

Ruth Berman ("3-OK," July 1972) was recently nominated for the John W. Campbell Award as best new writer for 1973. Her new story is an effective and moving variation on the theme of Are We Ready To Join the Galactic Federation.

A Board In the Other Direction

by RUTH BERMAN

Iskander was senile.

Having no children, he was therefore, of course, entered in a state home. It would not necessarily have made any difference if he'd had any; the homes were lavishly funded, thanks to the votes of the young and guilty. But he might then have had visits and outings to look forward to. As it was, he had nothing to do except look at pieces he no longer knew how to move. On bad days there was nothing but the varying smells of food, deodorant, urine, and feces to occupy his failing senses. On warm days he could go into the garden.

A bright torus, checkered with blue-steel and white-steel magnetic squares, spun on the clear plastic axis attaching it to the clear plastic frame. The plastic was as near invisible as makes no difference, to

kibitzers, but to the players it was half-glimpsed curves of light broken into rainbows and reflecting stray bits of color on the board and the blue and white pieces jutting out all over it.

There were some who had said they had seen that Iskander was failing even before Mbara of Uganda beat him, 13 variations out of 20. But others, who knew Mbara's play better, said that they were both in top form and Mbara had genuinely become the better player. They said it was the shock of losing to a youngster which had ended him.

In fact, Mbara was quite old enough to be tagged as a spinster, married like Iskander to the game alone. It caused quite a stir when she married the following month — and to a nonplayer, at that.

The sunlight was clear and harsh on the dusty park ground. An ordinary chessboard was marked out, but the pieces on it were living men, armed with wooden swords and shields, and sweating heavily under their padding.

Iskander was delighted when he found himself faced with two visitors, at last, on a warm day. Dimly, he heard the words, "Copter ride."

"Yes, yes," he said eagerly. "Copter ride. Most kind of you, Mr...Most...Yes." He plucked at the diapers he wore, trying to express his pleasure by freeing himself from the constriction, but they were fastened too securely. He was too excited at the prospect of a ride to mind, however.

But once they were in the copter, one of the men poked him with a needle. He sobbed at this unkindness until he felt himself growing drowsy, and then he went to sleep.

He woke to find himself on a couch in a sunny room. A woman of 65 or so sat rocking opposite him. She looked familiar, but it was not until he tried subtracting years from her face that he recognized her. He sat up slowly, pulling himself on the rim of the couch. "Hello, Miriam. Been a long time. Still in politics?"

"Yes. How do you feel?"

"Fine. And you?" But he had

no sooner finished the formality of the exchange than he realized that he did not feel fine. He felt weak and — oddly — happy. The first was not unusual of late. The second seemed strange. It was not as if he had played an interesting game that day. In fact, he had not played since he could not think when. At that thought, the pawns in his head leaped forward on a dozen different kinds of chessboards, and he knew that he could continue all those games to their ends. Which was as it should be, but not as it had been recently.

The bullet shot over the board....A green knight hop-frogged over a white to take a red pawn....The Fool circled idly around the other pieces and cut down the Moon....

"Well as can be expected," Miriam was saying, and her words took up no more time than Iskander needed to orient himself.

"Testing some kind of intelligence drug on me?" he said as soon as she stopped.

One side of her mouth quirked up, and she leaned forward, saying, "Not exactly. It's an experimental drug which allows the body to tap reserves of energy to overcome the effects of old age."

"Indeed. What happens when the reserves run out?"

She hesitated, and stopped rocking for a moment.

"Death? It's not like you to be sentimental, my dear."

"No, I suppose not." She started the rocker going again. "It's a dangerous drug, certainly. It'll be quite a few hours before you need to worry about unpleasant side effects, though. If you want out of the project, before then, we can reverse it."

"Who do you want me to play?" he said eagerly.

"I didn't say it was chess."

"What else could I possibly mean?"

"That's not a fair way to put it, Zander."

He smiled at her and shrugged. "No. But who do you want me to play? And Why?"

She stopped rocking and stretched herself up out of the chair. "You get dressed and come out. I'll show you." She pointed at a suit draped over the end of the couch, and left the room.

Iskander looked down at himself, dressed in diapers, plastic pants, and sandals. He felt a quick flash of nudity-taboo embarrassment, followed by disgust at the appearance of his body. He tried to suppress that reaction as equally irrational, but failing, ignored his feelings as well as he could and simply began dressing. The suit provided was one of his own from a few years back. It had become a little too large for him, but the

looseness of the fabric was pleasant.

"Ready," said Iskander. He stepped through the door into a long, windowless corridor. He blinked for a moment as his eyes adjusted to the change in light.

"Good," said Miriam.

An intense gentleman standing beside her immediately broke into protest. "Madam Chairman," he said, "Have you warned —"

"Yes, of course. Iskander, this is Dr. Hudek. He will be very annoyed with me if anything happens to you."

"Oh, do you play chess, Doctor?" said Iskander, bowing.

"No," said Hudek, obviously puzzled by the question.

"No, he's just a physician," Miriam explained. "This way." She set off down the corridor, and the two men followed.

A Bishop's Pawn opening was unusual, but the QBP was a better fighter than a Live Pawn should be, and worth using as a major piece.

Miriam took them into a small room with a one-way glass wall opposite the door. It looked into a council chamber and was fitted up with outlets for tri-d cameras and tapers, along with pencil sharpeners and the other esoteric paraphernalia of the press.

"Do you plan to broadcast the game?" Iskander asked. He felt out of place, almost a little dizzy at

being in a pressroom. He had watched broadcasts of other people's matches often enough, and so he knew what such rooms looked like — or at least what the front sections of them looked like — and he knew that he had been watched many times from such rooms, but he had never been in one before.

"No, we'll only record it," Miriam said. "But there's your opponent."

He glanced quickly at the figure seated at a table going over some papers, and looked back to Miriam, astonished. "It's not Mbara."

"Zander! You're impossible. Why should we risk your life to play her?"

"For the sake of the game?" Iskander made it sound joking, although it wasn't really. "If it's anyone else, why didn't you get Mbara?"

"We would have," Miriam said. "But she died in childbirth a few months ago."

"So I wasn't your first choice," Iskander said regretfully.

"That's irrelevant, Zander. By the way, you still haven't looked at your opponent properly."

Iskander looked. His opponent was...a dryad? It had delicate facial bones, like a woman, but a straight-lined body, like a man. It had brown skin, perhaps a little darker than his own, and long

green hair, braced up over golden combs on the head, giving a crownlike effect, then falling like a cloak down the back. But even more than the hair, the set of the face and the lines of the body were wrong: the eyes too large and set too wide, the shoulders sloping down too much from the neck, the legs and arms too long. And the most startling wrongness of all was that each of the individual oddities looked right on it. It was not deformed, it was simply not human. And it was beautiful. He found himself tracing designs in the air with one finger. He wanted to get some clay — no, wood was better — and carve a copy of it to be the Magician in a set of Tarotchess pieces or should it be the Fool? But if he carved it dancing like the Fool, how would those long limbs shape themselves to show arrested motion? And what kind of dog would fit with a Fool carved in that likeness?

"Zander?"

"Won't you sit down, sir?" Hudek set a chair behind Iskander, nudging it close enough to touch his legs.

Iskander sat down automatically, then came out of it enough to smile at Hudek. "I'm all right, Doctor. Don't worry."

Miriam sat down in a chair level with his. "Well, Zander."

"From outer space?"

“Right.” She nodded, as if granting him a point. “You hadn’t heard about the Visitors before, I think?”

“No.”

“They represent a confederation of intelligent beings within our Galaxy. They maintain a fleet of scout ships to go around checking promising planets every so often to find peoples ready for membership. The basic criteria are space travel and world government.”

“Defined how?” said Iskander.

“Cautious, aren’t you? Yes, that’s the stinger. Defined as interstellar travel — which, we gather, is most economically managed by treating space-time as four spatial dimensions and traveling cross-time to go places — and a government with some reasonable power to enforce its legislation.”

“We don’t qualify, then. A pity.”

“No, we don’t. But we’re so close to it, I hate to let the opportunity go. And besides...I don’t trust people.”

Iskander simply nodded, but Hudek’s eyes went wide, and for the first time he forgot to address the nominal world leader with respect. “That’s a hell of a thing for you to admit!”

“Wait till you’re my age, Doctor, and maybe you’ll feel the same.” She turned back to Iskander. “They made a mistake

about us. We were coming along nicely the last time they surveyed us, and they really expected to find us ready for membership this time. Which we almost are, close enough to cause confusion. So they entered openly — in fact, they walked in on a General Assembly debate.” For a moment her eyes gleamed uncharitable mirth. “I’m afraid that if they find out the truth and reject us, we’ll do something silly. Heaven knows, we have enough tense situations threatening to become wars at any moment. If we can fool them and send them away arranging proceedings to invite us into their confederation, I think...I hope...it’ll give us that little extra incentive we need to make peace with each other...at last. We’ve been so close to peace so long, and so close to Armageddon.”

Iskander was silent for a moment. “And the space travel?”

“Less important in their reckoning. And easier. We’ll get it soon.”

“Mmm. Maybe so.” Iskander looked into the council chamber at the being, still intent on its papers.

“Or maybe not,” Hudek put in. “Maybe the rejection would give us that little extra incentive, as far as that goes.”

“Yes. *Maybe*,” said Miriam. “And if this gambit doesn’t work, let’s hope that one does.” She looked at him briefly and then

turned back to Iskander. "We have all the forms of a world government now — encouraging that mistake is easy. But to keep them thinking we have four-dimensional travel — I'd like you to go out there and play a game of four-dimension chess."

"So. I thought you were leading to that. You really do need Mbara — that variant was her invention. And did anyone ever play it except for her and me?"

"Not a complete game."

"She was a fine player, you know. Playing against her was a kind of heaven, except for losing." He shrugged and half smiled at his own egotism. "But if you don't have her, I'd think a chess-playing mathematician with a specialty in n-dimensional geometry would be your best bet."

"No. You've told me often enough that you can tell a master player from a good one. Our visitor claims to be a master at their equivalent of chess — I gather that it's a good way of spending the time between planetfalls. Both of you will be handicapped, of course, playing an unfamiliar variant, but your familiarity with playing all sorts of variants, I hope, will see you through. You don't have to win, you understand. All you have to do is play well enough to make him think you know what you're doing.

"All right."

The medieval bishop two-stepped its way across the board, to join the slow-moving queen in attack.

They went round by the corridor and entered the council chamber. The alien's big eyes opened even wider. It tossed its head eagerly and cleared away its papers into a sort of briefcase. It said something and a microphone at its throat said, "You are chess master Madam Chairman promised to invite?"

"Yes, how do you do." Iskander bowed.

The alien mimicked the gesture. "White or black?" it said through its mike.

"White," Iskander said without hesitation. He sat down at the table, opposite the alien, and said, "King's pawn-one to king three, level one, cube one."

A board at the side of the room lit up: KP-1, K3-1-1.

"KP-1, K2-2-1," was the answering move.

Iskander nodded. The alien was not going to make orthodox answers, but evidently it wanted to send its pieces out through all dimensions of the "board." But Iskander had chosen white, and he was going to attack so vigorously that the alien would not be able to pursue its own schemes.

Methodically taking his pieces cube by cube across the fourth

dimension of the game, he hunted the alien's lesser pieces, first, and then its king. The alien was given to skillful use of the knights, cutting across several dimensions of the board at once, and making it hard for Iskander to keep in his mind the complicated structure of the game's hypothetical playing field. Vaguely, he remembered that he and Mbara had once built a representation of a hyper-cube out of two cubes linked by diagonals which should (if they could have gone in another direction through a fourth dimension) have been perpendiculars. Then they had marked their hyper-cube off into tinier hyper-cubes, making a board to play on, instead of playing the game entirely in their heads. But the board was clumsy, and getting at the pieces was a bore; so in the end they found it simpler to do without it.

Iskander concentrated on getting rid of the dangerous knights. Two he got rid of in equal trades, and one in a trade of bishop for knight. He sacrificed a rook for the fourth, after much hesitation. The rooks, too, make confusing cross-dimension moves, but they only cut across one dimension at a time. He made the sacrifice and looked up to find his opponent's wide grey eyes fixed on him. He met the gaze steadily, wondering if it was respect or curiosity. The alien's eyes fell as it turned to consideration of its next

move. Iskander found himself trying to imagine what material could reproduce the shifting colors that made up that grey. It wasn't usual to put eyes into chess figures — they weren't meant to be that realistic — but he decided that a chess piece made to that model ought to include eyes, anyway.

The alien took a strand of its hair in its fingers and fidgeted with it as it thought. The line of green flickered brightly against its skin.

That gesture could not be anything but nervousness, Iskander thought, and he played with renewed confidence.

After four hours or so, it occurred to him that his bladder hurt intolerably. He was surprised. Tournament players were used to sitting without relief longer than that. Then he remembered how long it had been since his last tournament and realized that he felt weak, besides. His head hurt, his chest hurt, his hands and feet were cold. "Excuse me," he said, "I need to stop for a few minutes."

The alien blinked several times, then stood up and stretched, shivering all its muscles in turn. "Acceptable," it said. It bowed and left through the door opposite the one Iskander had used.

Iskander bowed in turn, cautiously, and looked around him. He raised his eyebrows at seeing Miriam still there in the room.

"How are you enjoying the game?" he said facetiously.

"Very much."

On second thought, Iskander corrected himself, she probably did understand much of what was going on, following the game through their reactions to the moves.

Dr. Hudek looked frankly bored and unhappy.

Iskander smiled at him and started out. He stumbled at the doorway, and Hudek promptly came alive, catching him so swiftly that it looked easy.

The doctor looked at him skeptically, but simply said, "Yes. Rest a little before you start again. That may help."

When they resumed play, a half hour later, Iskander felt better, although he could tell that he was weaker than before, because he could feel the weight of his head. He propped it in his hands, and it stopped bothering him.

After two hours more, Iskander announced, "Three moves to mate." He sat back and let his head droop against his chest.

The alien looked thoughtfully at the panel recording their moves and said, "I concede. Thank you. A brilliant game."

"Thanks," Iskander muttered. He thought perhaps he should think of a lengthier and more gracious response, but before he

could find one, the alien spoke to Miriam.

"Madam Chairman, I have misapprehended. You travel to near stars, but you have not fourth-dimensional drive to go to far ones. So?"

Her smile shriveled into a blank poker face. She hesitated for a moment, then said, "Yes, that's essentially so. How do you know it?"

The alien curved its arm and hand around to point out Iskander. "Chess master's style. He plays as one not used to thinking in all directions at once — takes only three dimensions at a time."

"I see."

The alien curved its hand down to point out its briefcase. "When you have time, Madam Chairman, we will speak more. There is a concept among your peoples I find most difficult to translate: 'national sovereignty'." It used the native term, but its pronunciation was so awkward that they did not recognize the words until after the mike had given them the entire speech.

"It is difficult to understand," Miriam said equably. The diplomatic smoothness of years was back on her face. "We can discuss it later. Doctor..." She and Hudek helped Iskander from the room.

Hudek had a wheelchair waiting outside that time. Silently,

he trundled Iskander back to the room where he had wakened and laid him down on the couch.

"Thank you," said Iskander, squirming deeper into the soft fabric. "Very kind of...Very..." He began rubbing at his left arm. "It hurts," he said crossly. He was quiet for a minute, then smiled. "Thanks, Miriam. Lovely game. And now I don't have to go back to the home."

A rook slid over the inside curve of the torus and back up to knock off a knight before the pieces slowed and were still.

Miriam sat down by Iskander and took his right hand. Beside her, Hudek was listening to Iskander's

chest. He scowled and took out a needle to inject a painkiller. Then he bent over Iskander's face, breathing air into the lungs. He kept that up for a long time, but nothing happened. At last he gave it up.

"Do you realize you've just killed a man?" he asked, as quietly as he could. "For nothing?"

"For nothing?" Miriam said. She remained as she was for a few moments more. Then she set the hand down and kissed Iskander's cheek. She pulled herself out of the chair and held out her arm to be given Hudek's support as she made her way back to work.

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