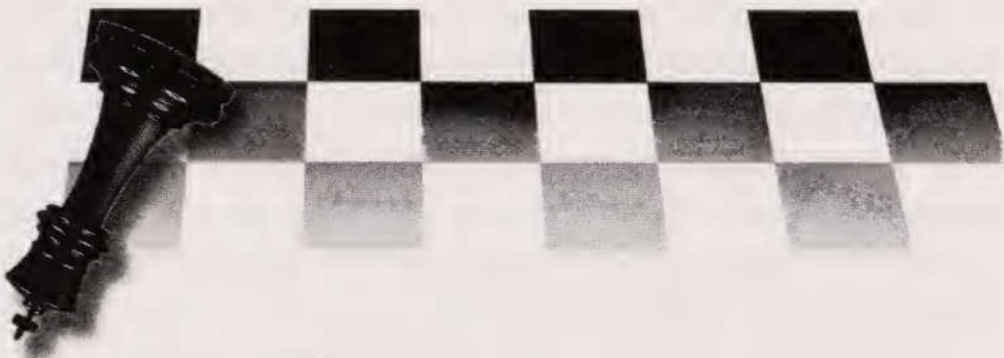


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Chess 4 Life

Randall Ingermanson



It's the Fourth of July, and I'm standing in front of a large tent at the San Diego County Fair, staring at a large, badly lettered sign—"Test your wits against a matched opponent. You could win Chess 4 Life. Only \$20."

My buddy John sticks an elbow in my ribs. "Go on, try it, Randy! What have you got to lose?"

For no reason, my palms are sweating. I'm a sophomore at Torrey Pines High School, and I'm the reigning chess champ. This ought to be a cakewalk. But something feels . . . not quite right here.

John pushes me toward the booth and whips out a twenty. "Sign him up!"

A bearded man with greasy hair looks at me suspiciously. "Ya wanna play or don't ya?"

"I'll . . . play." A lead brick settles in my gut.

The man shrugs. "You got a cell phone? You leave it outside, understand? We don't allow no cheating here."

I hand John my cell phone.

The greasy man leads me into the tent. I hear John hollering after me, "Good luck, dude!" I wonder for an instant why he isn't following, but the man is hauling open a big steel door. It's dark inside. All I can see is a gorgeous chessboard. The pieces are some kind of transparent stone, and they seem to be lit from within. As I step closer, I see that the room is divided in half by a large glass wall—kind of like those visitor rooms in prisons. There's a low gap in the glass above the chessboard, just high enough that you can move the pieces. I sit in the large leather chair in front of the board.

The metal door clangs shut behind me. I turn and see that I'm alone.

"Hey!" I jump up and hurry to the door. There's no doorknob. No nothing.

I pound on the door. "Hey! What's going on?"

No answer.

I'm sweating now. What kind of a weird place is this?

"I bet your name is Randy, right?" The voice behind me sounds strangely familiar. I kind of recognize it and kind of don't.

I turn and see a dark shape on the other side of the glass wall. "Who are you? What's going on here?"

He sits down in the chair on his side of the chessboard. "What's going on here is that we play a game. Whoever wins walks out. Whoever loses . . . plays another game."

There's something bizarre about that voice. I've heard it before, but I can't place it.

I stand there staring at him for about thirty seconds.

"Come on, let's play," he says. "You've got two doors

on your side and I've got two on mine. If you win, you get door number one, to the exit. You lose, you get door number two, to another game. What have you got to lose?"

Which is exactly what John asked me five minutes ago, and now I'm in Weird City. I jab a finger at him. "What if I don't want to play?"

He points at the clock. "It's 1:02. At 2:00 sharp, the room fills with poison gas. If the game's not over by then, we're trapped and we die. You've already wasted two minutes. Sit down and let's play."

"How many games have you played?" I ask.

"Just . . . sit."

A sick feeling rises in my gut. I'm gonna kill John for this. I sit down and stare blindly at the pieces. One-hour chess. I can do this. I'm a killer at one-hour chess. This guy has obviously lost at least one game, so how good can he be? I'm playing white, which gives me the advantage. I think for a second and move the queen's pawn forward two squares.

My opponent moves quickly, shoving his queen's pawn up two squares. So he's not stupid.

I move my queen's bishop pawn forward two squares. I know the queen's gambit opener cold. I'm hoping he'll accept.

He moves his king's pawn forward one square, declining my gambit.

Fine. I'm pretty good at this opening too. The very first game I ever memorized was "Alekhine versus Lasker, 1924. Queen's gambit declined." I think for a few seconds and move my king's knight up in front of the bishop pawn.

He instantly mirrors this move with his own king's knight.

I stare at my opponent, trying to get a line on him. The

light's bad, and I can't see much. He's about my height and skinny like me. And he's pretty quick with his moves. Quicker than I am. I wipe my palms on my pants and move up my other knight.

Without hesitation he moves his queen's knight in front of his queen. This guy is fast.

And he's good. We've played out the first eight moves of Alekhine versus Lasker. I'm feeling a little light-headed now. I need time to get a grip. I decide to follow Alekhine's lead a bit longer. I mean, Alekhine was a grand master. This guy I'm playing has lost to some nobody. He won't stand a chance against Alekhine. Eventually, he'll blunder, and then I'll jump on him. I kill his queen's pawn with my bishop's pawn.

The guy takes my pawn back with his, which is the only rational move.

I move my queen's bishop up in front of my knight.

Boom! Quick as anything, he moves his queen's bishop pawn up one square.

We blast through another half dozen moves, with me mounting a kingside attack and him defending. All of a sudden, I feel like vomiting. We're playing Alekhine versus Lasker move for move. And white lost that game. This guy is really good. The kicker comes on move fifteen, when he moves his king's bishop down in line with his queen. A great move but not obvious.

I sit staring at the board for a full fifteen minutes, afraid to move. Should I keep following Alekhine's game plan? Or try to improve on it?

"Dude, you need to move." My opponent is drumming his fingers on the table.

I look at the clock and see that we've got twenty-five minutes left. I decide to stick to Alekhine's game. He can

be beaten, but only by a grand master. I move my queen's knight pawn up two squares.

The game unfolds just like I know it. He unleashes a strong attack against my kingside. I move up my queen, poised for my own counterattack. He clogs my attack diagonal with a pawn, and I clog his. I move up my bishop to add weight to my attack. He ignores it, bringing his own rook down to my second row, adding weight to his attack on the knight guarding my king. It's a brilliant move, threatening mate in two. I look at the clock and see I have two minutes left. There's no time to think. I'm going to lose, but . . .

I move my knight to safety. We exchange queens, leaving him with a commanding attack. With thirty seconds left, I tip over my king, resigning.

My opponent leans forward and stretches out his hand. "Nice game, Alekhine."

I shake his hand. In the dim light of the board, I see that he's got a mole at the base of his right thumb. Just like I do.

"Who . . . who are you?" I stutter.

"Listen, there's no time," he gabbles. "So just listen. I'm your future. The loser goes back in time and plays again. You'll get out of this if you just—"

A loud buzz sounds.

"Five second warning!" he screams, running for his exit.

I jump up and spin around. There's a flashing exit sign on my right. I rush for it and hit the push bar at a dead run.

It opens and I'm through. I fling the door shut. An instant later I hear the buzzer change pitch. My heart is jackhammering in my chest. I can't see a thing. There's no

doorknob on this side. I turn and stagger blindly, feeling my way along a dark tunnel.

Soon enough, I see another light. An Enter sign. I reach a door. I push through.

I'm back in the room, but this time I'm playing black. The clock says 1:01. And there's a guy on the other side pounding on the metal door, hollering, "What's going on?"

I move toward the chessboard. "I bet your name is Randy, right?"

He turns and looks at me. "Who are you? What's going on here?"

I've figured it out now. I've come through a wormhole or something. I've traveled back in time exactly one hour. I'm about to play my one-hour-earlier self, whose voice I've heard before—he sounds just like I do on a tape recorder. And I'm going to win.

I sit calmly in the chair. "What's going on here is that we play a game. Whoever wins walks out. Whoever loses . . . plays another game."

He just stares at me like a moron. I've been through this already, so I explain the rules, about winning and losing and the poison gas thing.

"How many games have you played?" he asks.

"One. Now sit down and play."

He sits down, thinks for a second, and moves his queen's pawn. I make the countermove, and we're launched. Inside I'm laughing. The poor guy is sweating for nothing. Sure, he'll lose this game and I'll escape. Next game, it'll be his turn. It's weird, but it's totally consistent.

At move fifteen, I push my king's bishop in line with my queen and sit back. My earlier self looks stunned. And I feel for him. I know exactly how he feels. He stares at the board for a long time.

Finally, I say, "Dude, you need to move." I'm getting impatient, drumming my fingers. I'm depending on this guy to lose so I can win. His turn will come, but he just doesn't know it yet.

He looks at the clock, and fear slides across his face. Did I look like that? He puts his hand on his queen's knight pawn and then takes it away. He moves his queen's rook across the back row to stand next to his other rook.

A sheet of raw panic slides through me. He can't do this! That's not what Alekhine played! This isn't the past I just played. In an instant, all my self-confidence is gone. I can't coast through this game. I've got to play. We've got twenty-five minutes left. When that time's up, one of us is going to walk out to freedom, and I want it to be me, because if I lose, I'll be stuck in some endless loop. I'll be playing forever, losing forever, playing . . .

Chess 4 Life.

How can this happen? It's not consistent. This isn't my past, this is . . . some other universe. Some parallel universe.

For a minute, I can't breathe, can't think, can't see. I'm freaking out.

"Dude, you need to move," my earlier self says. Only he's not my earlier self. He's some alternate universe guy. He's drumming his fingers on the table, leaning forward, looking confident. I stare at the board, and my whole brain is frozen. Five minutes tick by. Finally I move my knight up to attack his. It's a stupid move—I should have moved my pawn. We exchange knights, and then he captures my pawn with his bishop. Shortly, he's launched a vicious attack on my kingside.

I don't have the energy to fight this. I stare at the board. Minutes tick by. With thirty seconds to go, I tip over my king. "I resign."

The Science behind the Story

Wormholes, Choices, and Checkmate

“Chess 4 Life” asks more questions than it answers. Could it be? What if . . .? If you watch a science fiction series on TV, sooner or later you see an episode where one of the characters travels through time. The starship hits a wormhole or a cosmic storm, or light-speed travel slows down time.

Sounds good. But before we can understand a wormhole, we have to know what a black hole is. Actually, no one has seen one up close yet, but the theory is that some collapsed stars have squished together so tightly that their surface gravity won't let anything get out—not even light. Thus, *black* holes.

Now, the wormhole idea (it's just an idea) is simply two black holes put together. Traveling through a wormhole would be going in one black hole and out the other. And some scientists with good imaginations guess that time might be different on the other side. Why not? It makes for a few good *Star Trek* episodes.

There are some theories on paper, but no one claims time travel is real science. Even Einstein never suggested how to travel back in time. So time travel is a great “what-if?” that helps us focus on how important even the little things can be. In other words, there are *consequences* to everything, and if we make a different choice, different things could result. That's what time travel stories are usually about. They remind us that what we say and do matters.

The other thing to remember is how our God is outside time. He created it, after all—and the Bible says, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb. 13:8). So in that sense, we do know of one genuine time traveler!

"Nice game." He reaches across to shake my hand.

I shake with him, and astonishment flickers across his face when he sees the mole on my thumb. "You're . . . you're . . ."

"I'm your future. You've just made it out, and I'm in limbo."

"You mean like . . . forever?" Horror fills his eyes.

"Looks like it."

He's staring at me like he's killed me.

The clock tells me we've got eight seconds left. "Have a nice life." I stand up.

The buzzer goes off. "Five second warning!" I scream.

Then I'm running for my own exit. I bash through the door and slam it behind me. As I stagger through the tunnel or wormhole or whatever it is, I wonder what went wrong. How many of these parallel universes are there? Two? A hundred? An infinite number?

I'm stuck forever in Chess 4 Life.

I see the Enter sign and punch through.

I feel like I've been slugged. I'm playing black again. The clock says 1:01. My alter ego is pounding on the metal door, hollering, "What's going on?"

I lurch toward the chessboard. "I bet your name is Randy, right?"

He turns and looks at me. "Who are you? What's going on here?"

We go through the same rigmarole, with me explaining and him confused. Only this time, I'm just as confused.

"How many games have you played?" he asks.

I'm too embarrassed to admit that I've already lost two, that I may be doomed to play an infinite number. That I may be playing Chess 4 Life for the rest of my life. Great, I've achieved immortality. "Just . . . sit," I say.

He sits.

We play.

It's Alekhine versus Lasker again, a game I'm thoroughly sick of. I've lost it now from both sides of the board. I'm freaking out.

But so is my alter ego. After I move my king's bishop on move fifteen, he sits staring at the board, realization dawning. Again, I know exactly how he feels, but now that's no consolation. This guy could whip me. I could be here forever.

With twenty-five minutes left, I say, "Dude, you need to move."

He looks at the clock and flinches. He puts his hand on the queen's knight pawn. Moves it forward two squares.

A rush of hope jolts through me. He's following Alekhine. He's chosen to play safe. Chosen to lose.

I move my bishop.

Now the game plays out the way I want it to. I'm watching my opponent, and I see hope dying move by move. He's playing it safe. Forcing me to beat him. And I'm eating his lunch.

With thirty seconds left, he tips over his king.

I'm so relieved I could puke. I lean forward to shake. "Nice game, Alekhine."

He sees my mole and stares at me. "Who . . . who are you?"

"Listen, there's no time," I babble. "So just listen. I'm your future. The loser goes back in time and plays again. You'll get out of this if you just—"

The buzzer cuts me off.

I jump up. "Five second warning!"

Then I'm running to my exit door, I'm slamming through it, I'm bursting out into an empty fairground. There's nothing here. Zilch. I look at my watch. It's 1:00 p.m. on July 6. I can only hope it's the same year. A worm-

hole can take you anywhere. Something on the ground catches my eye. My cell phone.

I pick it up and see that it's still charged. I flip it open and call home.

"Hello, Ingermanson residence. This is John."

"John, what are you doing at my house?"

A holler pierces my skull.

I yank the phone away from my ear, but I can still hear John roaring, "Randy's calling! It's him! I don't believe it!"

Then my mom is on the line, and she's bawling her head off and blubbering, and it's just embarrassing.

Finally my dad gets on the line, and he's marginally calmer. "Randy, listen. Where are you? What have you been doing for the last two days?"

I swallow the brick that's sitting in my throat and try to sound like I'm in control. "Playing chess," I say. "Chess 4 Life."

Jason's Personal Survey Log 0017:0152:7003

I decided to challenge Talismort to a game of chess. We played for about ten minutes. I got the idea he was just being patient with me. In the end, he wiped me out with a couple of clever moves I'd never seen before. It was like playing against our ship's computer.

Talismort laughed, put his hand on my shoulder, and said, "Good game. I've been playing far longer than you have, son, but you show promise."

He walked across the hub. On the far side of the counter stood a glass jar. He waved his hand over it. Light flared inside it, illuminating a stone the size of my fist. The jar began to slowly rotate.

Amy wasn't impressed. "Another rock? No thanks. Geology's not my area of interest."

She can be such a pain.

Talismort gestured toward the specimen in the glass. "Ah, but how about paleontology? The study of ancient life?"

I crossed to the jar. The stone inside was slate gray with a few pockmarks here and there. As it turned in the greenish light, parallel lines came into view. Were they ribs? Marks of waves from some primordial ocean? Spines from a lizard's back? This was more than a stone. It was a fossil.

"What do you think it is?" Talismort asked.

"Looks like the legs of a spider," Amy guessed. But as she spoke, the stone turned farther, and we saw

wrinkles. Across the wrinkles were imprinted the pattern of flakes or scales.

“Or maybe,” Amy said, “something like a little armadillo.”

Talismort looked at me.

I shrugged. “Could be anything.”

“Yes, and that’s the beauty of it, isn’t it? Look again, and you see more. Look yet again, and you must change your mind! It’s a trilobite. But no, it must be an insect. Or perhaps an ancient reptilian bird.”

The stone offered a new face with faint segments and a bizarre fragmented lobe like a giant bug’s eye.

“Yes,” Talismort whispered, the petrified thing mirrored in his glassy eyes. “Lobes and fins, scales and bones. It could be anything . . . Sometimes you run across a fossil like that. Sometimes fossils give you bad dreams. Professor Martin Cole had a fossil like that.”