis ill, absent—and I felt that I had moved far ahead of him already in the annals of Caissa. "It's a beautiful, logical, perfectly shaped game with a beginning, a middle and an end. Now, you can't say that about God. It isn't the same."

"You're not such a hot chess player, David. You have a lot of weaknesses."

"I'm still better than you, and you haven't answered the question."

"Question?" Louis said. "I didn't know there was a question, I didn't know that there was anything before us." He turned toward me then, his eyes suddenly limpid and open and looking at me. As I felt myself being drawn into his intensely empty, bleakly staring eyes, I realized that there was no one in all of the world who knew that we were here at this moment: not my father (who was, of course, struggling with accounts receivable at some miserable warehouse in the Red Hook district), not Louis' mother, a waitress who in her widowhood struggled through existence in an Atlantic Avenue hamburger and steak restaurant' (many were the times that Louis and I had thought about getting his mother and my father together, but it had never worked out; these two dismal adults had once gone to a movie together and had returned separately hours later, refusing comment), not anyone in the Marshall Chess Club; just Louis and myself lying side by side on the blind and irrevocable flats of Brooklyn. Something passed between us at that moment. There must! have

been a transaction of some sort, some calculation too intimate and dreadful to bear articulation. As I moved toward him, the true ominousness of the situation assaulted me. Louis and I were on the verge of buggery.

Well, why not? Why not? I ask. Even some thirty-five years later I am still unable to see the unreasonableness of this feat. We were young, vigorous, twin prodigies, celibates both, unaccustomed to and uninterested in the company of women: What could have held us back? I felt the faint thrust of bone against me and realized that Louis' finger was prodding my thin and palpitating adolescent wrist; in the next moment I had vaulted over him, heaving my body at cross-angles to him.

"God makes less sense than chess does," I murmured to him, my lips against his cheek. He murmured back, "It's preposterous, it's unreal," and then we were intertwined, the two of us lashed and lashing at one another against the dry mud of Brooklyn. My pants were detached; it was Louis who was the aggressor, not I (as in my dreams); it was Louis who forced himself against me and with a series of grunts and groans I felt myself being turned. I looked then into a few pebbles buried at some peculiar angle in the Brooklyn mud while a feeling of awful pressure began in my anus; it was Louis, forcing entrance. And then he was heaving over me, enormous, awful, one bloodshot eye peering into mine. "This is completely wrong, you know," he said in a flat, precise, cultured voice. "We have no business doing this."

I was quite beyond speech at this time but it was possible, even at the perilous angle of cojoinment we had selected, for me to nod agreement. "That's right," I said, "that's quite right, we have no business doing this, it's ridiculous." And at that moment he slid fully into me, some discovered moistness enabling the full wedging and pressure, and then I felt Louis, the second best junior player in the Marshall Chess Club (I will admit this), beginning to heave and buck, forcing dangerous entrance. "We could be arrested," he said, "this is quite wrong, uh, uh, uh," his *uhs* conveying far more sense to me than any of his protestations. I spread my knees, forcing life into my limbs, and felt him sliding smoothly up all of the ranges and terrain until he touched something within me whose very existence I would

not have known even five minutes before. Whole waves of feeling erupted and then I fell beneath him as he climaxed with a few brief and honest strokes.

Sodomy is a sin. The Bible is quite explicit on this and there has never been an internationally ranked grandmaster who showed any tendency whatsoever toward homosexuality. These thoughts occurred to me only through a vast gauze of indifference; it did not, truly, seem to matter. And in any event, no one would ever know that it had happened.

“We shouldn’t have done that,” Louis said.

“All right.”

“That was wrong. We were just having a discussion and then I lost control of myself. I didn’t know what I was doing.”

“All right,” I said again. “Neither did I.”

“We’re never going to do anything like that again. You led me into it.”

“No, I didn’t,” I said. I clawed my hands down around my ankles, found my pants, began to draw them slowly upward through layers and layers of mud.

“Your fault. You did it,” he said.

“Say that again and I’ll kill you,” I said. My angle of vision was focused upon a 1947 Pontiac, a, coupe with enormous mud-guards which for some reason fascinated me. I found that I could literally dive into those fenders, merge with the gunmetal grey of the ruined car. “It was all your fault anyway.”

“We’ll never tell anyone about this,” Louis said. “It will be our secret. Are you going to tell anyone about it?”

“No,” I said, “no, I am never going to tell any-one about it.” That is a promise which I kept for thirty-five years and a fraction, breaking it at only this crucial point of the account for reasons which are obvious and need little explication at this point. By his betrayal, by his lying about the nature of our match, he broke that pact made in a junkyard thirty-five years ago, and thus is entitled to no further consideration. This is a perfectly reasonable point of view.

“Even the best chess player in the world,” Louis pointed out sometime during that discussion, “still lives within the confines of sixty-four squares, which is hardly the world, don’t you think?”

“It is the world.”

“Then God help the world,” he said: The liar, the felon, the fool, the doppelganger, the traitor, the pederast, the buggerer, the assailant, the fool, the fool, the fool.

At the board, all is the same. It is a chastened and impassive Louis who confronts me over the squares; chin cupped in hand in the well-known tournament position, his knuckles running ceaselessly over the edge of the table. He is cultivating abstraction again, a high patience, a tolerance which he hopes will win the hearts of the audience. It is too late. He is already doomed; the Overlord has announced it. I look at him for just a moment as I hitch my chair more deeply into the board and then my next move comes dribbling out of the subconscious like a turd, easing its way through those rectal cavities of the mind; and then, reaching forward, I embark upon the move that will destroy him. And not a moment too soon for he indeed does, not only through selection but through destiny, represent all of the forces of evil in the populated universe.

INTERREGNUM: *Rook Pawn*

In a dream I conceive myself to be Job and now I am in earnest dialogue with the three comforters, this trinity grouped around me in uncomfortable, rigid postures, their nostrils flaring with revulsion. The comforters are dressed like chess-pieces—King, Knight, Rook Pawn—and very foolish they look indeed, since human conformation is not at all similar to the pieces of the Royal Game and they must be sweating heavily under their garb. Nevertheless, they are doing the best that they can, just as I am doing the best that I can, and I do not wish to look askance at them. It is their advice, rather, which I find terrible.

“This burden is too much,” I reiterate. “I have a good ranking, am probably the fortieth or fiftieth best chess player in the world according to FIDE, even better than that by my own estimation, but

how can I take on the obligation of the defense? I tell you, it's too much."

"True," the King says. He is an elderly chap with hands as transparent as gauze. "It is a very unfair obligation. Still, do the best you can."

"I would agree with that," the Knight says, sweating heavily. "You're hardly to be blamed as long as you do your best. After all, you were chosen. You were chosen to carry this burden, you didn't volunteer for it, so how can you feel guilty if you fail?"

"I never wanted chess to mean that much," I say in this dream. "Louis was right; essentially it's a trivial game. It is the very triviality which fascinated me. I never wanted to get into this level of consequence."

"But you were selected," the King says. He taps his staff upon the ground. "Consider it a great honor."

"My fields have been destroyed," I point out, my hands shaking a bit. "My wife has been raped, my children murdered, my cattle destroyed, all of my possessions smashed and still I must suffer. Why?"

"Stop fantasizing," says the Rook Pawn, a nasty little fellow. "You've never had a wife, you've never been married. You have no children, and one thing is sure as hell, you've got no fields and cattle. All that you've got is yourself and your miserable FIDE ranking. Well, if chess is so important to you, you have no right to complain if they selected you to play for high stakes." He wipes some snivel from his nose, a nervous, intense little fellow who reminds me, at least in this dream, of an earlier version of myself. "It's your life and you're stuck with it."

"Besides," the King points out, "the publicity will do you a great deal of good. Very few players at the fortieth or fiftieth FIDE rank get the kind of coverage you've been getting recently. You should be able at the very least to get a biography out of it."

"But the universe is going to end!"

"Not the part of it which *you* represent," the King says, "at least according to your pretensions. There should be a very grateful audience for anything of yours after you've saved them, you know."

“And not only that,” the Knight says, “if you think that you’re in a bad position, think of Louis. He’s even unhappier.”

“I don’t care about Louis.”

“I don’t know whether you care about him or not. Nevertheless, think of his position. It isn’t pleasant for him either and he’s not as good a player as you. That’s to be thought of, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “I never thought of taking that into account.”

“Well, you should have,” the Knight says. “That shows your latent selfishness and megalomania. The trouble is that all of you chess players are the same. Onanistic, absolutely. If you thought a little bit about others instead of self, self, self all the time you’d be better. What about all of those poor creatures on whose behalf Louis is playing?”

“Yes,” the King says, moving his face closer to the Knight’s. Their conjunction has a strangely pleasing aspect; there is something symmetrical about it. They belong together, King and Knight “Yes, what about those creatures? What you’ve got to do is to look outside yourself, get out in the world a bit, think of the rights of the other fellow. I hope that when all of this is over you’ll have learned a thing or two. If you can learn something from it, if you can derive meaning and go on, I think you’ll find that this may have been the best thing that ever happened to you, am I not right?”

“Of course you are,” the Knight says, risking a confidential swat on the King’s backside. “You’re absolutely right, old fellow, but I’d expect nothing else from you.”

“You’re all full of shit,” the Rook Pawn says. He is a diseased, deformed little fellow, with very much the aspect one would expect of the King’s Rook Pawn which, as all masters know, is the weakest piece on the board, worthy only of being sacrificed in order to open up a file, usually a mere obstacle in the way of development, that piece which stands helplessly beside the Bishop in fianchetto, its only function to defend. “You might as well tell him the truth, that is, that all of this is meaningless.” The dream landscape on which we are standing, abandoned sands on all sides of us, a shimmering desert aspect, seems to waver and then begins to take on a brilliant orange hue as he says this. “He’s built it up in his own mind as a

reaction-formation against his love for Louis, whom he knows to be the superior player. None of this exists.”

“Nonsense,” the King says, “get out of here.” He looks pleadingly at the Knight. “Of course,” the Knight says without as much conviction, “you’re misleading him terribly. Why don’t you leave? No one asked for three comforters anyway. Two are more than adequate considering the situation.”

“I won’t leave,” the Pawn says, “I’m as much entitled to be here as either of you, and if we’re going to do Scripture then it’s clear that three comforters are necessary.” He turns upon me an acned, penetrating adolescent gaze. “You’ve made far more of this than you should have, you know. Actually chess is a very trivial game.”

“It is not a trivial game.”

“That isn’t what used to be your point of view,” the Pawn says. “In fact, I can recall you distinctly saying that chess was quite trivial. ‘Meaningless’ and ‘unimportant’ were the words you used to use, I believe.”

“You’re wrong,” I say. “It was Louis who said that. You’ve got me confused with Louis.”

“Exactly,” the Knight says and swats the Pawn with his lance. The Pawn’s eyes glaze over. “Why don’t you get the hell out of here?” the Knight says. “You’re really not helping matters at all.”

The King imperiously folds his arms. Desert breezes sweep over us, peculiarly chilly for a dream in this time of year. “Yes,” he says, “I really think that the Knight is correct. There’s nothing more for you to say and you haven’t even gotten your information correct.”

“You fools,” the Pawn says weakly. “You don’t understand a thing. You don’t understand a single thing, don’t you know what’s going on here?” I lean forward then, bedazzled by the dialogue but eager, eager to learn, if at all possible, what the Pawn has to impart so that my own understanding of the situation will be widened and deepened.

“I’m going to tell you,” the Pawn says, “I’m going to tell you the real and true and utter and absolute and total final meaning of this. After you hear it, you’ll never be the same again.” He opens his mouth. In that mouth I see rotting teeth; between those teeth I see little crevices of darkness from which the truth at last will emerge. The

King and Knight, against their will, also lean forward: It seems that the comforters, no less than I, could use a little bit of information if only they could find it. So the three of us lean forward toward the ridiculous little Pawn, trying in this dreamlike substance to learn something from him. But even as we do, even as we stiffen into an inquisitorial posture, there is a shattering roll of thunder somewhere in the distance. Jahweh himself, it seems, is attempting some kind of intervention, and then a lightning bolt strikes the ground between the Pawn and myself, the lightning sizzling, inducting little waves of heat and light along its length.

“Tell me!” I shriek. “You’ve got to tell me, I’m listening I” But the wretched little Pawn, as the lightning flicks away, has already disappeared; in his place is merely a burning bush (or perhaps I am thinking of cinders of ash slowly imploding upon one another, lovely, empty, burning leaves). I look to my left and right for the King and the Knight, but they have been similarly incinerated. On the ground are various ornaments: a lance, a crown, a few of the impedimenta of office, so to speak. But of their actual personae there is nothing to be seen. The three comforters have been removed in the very process of comforting and now, now clearly I am alone.

It is immensely frustrating, having gone this far merely to be deprived of what promised to be the full and final answer to my terrible dilemma. But on the other hand, I learned early along that in or out of life there are no easy answers and that it is best, perhaps, not even to settle for them, it being far better to struggle onward and to allow the structure of life itself to yield implication. In the structure is the message. So I sit upon the ground then: I sit upon the ground and tell myself sad stories of the death of Kings while the clouds gather and eventually I am wrenched from my dream back to the more difficult and even more dreamlike substance of what is truly happening. Now.

CHAPTER SIX

Queen Knight to Rook Four

And now, quickly, I have put the game on the verge of its denouement.

What I have done by moving this Knight is to threaten the Bishop, launching a direct attack against that piece which is now *en prise*; and at the same time I have cleared out the Queen-side for a terrible attack. Louis has put himself in this position, and now I will yield no mercy whatsoever. I do not expect that the game will go more than five more moves before the inevitable outcome is clear. Louis pales. He groans and tears at his head. His eyes blink. He stares at the board as if the board itself will yield to him its answer.

But it will not. There are no answers on the board; this is the message that I could have given Louis a long time ago if only he had asked. I know this now; that within the mad and terrible confines of the red and the black, the irreducible sixty-four squares, lies nothing to be applied to reality. Answers found upon the board will remain there; combinations are their own reply. Chess is, for all of its manifold wonders, indeed an infinitely trivial undertaking, and oddly it is Louis now who does not know this. His knuckles crack, his hands tremble as he studies the board. The man is in extremis, I will let him suffer.

Punching out my clock with an easy motion of the hand, I stand. My legs and arms feel curiously light, loose and limber as I stride from the stage; I feel more sure and in control of myself at this moment than I have felt in a long time. Indeed, the staggering form who quivered behind these curtains only a few moments ago is hardly that assured, strutting David who now takes himself directly to the massive trays bearing delights and with an easy gesture takes in his hand one of the fairest of them, his very favorite Jovian lice, and

crams them, gulping, into his mouth. Hook around and find that the area is mine, mine alone. Louis will use up a lot of time on his clock. I help myself to another handful of lice.

Then, quite suddenly, there is a motion to the side and when I concentrate upon it, blinking, an Overlord strides into the room. He is an unfamiliar Overlord, this one; I do not believe that I have seen him before, although differentiation of course is difficult with these creatures. Still, as best as I can make out through my rather bedraggled sense of perspective, he is a new and more imposing Overlord, not less imposing because he has somehow contrived his scales and tentacles into legs which enable him to achieve a walking posture. Most of them, as I have surely pointed out in ample detail, simply *crawl*. His expression, to the degree that I can read the expression of these creatures, is quite threatening and something approaching fear rattles around within me; I have never responded well to the concept of physical menace, being, I am quite free to admit, something of a coward in that direction. Throughout this deplorable set of instances one thing at least has been clear: The Overlords have never harmed me physically, nor given indication that they would. This one, however, seems to carry around a different species of menace with him; not psychological (with which I can cope, being geared to conundrums and cryptograms by virtue of my training), but physical. Behind him, in a lumbering, uneven gait, comes Louis himself, escorted, I note, by my own old friend, Five. Louis' expression is a magnification of terror; peering at him over the food that I have brought to my mouth, now stopped in mid-air (I am nauseated again), it occurs to me that I have never seen an expression of such rank terror on a human face. Really, it is disgraceful to see the extreme of cowardice pasted across Louis' distorted features, but then on the other hand his expression may merely be an extension or reflection of my own. It is hard to say. Certainly the circumstances are difficult enough. The new Overlord says to me in a flat tone, "We have been made aware of certain rumors. Are they from him?"

Louis raises his palms in a defensive gesture. "Don't say anything," he mumbles. He shakes his head desperately. The new Overlord

turns and apparently gives Louis a threatening glance. Louis subsides. His arms are shaking from fingertips to shoulderblades.

“What rumors?” I say.

The Overlord turns back to me. “Don’t dissemble,” he says. “It’s too late for that now.”

“Tell him the truth,” Five says. “It’s better that way.” Although I have difficulty in deducing alien expressions it seems that Five may be as unreasonably terrified as Louis. Perhaps not.

“Reports that this match is of no consequence,” the alien says thunderously. “Reports that it is merely an exhibition.”

I shrug. For some reason, a certain winsome dissemblance seems to be the proper attitude with which to meet this difficult situation. “I don’t know a thing about that,” I say, “I merely—”

“Be responsive!” the Overlord says, the tones even richer than before. “If you are not respondent we will have to take the most dreadful actions—”

“It really would be better if you were cooperative,” Five says mildly. “This is a difficult and embarrassing situation for all of us, perhaps if you could simply resolve—”

“I don’t know anything about it,” I say and then fling the handful of food to the floor. There are limits to the humiliation which I will undergo, after all, and everything considered I have had more than my share of intimidation. “It isn’t my fault,” I say. “I heard it from him.”

I point rather dramatically toward Louis who flinches in his posture, and retreats into a corner. It may not be nice for me to have turned the focus of aggression to my old enemy and fellow-competitor but then I have my own position to consider. There is more than one way of looking at any problem. “He reported it,” I said, “and I simply turned it over to my second—”

“Enough,” the angry Overlord says. The knowledge seems to have calmed him, rather than the reverse. He turns toward Louis slowly, his scales glinting. “Where did you get this information?” he says to Louis.

“I never liked him,” Louis babbles, pointing to me. “I never liked him at all; he’s always been a cowardly fellow without any sense of decency and furthermore—”

“Where did you get it?” the alien says again. “I want you to tell me.”

"His game is stolid, unimaginative, completely without point," Louis says. "He's gotten where he has by stealing ideas from everyone, by misusing, misapplying their ideas, he's had nothing of his own whatsoever to contribute to the literature of chess—"

"For the last time," the Overlord says, closing in upon Louis in a gait so rapid and threatening that Five himself seems driven to interpose himself between that stride and my helpless antagonist. "I want to know where you got that information, information that this game is not consequential, that—"

A little froth comes from Louis' lips; he indeed seems to be in extremis. "I've got to get back to the game," he says plaintively. "He's just moved, it's on my clock-time, I've got to plot out—"

"For the last time," the Overlord says, "for the last time tell me where you've gotten this heinous information from, this maliciousness, these lies—"

"You really should tell him," Five counsels. "I don't think that you understand the situation; he comes from a higher level of bureaucracy, he's entirely beyond me and I really can't help you with this at all—" He gives me an anguished, piercing little glance, Five does, but I avoid his eyes, working my way with an elaborate show of disinterest to the trays of food, taking another small handful of lice. It does not seem to be my problem. "If you'll excuse me," I murmur, tossing the lice in my hand, "I believe I'll get back to the board myself; it's a very tricky, difficult game, as you know, and I'd like to concentrate—"

The Overlord turns toward me and makes a motion simultaneously so threatening and dismissive that there is little that I can do other than to stand shocked in place. Five is quite right. We are dealing here with a creature of another level entirely. "You keep quiet," the creature says, "and just stay here. Let me deal with this."

Louis is winking and shrugging, his face having uncovered tics much as a rock turned over on a seashore might uncover insects. "All right," he says, "I admit it; I made it up myself."

"Made it up yourself?" the Overlord says quietly. "Made it up yourself? What does that mean? I am not as familiar with your vernacular," and here he gives Five a loathing glance, "as some of the other creatures here."

"I mean that I invented it I" Louis shrieks. "I didn't know anything about it myself, I just thought that it would be a good story to tell him! I thought that it might discourage him, might sap his will to win—"

"But that's ridiculous," Five says, "you're leading nine games to five, why would you seek an advantage?"

"I couldn't be sure!" Louis shrieks. "Don't you understand that? Master chess is a very difficult game, you're always functioning under a terrific level of tension, and I was looking for any advantage that I could get! It isn't my fault, it's standard in master play—or don't you know anything about chess?"

"That's heinous," the inquisitorial Overlord says. "That's absolutely heinous. I've never heard of conduct like that before."

"Well, you ought to know something about chess!" Louis screams. He is winking and blinking and nodding away, his head trembling like a petal on the stalk of a long, decayed flower. "If you knew something about chess you'd know that any tactics are fair! Lasker used to smoke cigars and blow smoke in their faces—"

"But you're leading nine games to five," Five says again in that puzzled way. "I could understand why you might engage in tactics of this sort if the match were not in your favor or even if it were very close, but you've established a clear advantage, surely—"

"The only reason he's leading," I say, "is that I haven't played up to my best standard yet. I've deliberately held the level of my play back." It seems important to reassert my own position at a time when my ability seems to be coming into question. "I'm a much better player than he is," I say, "and I intend to prove it now. After three moves, I've got him on the run. He knows perfectly well that he can't beat me if I don't want to be beaten; he was just trying a desperate trick."

"You fool," Louis says, "I can beat *you* at will. We simply play two different kinds of chess. Do you think that I have anything to fear from you?"

"Of course you have something to fear from me," I say coolly and with magnificent poise. "Otherwise, why would you have tried such a cheap trick? You know that I've got the advantage, and furthermore
—"

“You’re a, lousy player!” Louis says. His face contorts; he is whining like the thirteen-year-old that I remember him as having been. “You can’t handle the minor pieces and you fall into the same stupid patterns time and time again.” His eyes take on a fierce intensity, refracting some mad light. “Don’t you know what position you’ve gotten yourself into?” he says. “Haven’t you looked over the board, haven’t you—”

“Of course I know what position I’ve gotten into! I’ve completely blocked your attack, I’ve posted my Knight at a threatening square, I’ve virtually pinned your Bishop and forced you into a premature retreat of the Queen, which you had no business developing in the first place. What kind of idiot do you think I am? You’re going to lose this game, Louis, and you’re going to lose the next sixteen games in a row, and then where are your forces of evil going to be? I’ll tell you —”

“You ass,” Louis says. Saliva moistens his lips. I have never seen him as discombobulated as now (and indeed I have seen him in many postures). “You don’t understand. You don’t understand the game or what’s going on here.”

“Oh, yes, I do,” I say. “Yes, I do. You’d better get back to that board and think over your next move, Louis, because I calculate that at the very best you’ve got four or five left before this game is in hand.”

“Quiet,” the authoritarian Overlord says. “The two of you keep quiet, I want to think this over now.” Indeed, the creature does assume a cogitative posture, resting one of its tentacles within another, retreating into some peculiar position in which Five seems also to be removed from the confrontation. Intricacies of which I have never been previously aware seem to assert themselves; it is obvious that there is a whole hierarchy of purpose here which has evaded me. I was wrong in assuming the ultimate authority of Five and his cohorts. “All right,” the Overlord says, unbending, emerging from its posture. “The offense is very serious. Nevertheless, the match must go on.”

“Of course it’s got to go on,” Five ventures, “we’re on a tight schedule—”

“Shut up. Just keep quiet. When I want you to talk, I’ll let you know.”

"All right," Five says mildly. "I was just trying to make a contribution of some sort; after all, the match is being run under our own aegis and we've got certain rights—"

"The match has been severely compromised," the Overlord says, running right over Five's protestations. "The very integrity of the match itself has been menaced. Nevertheless, it is too late now. This is the sixteenth match of forty-one; it would be much too laborious to go back to the start and begin again. So it will have to go on."

"Why has it been compromised?" Louis says. He has rolled himself into a little ball against the wall, shrinking inconspicuously, and his voice is quite thin, but curiosity has yanked him forward. "It's perfectly legitimate to use psychological tricks on an opponent; it's an ancient and honorable facet of the game, in fact—"

"You keep quiet as well," the Overlord says harshly. It pedals itself over to Louis and quite casually uses a tentacle to strike him on the face.

I cannot see the blow but only Louis' eyes, and from this aspect the contact has been stunning; it has broken my old antagonist. His eyes widen in panic, his nostrils flare. The blow comes again. "That will teach you to tell lies about us," the Overlord says. "Lie about our purposes, mock us, misuse the truth in devious ways." It turns, comes over then to me. "I could say the same about you."

"Why me?" I show my palms. My calm, under the difficult circumstances, is superb. If I were a detached observer I would admire the way in which I can come to grips. "I didn't have anything to do with it."

"You believed it?"

"Believed it? I believed nothing!"

"That's not so," Louis says in a thin voice. "He did so believe it. He's always been a gullible fool; he could be easily manipulated. Anything you told him would be all right with him; that's one of the reasons he's made such a mess of his life. I tell you—"

"Enough," Five says. He comes over to Louis, wraps a tentacle around him. "I think it's best if you take yourself off to the board now."

"You have no right!" Louis says. The disaster of having been struck twice has braced him; he concludes now that things have reached their nadir and he has undergone the worst of all possibilities. He

seems to have bottomed, is arcing upward once more. “You have no right to treat me in this fashion. I am an international grandmaster. I have competed for many important titles. I wore the crown of the American Juniors for three years—”

“Enough,” Five says quietly, “enough now.” He wrenches Louis around with an amazing show of strength (I have never thought Five to be a strong fellow). He hooks a tentacle around Louis and escorts him out the doorway back into the staging area, leaving me alone with the other.

Suddenly embarrassed, shamed by his gaze—although it is hard to know exactly why, having myself committed no crime at all—I affect a posture of disinterest. “Well,” I say, “it’s a testing match, I’d better get back to the board—”

“You fool,” the Overlord says. “We haven’t dealt with you yet.”

“There’s nothing to deal. I told you everything I knew.”

“Why was this not reported immediately?”

“I did report it, sir,” I said. “I reported it right away. We’re in the middle of a game, sir,” finding the deferential mode accommodating, “and I should be at the board.”

“Don’t you accept the importance of these matches?”

“Of course I do.”

“Then why have you played so miserably? Why has your game been absolutely atrocious, eh? Answer me that one if you will, and stop lying.”

This flabbergasts me. Indeed, I am forced to swallow several times before I can focus my attention on the Overlord. “I don’t think it’s been so atrocious,” I say mildly. I do not want to get into the matter of having thrown games.

“We do. We know a good deal about chess. Do you take us for fools? We have made a very careful study of your game; we know exactly how it’s played and the comparative levels of achievement. Your antagonist and you were selected because you were as evenly matched as any two players we could find on any given level. Your games are identical. So how can you be losing nine games to five? And be on the verge of losing again?”

“I’m going to win today.” I

“No, you’re not.”

“I am! Anyway, I had to get my game together.”

“We think you’ve been losing on purpose,” the Overlord says. “We’ve worked out a careful move-by-move analysis of the first eight games, really dissected them, taken those initial eight apart. It’s clear that there is a sequence of blunders and errors which are out of accord with your normal style of play.”

“Well,” I say, “well—” I try to keep my demeanor calm, my respiration under control. “That is not strictly true, although I would admit that I could have played a little more *cleanly*.”

“Nonsense! Those blunders can be explained only by deliberate error. You couldn’t have been so stupid otherwise. Is that fair?”

“Fair?” I say. “Who and what is fair? I don’t understand.”

“Well, now. There are billions of sentient creatures whom you represent.”

“I’m aware of that.”

“They’re all depending upon you. You’re the only means by which they can survive ... and all of this time you’ve been failing to give your best. Either that or your game has severely deteriorated.”

“All right,” I say. This is new; obviously, this creature is no fool and the small deceits and trickery which I might have thought successful with the original group will hardly work here. Is it possible that he was called in to straighten me out?

“That’s true then. I admit it. I haven’t given it my best.”

“You are correct.”

“I wanted to extend the series for as long as possible. Louis’ defeat was inevitable anyway, and in that case I felt it made as much sense to give the races or people he was representing a chance to survive as long as possible.”

“That was a mistake.”

“I’m a *much* stronger player than Louis no matter what your computers say, and I knew the match was in my hands. I could win at will but chose to extend—”

“Mistaken,” the Overlord says again. “Terrible, the small traps and deceits into which you creatures fall. Do you realize that you are liable to stiff penalties for this?”

I try to look humble which under these circumstances is surprisingly easy. “Well, of course I do,” I say. “But I’m going to bear down now,

so what's the difference? It's all past."

"We are functioning under extreme time pressure here. We never expected the matches to go the full forty-one game distance. If we had, there would have been a different timetable; it might have been a best five out of nine."

"I understand."

"We only allowed it to be a best of forty-one because we were sure that one or the other player would establish a commanding lead."

"Even though we were so evenly matched?"

"Yes. Chess is a highly psychological game, and a small advantage can be compounded into a, large one; the smallest blunder can magnify into a hopelessly losing game. Under the pressures, we knew that one of you would crumple and the end would be quick."

"It will be. I'm going to beat him in straight games."

"You may be too late. I don't know what to say to you; you've put us into trouble here."

"I'm sorry," I say again. Strangely this crucial interview is beginning to bore. Also, I am eager to see the board. "I apologize for everything, you understand, but I really think I should get to the board now."

"This *is* apocalypse, you know," the creature says quietly. "That was the condition from the beginning. You're playing for the outcome of the universe."

"Yes," I say with the vague feeling that I am humoring it. "I know that, and accept, and I really will play my best now and wipe out Louis in a short span of time. As a matter of fact, I'm going to win twenty-one games to nine."

And saying no more than this, I commence a difficult but methodical stalk toward the side door. It is impossible, I think, that I can manage to negotiate this without being blocked but, strikingly, I can. As I go through the door, I hear the sounds of rattling as if the Overlord were adjusting complex machinery within himself. (I wonder if these are mechanical constructions, not sentient but merely with life's motions. It would certainly be an economical way of running things, but who am I to divine the cause or nature of the universe?) I return to the great hall.

And there the usual: murmurs, snorts, sneezes and groans caress me as I head toward the area of light surrounding the table, which is surprisingly small from this aspect. Louis is hunched in his gnarled way, the pieces as we have left them. I seat myself without acknowledgment and ponder the board. Louis has not moved yet. The pieces are stable.

I look at him and he is weeping.

He is weeping, distinctly; large brown tears move down his face. Aided by gravity they plop on the table and he rubs against them with a palm, groaning, merging them into the polish of the table. Even as he does so the tears are replaced by newer outpourings. I look at him intently, really disbelieving. This is disgraceful.

Truly, I have never seen Louis weep before. Even in our youth, when abused by neighborhood bullies, he still was contained and refused to make emotional display. This kind of conduct from him or for any grandmaster is unheard of. Weeping at tournaments is simply not done; even Alekhine never did anything more disgraceful than a bowel movement. Protocol calls for tight emotional control, a denial of feeling, although one may be permitted a certain amount of teeth-gnashing, or now and then the squeezing of a captured Pawn.

“What’s wrong?” I say. “What’s wrong, Louis?” A horrid breach, but I find the question so irresistible and I would not have known until this moment how profound the effect upon me would be his weeping. “Louis, stop crying, will you? This kind of thing is ridiculous, crying during a match. And in the bargain, it’s not doing any good. You can’t play on my sympathy.”

He shakes his head and says nothing. The tears continue. It is so soundless, so completely controlled that the audience and seconds can hear nothing. Surely if they knew what had happened to Louis there would be a crowd, but he has contained himself. We are noted for our control. “Now stop it,” I say. “What’s wrong?”

“David,” he says. “Oh, David, you’re such a fool.”

And then his face splits open; from its seamed places come further rivulets, pouring, drenching his chin. It is shocking, looking at him in this posture, to see how old Louis has become. I never thought of him as being old, of course; he is my age and consequently quite young ... but indeed he is falling apart psychologically and physically.

A cackle, like the very drone of senility, comes from him. "Whoop," Louis says. "Whoop!"

"Are you quite all right?" I say, still talking in lowered tones. I am afraid that someone will come in shortly behind the camera, seeking a closeup, and what will they make of this? What can they possibly make of it out there? Collaboration over the table in the course of a match? Incredibly damaging; our reputations would never survive this kind of thing. Also, the Overlords might shortly notice weeping. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he sighs, his voice cracking on the *noth*. "Nothing is wrong with me, David, except that you're such a fool, don't you see?" And then his weeping shifts to laughter. Louis begins to giggle over the pieces. He reaches into a pocket, removes and unfurls an enormous green handkerchief and wipes it over streaming eyes, pulsating nose. "What a fool," he says weakly.

What is this? It seems impossible that his behavior will not draw attention, and yet we seem to be at some dead point in the match. All of the referees are off the stage; booms and lenses remain stationary. Obviously no one expects anything interesting to be happening at this moment. Can the Overlords be in frenzied conference backstage?

Louis snaps the handkerchief into a small gathering, then folds it into his pocket. He sighs, shakes his head, meditates over the pieces. "Such a fool," he says, but only in a whisper's echo. I have to lip-read this. He reaches outward, grasps his Bishop lightly, then lets it fall from his palm. Touch-move.

"What's going on here?" I say. "What are you talking about now?" But Louis is in some deep well of concentration. Whatever little spasm affected him has now been overcome; my opponent has literally nothing to say. He wipes a jacket sleeve over his mouth, belches, looks at the board. "Isn't this enough?" I say. "Haven't you caused enough trouble here with this nonsense of yours?"

"Not quite," Louis says, "not quite enough, David." And he reaches out his hand—touch-move is proper—and then slowly stalks his piece across the board, little plumes of dust seeming to become a halo as the Queen begins her move. Louis settles the Queen into place. He sits back then, flat to his chair like a man being

electrocuted, and stares at me, seemingly overwhelmed by consequence.

“My friend,” he says, “my dear, dear old friend of my youth, why, this is too terrible!”

I consider the board.

INTERREGNUM: A *Discovered Check*

In discovered check, the checking piece is not moved to attack the opponent’s King. This is crucial.

Rather, rather: It remains in place, the check administered by the removal of another piece out of the line of attack. Thus, a Bishop between a Rook and an opponent’s King, innocently moved away to expose the King to a Rook attack, can deliver a devastating blow even though it is not being used for attack. A Bishop, say, can attack the opponent’s Queen in that uncovering move and since under the rules of chess the opponent’s obligation is to remove his King from check at all costs, it can be seen that this is a powerful move.

Indeed it has a long and honorable history, this discovered attack. Most notably it was used by the long-deceased Frank Marshall in his famous “shower of gold” game against a then world champion in New York City at the turn of the century. Unfortunately it was not in a tournament game. Marshall, behind, and apparently defeated, made a move so wondrous that spectators are supposed to have showered the board with goldpieces (the possession of gold was not then illegal). Like most chess stories this is hyperbole from desire.

Still, against Stiller, the impetuous Stiller, in 1967 in Heidelberg, I had such an opportunity available to me. I had stumbled through sixteen moves in a haze of stupidity, the pieces themselves feeling uneven within my hand, the board a dazzling and impenetrable collection of little squares, the progress of the game seeming to take place between various layers of gauze. Chess-blindness had gripped me; all motives, the very rules of the game themselves, seem arcane, and the mind, moving slowly through imploded layers of glue

and cement, simply refuses to collaborate with intention ... and going into this game with Stiller, my standings in the tournament, dead-even to that point, seemed in danger of collapsing completely.

In fact, I would fall under the fifty-percent mark with seven wins, eight losses and fourteen draws in this endless match. So if there was ever a time to turn the tide, get hold of myself and begin that late-tournament charge made famous through the years, it was at this point ... but I could not, sixteen moves into the game, bring mind and attention together. My development was skewered. A transposed Sicilian had failed at the ninth move to make the transposition when Stiller, the bastard, had lumbered into an audacious and serendipitous sacrifice of his Rook. All in all, it was clear that I was within five moves or less of a resignation.

Then it happened.

It was as if some quality of light in the hall changed, as if the intensity of fluorescence beamed straight, breaking open the dried kernels of my stupidity. My head, heavy for hours, became preternaturally light. My body, similarly weightless, seemed to expand. It became so light and gaseous that at any moment it seemed likely to spin gracelessly from the board itself. I would drift then through referees, spectators' ring, out of the hall itself and into the air of Heidelberg, another German airborne object ... and stunned by these sensations, it was with an effort that I forced my attention back to the board, wondering if I was going to become ill. And at that point I saw it. The world tied itself into a knot around my intestines.

What I saw in that transparent haze of renewed attention was that there was a means to defeat the fool. A position had created itself on the board almost as if it were natural law: my Bishop was wedged between both his Knights, simultaneously attacking, of course, but prohibited from capture because one was guarded by a Pawn, the other by his uncovered Queen ... but if I were to take the Knight, follow carefully now, the Knight guarded by the Pawn, then the capture would leave his King file open, permitting me to bring a Bishop into line.

He could not take the Bishop because it would leave a hanging Pawn ... and if I were then to take the open Rook behind the Bishop,

I would have a devastating discovered check. The Bishop could go Queen-side, it could go down the line to double-check, it could pause to go nibbling on a Rook. And nothing to be done. The double-Knight maneuver pinned him.

He was helpless!

I almost gasped but did not: With an effort I was able to keep down the burbles and chokings of laughter which were, instead, like worms moving within the canister of gut, trying to find exit through the mouth. There is something about the mere glimpse of a win which will unsettle even the most amiable and restrained: I have known some who laughed out loud, others who might have ejaculated cleanly within their trousers ... but the years of discipline held me in check and I did not laugh in Stiller's face, although looking at his humble, stupid features, now conjoined as I was in a belief that the game was in hand, I proved able to hold down that laughter only through a great effort of will.

What I did was to stand with a little leap, and begin to pace through the spaces of the room, working out the carbonate knots of tension through sheer motion. I was afraid that if he saw my face he would glimpse intention ... and a sense of magic, so pervasive in the Royal Game, held that this could not possibly be.

At all costs he could not see my expression, I resolved. And so I paced through the hall, winding my way through the tables on which play continued, twenty different worlds whose interstices contained me like a sliding fish in net, until I came to a sheer, blank wall and I leaned against that wall, opening my mouth, taking the clear surfaces into my mouth like that fish puckering at the top of an aquarium. He would not see. I would not let him glimpse nor share my knowledge.

When I returned to the board the situation was unchanged. Stiller's clock moved; he had not yet responded, although his chin was cupped in his splayed hand. The bursting aspect of the little freckles on his skin indicated that he was aware of some subterfuge. Like any master he had sensed rather than seen what was developing, but he did not know my language and I knew that he never would. My intention had gone beneath, over, through him. And even if he did see, what could he have done? The only conceivable response

would have been to uncover one of the Knights, and bring it to a safe square. But even so the attack would have proceeded, lacking only a move of development or so.

I had him.

He had used up five minutes and still remained rigid, locked to the board. An exceptionally slow player, Stiller had now used almost an hour and a quarter for those first sixteen moves ... which meant that he was going to get into time trouble sooner or later. Surely this had occurred to him as well. But shaking his head, giving odd little grunts and grumbles, Stiller yet refused to move.

I felt a flick of impatience. I wanted to grasp his pieces, force one into his hand. He had no right, confronted by the exquisite combination, to be so slow! Still, I could not force him.

Etiquette prevailed. Etiquette always prevails in tournament chess, although I desperately wanted to smash him. The aggressive underlay of chess, so often denied, is the basic component of the game. I could have wrung Stiller's thick, palpitating neck for what he was doing to me. But one does not do this. One seeks the right move instead. I commenced to pace.

Pacing, then, I had a vivid image: I would leap upon the table, come down then upon Stiller with enormous force. I would rear a gigantic knee into his cheekbones, screaming, and clobber the chessmen to the ground. "You cannot do this to me!" I would scream. "Not when you're defeated anyway, you fool. It would be one thing if you were winning, but you're not; it's hopeless. I've found the key to the victory and you're helpless. So there's nothing to do, give up, move!" But still he would not move, remaining in that posture over the chessmen.

Sitzfleisch, I thought with rage: This tactic was common before the advent of the chess clock in the late nineteenth century. Before that time there was no limit on moves or games, and a defeated player often could, by simple refusal to move, salvage victory, drive his infuriated opponent to grief and resignation. *Sitzfleisch* ... the iron butt that can transcend all difficulties, control all circumstances by its simple unwillingness to be moved.

Surely Stiller could not be engaging in this tactic now. His clock was ticking away, now only an hour remained on it for his next

twenty ... but yet he would not move. Something broke within me at this point. Surely if there had been a larger audience they might have noted that I was acting rather lunatic. I lumbered over to the referee, then, the referee a small, confused German, recruited from the city as a means of cutting expenses (the tour was in bad straits that year). I resisted an impulse to seize him by the lapels, settled instead for a winsome, stricken grin from which saliva welled and dripped. "Please," I said, "you've got to do something. He won't move."

The referee looked at me without comprehension. Something wild and Teutonic passed over his face, then he looked at the floor. "I told you!" I shrieked. "He won't move! You've got to make him move!"

The referee mumbled something, moved away. I stamped my feet in a rage, aware that I was now drawing some attention from a desultory little line of spectators in the hall. "Make him move!" I shouted. "Make him move!"

Stiller himself looked up from the board three yards away, and rubbed his palms. Up and down the line of tables, the frieze of concentration broke. Players were staring. "Please," I said, appealing to them, "this cannot be permitted."

"Really, David," Stiller said, "this is not proper, it's highly irregular, in fact. Allow me to consider my next move in peace."

"Liar!" I said. "You have no next move! You're not *going* to move, you'll just sit there."

"I'm definitely going to move if you'll give me a chance. In these circumstances," he said blandly, "how could I move?"

His demeanor was so mild, so apologetic, immersed in such sanctimony as to drive me to utter fury, and with a growl I leapt toward him, shrugging off the referee who made desperate little gestures of retrieval, then, with a sigh, gave the battle up and fell away as I launched myself upon my adversary. I felt the shocking contact of his flesh as I dove.

Chess is a game famed for its intellectual rather than physical contact, and therefore this plunge against Stiller was doubly shocking. Little sighs were torn out as I reached my hands toward his stalwart, Hebraic neck, wrung it. (I am not an anti-Semite but there is a certain characteristic of Jews, a repulsive amalgam of hard

personality and soft physique which I find disgusting. I say this even though I am at least partly Jewish myself.) Oh, did I squeeze!

“Don’t do it,” he said, “David, don’t *gghh*, then,” his voice remitting to a kind of unintelligibility as he reeled from the board, Knights and Bishops falling like little warped pearls.

“You can’t do this to me!” I responded. I was vaguely conscious of forms hustling toward our little confrontation, attempting to separate us, but I could hardly be dissuaded. “I’m entitled to better than this. I’ve won the game fairly, you fool. You can’t just sit there and expect me to go away!” and so on and so forth, mumbles and curses meshing, wringing his little neck until his kike’s head began to flap on his neck like a petal, and only at that moment did the hands of intervention assert themselves.

They came between us, pulling me from Stiller, he from me, and I saw him recede. Then I hit the floor, pinioned by referees, officials and a few involved spectators who had dashed from the benches to assist, becoming involved in the situation although FIDE is very much against this kind of thing. Lights swung above my line of sight like insects. I felt myself to be literally in extremis but this too, I advised myself, would pass, would pass.

An incident of this sort was unheard of in the Internationals but there is always a first time. “I’m sorry,” I said when I was able to recover breath, “truly sorry about this but he was, of course, cheating. He’s a big cheater and not only that, he’s a Jew.”

So I felt myself yanked, propelled through the air as I wavered in the supporting network of hands. “You’ve got to play the game fairly,” I nevertheless observed. “It’s a great game, but unless you honor the rules, what’s the point of it? It’s only a madness then; it is the rules which make it great, the strictures which shape it, the difficulties which lend genius.” Then I must have fainted, or at least I have little recollection of what went on for the next few moments. At one instant I was declaiming, and at the next there was a blank, aseptic pit, no sense of transition between the two and then—

I found myself in a small room at the rear of the hall being talked to earnestly by two officials. “We can’t have this sort of thing, David,” one of them said. I nodded; apparently I had remained conscious through all of this, although without memory, and was trying to give a

good account. So I deduced. "It's a scandal. Stiller is being seen by a doctor right now, he may want to press charges for assault. The Germans are a very authoritarian people, you know."

The other official, silent but equally involved, nodded vigorously at this. "Do you have any explanation for your conduct, David?" the first official asked. "Anything which can be said in your behalf, which we can take to FIDE?"

I shook my head weakly.

"I was afraid of that, David, but then, attacking opponents during a match is illegal. It goes counter to the spirit of the game which is one of the mind—"

"Go to hell," I said. Spiritless and drained, there seemed yet to be some core of purpose. I dragged myself to my feet. "Go to hell!"

The official looked at me astonished. Such language is rarely heard at matches; Alekhine has been dead a long time. "David," he said.

"I'm sick of our talk of intellect," I said, "I'm sick of our cheap rationalizations. Chess is a game for failures and for physical cowards. Let's face it. Besides, I had a clear line of attack, the game would have been mine in five moves more."

"But—"

"But he wouldn't accept the reality of his defeat. The trouble with all chess players except me is that they won't face reality! Reality for the game is itself. They've tried to make it a pure substitute, but it won't work. Things will never change."

Admittedly, I was gibbering in what was later considered an attack of deep shock. Anxiety neurosis. "I want to get out of the international circuit," I said. "I want to get out of competitive chess, get married, live in the world, travel a bit and see the places I stay in. I'm going to leave chess," I said, the silent official unleashing a briskly mad series of nods then, as if I were addressing his own condition, and I found approbation in his eyes. "Get out," I said, "meet people, circulate, get away from fools like Stiller." And I stumbled toward the door of the anteroom, my intention quite clear, my intention to leave the hall and embark upon my life but—

As I went through the door I stumbled into the veritable arms of officials, reporters, honored guests, grandmasters—all of them shouting, "The board has been restored, the board is ready again,

you must play, you must!" I tried to break free from their grasp and I could not. I found myself linked within that network of arms and conveyed once again into the hall, toward the board where all of the pieces were set up as before except that my Bishop flanking the Knights *en prise* had somehow been removed.

"Where is it?" I said. "Where the hell is my Bishop?" Referees, honored guests, grandmasters began to laugh. "Where is my *Bishop*? I've got my life tied up in that."

"The position is as you left it," they said, all of them talking in unison. "Nothing has changed, nothing has changed." From a side door came the abused Stiller wearing a fresh set of clothing, a high-collared shirt concealing marks which I had left on his wretched neck, the neck swathed in white. He seated himself across the board, ostentatiously making no acknowledgment at all ... and without hesitation of any sort, brought his Queen down to Q7 and checked me thunderously. I looked at the board appalled. The mate was in one. Inevitable. "This is illegal!" I screamed. "You've altered the pieces, you've changed—"

"Move!" the referee and honored guests bellowed, Stiller saying nothing, sitting modestly, his hands folded, looking down sweetly at the board in a distracted fashion. As I looked at him, looked at the board, looked at the referees and then the two FIDE officials (who had reappeared), it became quite apparent that the situation, perhaps, was out of control.

Looking at the clock I saw that I had an hour and a half left. Certainly enough. I would sit him out. I folded my hands and looked at the board, suspended in a haze of concentration from which I would not be diverted. I was not going to be checkmated. They were not going to do this to me.

It is possible that certain aspects of this memoir are fabricated, but not all of them are.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Queen Takes Bishop Mate

I look up at Louis as he completes his move and he is weeping. His face, still open, has come to darkness. Little patches of illness, seen as pits in the deep surfaces, his eyes shrouded, his neck thin and palpitating.

“I’m so sorry,” he says. “My old, old friend, I am so terribly sorry.”

Looking at the board, seeing what he has done to me (or maybe I am only thinking of what I have done to myself; could such a thing as this truly be possible?), I have a dazzling moment of pure and brilliant insight which at last continues and does not deny me. It goes on and on, instead, trailing hot little flashes of light like dysentery cramping from the bowels ... and I see then what we have been, where we have gone, what we will become, but this insight cannot possibly last. No! It drains from me as those cramps dissolve themselves into the viscous and deadly fluids of elimination, and here I am again, looking at the board in the fluorescence, the lights of the hall harsh and bright. There are murmurs about me. I turn to connect with them but when I look, expectedly, there is no one there, only Louis and I. It has always been this way. Slowly then I subside into my seat and the gelatinous substance I know as the Competition encases me once again. Ten games to five. Twenty-six games left to go.

Next time, I take the wraps off.