

Motivation

By Andrew Breslin

Is that a poison pawn? It's just sitting there looking helpless and far from home. I could just snatch it up. Just like that. But billions of lives could be lost by such impulsiveness. Better look more carefully . . .

Billions of lives, you heard me right. The evil deep-space entity calling himself Merf Stellar sits across from me. A foul, pustulate beast, emitting noisome odors, sounds, and the occasional effluence of fluid continuously. He is a loathsome and detestable creature. A pile of rotting entrails with a bad attitude.

He possesses terrible, unimaginable power. He's been known to obliterate entire galaxies just to impress women. One blink, and everything on this Earth could be gone. The human race, plants, animals, even tax records. He gives omnipotence a bad name.

Yes, Merf's power is almost unlimited. He lights his cigarettes with the sun. He exceeds the speed of light for kicks. He routinely violates the laws of man, God, and physics. He's also a damn good chess player. Damn good, but I'm just a little bit better.

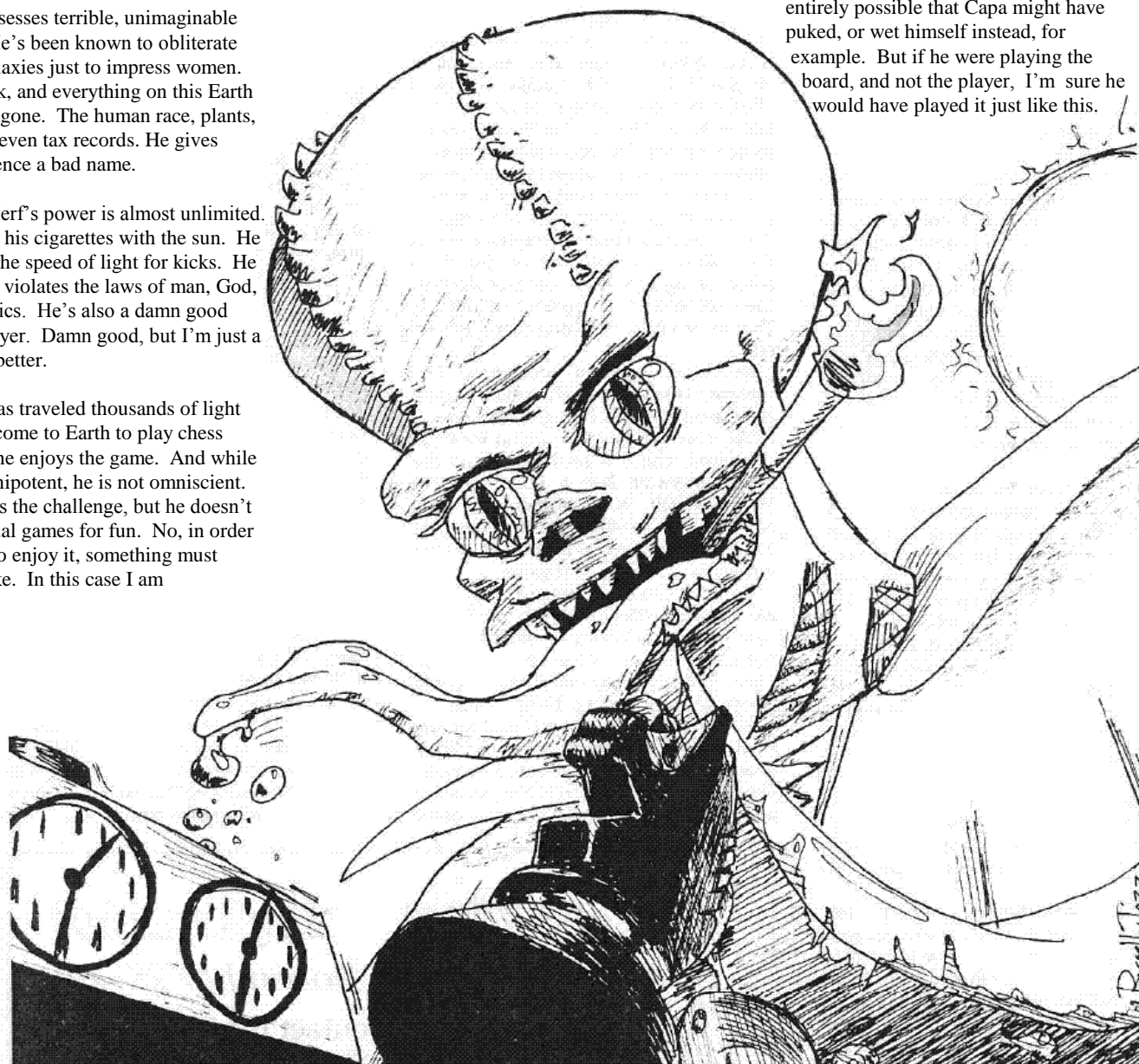
Merf has traveled thousands of light years to come to Earth to play chess because he enjoys the game. And while he is omnipotent, he is not omniscient. He enjoys the challenge, but he doesn't play casual games for fun. No, in order for him to enjoy it, something must be at stake. In this case I am

playing for the continued existence of all life on this planet. A far cry from the odd dollars for which I used to play in Washington Square Park, but the concept is the same.

Wait a second, I see it now. Yes, if I take that pawn he'll win the bishop in three moves. Clever. Very clever. I won't be barreling into your little trap, Merf. No, a conservative developing move seems more in order. Solidify my grip on the center. No glory-soaked tactical mayhem. Keep it positional. Merf hates it positional. Cosmic deities aren't noted for their patience.

Merf drew the black pieces and played Sicilian in reply to my King's pawn. Exactly the sort of opening one would expect from such a belligerent and bellicose beast. Things have started to get interesting. Material is essentially even, but unbalanced. Merf traded a bishop for a knight and has doubled my pawns in the bargain, but I'm not worried. Capablanca would have played it this way. When in doubt, I always ask myself, 'What would Capablanca do?'

The legendary Cuban genius never played noxious slimy space demons, however. Certainly not in any tournament matches, anyway. It's entirely possible that Capa might have puked, or wet himself instead, for example. But if he were playing the board, and not the player, I'm sure he would have played it just like this.



Merf banks heavily on the psychological factor. He makes casual, obvious moves via telekinesis, but when he does anything bold, aggressive, and/or unexpected, he always does it with an oozing tentacle. Sometimes he slams the clock with his long and thoroughly disgusting tongue. This is against FIDE rules, but people tend to let evil celestial gods do as they wish. I can't let it get to me. I'm playing for my planet here. Mom. Apple pie. Carbon-based life. No room for the heebeegeebees.

Merf has moved a knight, threatening a deadly fork. Must be careful . . . Defend against the threat without weakening my overall position . . . Yes, bring in the clergy . . . The bishop is the man for the job . . . A good move, I am sure. Merf seems puzzled. He's knitting what I can only guess is the equivalent of a brow. His face has flushed a deeper shade of purple. Always a good sign.

A foolhardy kibitzer mumbles the word 'queen' under his breath. He is transformed into a mango, which Merf devours voraciously. I can't say I disapprove. After a long think, Merf moves the queen after all.

Billions of people are watching and waiting. One false move and they'll never forgive me. They won't hold a grudge against me either, of course. Scattered sub-atomic debris cannot be vindictive, so at least I won't have to worry about that. Still, I am highly motivated.

It's time for something a little more aggressive. I've played this game passively. I've stopped all of his threats, but soon I may become stifled, my pieces gasping for air. Still, nothing too risky . . . It's a fine line between bold and vaporized.

A center pawn push beckons and I heed its call. Crossing the center, I have now placed a pawn firmly in Black territory. No immediate threats, but it does block some routes of escape should I choose to attack Merf's pieces later. The thought had crossed my mind.

I take a long overdue slurp of my beverage and await the next move. It's difficult to maintain composure. My fate if I lose will certainly be worse than that of the rest of the Earth. I heard that Merf played a game of Zakkonian Logicball on a small world in the Andromeda galaxy, and having won, sent the planet hurtling into a black hole, but transformed his opponent into a sentient toilet now serving the intergalactic sporting arena on Dykron VII.

Uh-oh . . . Why didn't I see that before? Multiple threats. Bishop attacks, skewering the queen and rook . . . He just has to drive the knight away first. Can he do it? Maybe, but I'm not going to make it easy. Oh, hurry up and move already, the suspense is killing me. Or better yet, run the clock down. That'd be delightful. Normally I find a game which is decided on time to be a disappointment. But to avoid global apocalypse, I can endure anticlimacticity.

Merf's tentacle undulates just a few inches above the board, teasingly. Then he brings it down and he's about to grab the bishop. Oh rapture! The bishop! If he moves that now, before driving off the defender he won't be able to make that deadly attack. In fact, there is nowhere that bishop can go right now that doesn't weaken his position. Ha! For an all-powerful entity, he's playing like a fish. Just a second before the tentacle touches the bishop, Merf's unsettling voice, which sounds like a dying warthog, only less melodious, is heard for the first time in the match. "J'adoube," he says.

The malicious beast is toying with me. If he had said "J'adoube" just a second later he would have had to move that bishop. We are playing touch-move, after all. There is a planet at stake, and even Merf respects the touch-move rule. But just by saying "I adjust" in French, everything changes. The rule was invented to allow players to position their pieces so that they are nice and orderly, sitting proudly in the centers of the squares they occupy, instead of haphazardly in the corners, threatening to defect to adjacent squares. Merf has transformed the rule into an instrument of torture. This incarnation of evil must be defeated.

He swings a knight into action. The pressure is mounting. The knight threatens my own, which is unguarded, alas. If I take it or flee, my queen and rook get skewered and I'll probably lose the knight anyway. Not a good day for Mother Earth. What bothers me even more is that this will probably be the last game of chess ever played. It wasn't even a particularly good game.

No, no, I can't give up so easily! All of life on Earth is depending on me. The fat lady has not yet sung, though I hear a few practice arias in the dressing room. There must be a way out. Alekhine could have found something. Think! Think!

As I spot the move I can almost see the single beam of light come down from

heaven, and hear triumphant music playing, such as is heard in the movies at moments of divine intervention. I move my queen, trying to convey a sense of infinite reluctance. I act as if I have resigned myself to the fact that I have lost material and am making a hopeless attempt to cut my losses, knowing full well that it will be fruitless and that my planet will be decimated and I myself will know infinite, unending torture.

If the academy awards extended to chess playing, I'd certainly be up for a 'best actor' nomination. Merf didn't suspect for a moment that I had anything up my sleeve, that my mind held anything but the painful sensation of the grip he had on my short and curlies. He takes the knight, with a tentacle of course, slaps the clock with his tongue and grins.

And then I make the unexpected move. The move that would have made Paul Morphy proud. The move that saves the planet. I slide the queen down taking a pawn at the other end of the board, checking his king. He has no choice but to take with the king. A queen sacrifice. The single most beautiful type of move that exists in chess, in my opinion. Merf is flabbergasted. Never in a million eons was he expecting that. His shock is indicated by emission of a truly pungent stench, causing an entire row of reporters to gag, but to me it smells like victory.

He takes the queen and is checked again by my rook, which slides over to continue the barrage. Merf can see that both my bishops can be called upon to finish him off. It's a mate in two. I have done it. I have vanquished the nefarious monster. I have saved the entire world. I will walk in glory for all my days to come and be remembered forever. Children, streets, bridges, and chess tournaments will all be named after me. My social life will improve immeasurably. Merf, acknowledging defeat extends a slimy tentacle toward me . . .

I shake Fred's hand. "Very nice," he says, "I didn't see that coming."

"It was pretty subtle," I reply.

"You up for another?"

"Sure. Let me get some more coffee."

Fred sets up the board as I make my way toward the counter of the café. The loser always sets up the board when we play. It provides some motivation.