

The Library of America • Story of the Week

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(1910–1992)

Knight to Move

THE tall, long-haired girl in the trim olive uniform with the black spiral insignia was tapping very lightly in a dash-dot-dot rhythm on the gallery's golden rail where her elbows rested.

It was her one concession to nervousness. Though Rule Number One of her training had been that even a single such concession can get you killed.

The beautiful hawk face hooded by black bangs searched the golden hall below, where a thousand intelligent beasts from half as many planets were playing chess. The pieces were being moved and the buttons of the time-clocks pressed oftener by tendrils, crablike pincers, and prosthetic devices than by fingers. Dark-clad referees and ushers silently walked on tentacle tips or soft-shod hooves—or feet—between the tables and among the spectators packed in the stands to either side.

Just an interstellar chess tournament, Swiss system, twenty-four rounds, being conducted on the fifth planet of the star 61 Cygni in the year 5037 A.D., old Earth Time.

Yet *inside* the girl's mind a muffled alarm bell was ringing, barely in the conscious area.

While *outside*, a faint whining buzz somewhere far off in the hall reminded her of a wasp in the rafters of the huge dark barn behind the Minnesota farmhouse where she'd been raised. She wondered briefly about the insect life of 61 Cygni 5, then slapped off that train of thought.

First things first!—meaning the alarm bell.

She glanced around the almost empty gallery. At the head of the ramp down to the hall were two robots with a stretcher and a yellow-beaked nurse from a planet of Tau Ceti, who bobbed her red topknot and ruffled her feathers under her

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white smock. The girl almost smiled—surely chess wasn't that dangerous a game! Still, when a thousand hearts, some old, were pounding with tension. . .

Only her green eyes moved as she searched out the two players who not only looked human but actually were from Earth—a man and a woman, one currently in thirty-seventh place, still with a chance to end in the money. She felt a small flame of sympathy, but instantly extinguished it.

An agent of the Snakes should never feel sympathy.

Her nervous tapping speeded up as she searched her tidy mind for the cause of her alarm. It did not seem to involve any of the silent, furiously thinking beasts, humanoid or inhuman.

Could it be connected with the game of chess itself? With the coming of star-flight, chess had been discovered to exist with almost identical rules on at least half of all intelligent planets, spread by forgotten star-traders, perhaps. There was something about one of the moves in chess—

Under her uniform and lingerie, between her breasts, she felt a large spider moving. No mistaking that quick clingy tread on naked skin.

She did not flinch. The prickly footsteps were pulses on a narrow metal plate pressing against that sensitive area of her body—pulses which warned of the approach of the body or projection of a friend, a neutral, an unknown, or—in this case—an enemy.

It was a rather common device. For that matter, the being approaching her felt the scaly gliding of a snake high on the inside of his thigh, and he reacted as little.

The girl instantly stopped her dash-dot-dot tapping, although it had been soundless and her other arm had concealed her black-gloved fingers. While watching in the polished black leather of her gauntlet the casual approach of the being along the golden rail, she yawned delicately and tapped her lips with the Cordova-scented back of her other glove. She knew it was corny, but she loved doing it to enemy agents.

The man stopped a few inches away. He looked twice her age, but fit and youthful. His gray-flecked hair was cut close to his skull. He wore a sharp black uniform with silver insignia that were eight-legged asterisks. He had three times as many

silver decorations on his chest as she had black iron ones. To most girls he would have seemed a shining silver knight.

This one ignored his presence. He studied her shoulder-length, gleaming hair, then rested his own arms on the golden rail and gazed down at the chessplayers too. Man and girl were the same height.

"The beasts beat out their brains for an empty title," he murmured. "It makes me feel delightfully lazy, Erica, sister mine."

"I'd rather you didn't trade on the similarity of our first names, Colonel von Hohenwald," she replied softly.

He shrugged. "Erich von Hohenwald and Erica Weaver—it has always seemed to me a charming coincidence . . . er—" He smiled at her. ". . . Major. When we meet in the open, in uniform, on a peaceful mission, it seems to me both agreeable and courteous to fraternize. Or sororize? *Geschwisterize*? No matter how much throatcutting in the dark we must do the rest of the time. Now how about a drink?"

"Between Snake and Spider," she answered fiercely, yet still softly and still without looking at him, "there can be nothing but armed truce—with eyes wide open and finger on the trigger!"

The Spiders and Snakes were the two great warring undergrounds of the Milky Way galaxy. They warred in time, seeking to change the past and future to their advantage, but also in space. Most intelligent planets were infiltrated predominantly by one force or the other, though on some planets, like Earth, they struck a balance and the Unending War was hotter. 61 Cygni 5 was a neutral planet, resembling an open city. Like racketeers turned respectable, the Spiders and Snakes operated here openly—by a mutual agreement which neither side really trusted. Behind the mask of amity, they were competing for such planets; on them the silver asterisk of the Spider and the black spiral of the Snake were recognized, respected, and shunned.

Each underground recruited agents from all times and races—agents who seldom knew the identity of more than a few comrades, a scatter of underlings, and one superior officer. Erica and Erich, though on opposite sides, had both been recruited from Twentieth Century Earth. It was a common

experience for an agent to find himself five thousand or many more years in the future, or past. Some agents hated their work, but punishment came swiftly to the traitor or slacker. Others gloried in it.

"*Teufelrot!*—what a murderous slim Amazon you are!" the Spider Colonel commented.

"The Amazons cut off their right breasts to be able to pull their bows to the fullest bend," the Snake Major retorted evenly. "I would do the same if—"

"But—*Gott sei dank!*—you haven't," he cut in. "Erica, they're magnificent! And did they not tauten a trifle when my insignia walked between them? That's where you wear your warning plate, do you not?"

"I hope yours bites you!"

"Don't say it!" he protested. "Then I wouldn't be able to appreciate you with any gusto. Erica, must you hate twenty-four hours a day? It hasn't injured your loveliness yet, not quite, but—"

He laid a scarred hand against her black-gloved one. She snatched it away and sharply slapped his fingers, her face still bland and looking out.

"*Verdammt!*" he cursed lightly, but there was pleasure in his voice. "My dear green serpent with black fangs, you're much too serious for truce-times. To begin with, you wear too many medals. If I were you, I'd throw away that Ophidian Order of Merit. In fact, if we weren't being watched, I'd rip it off you myself."

"And you with your silver chestload? Just try it," she breathed, her body poised, her black fingertips hovering on the gold rail.

The other looked oddly, almost worriedly, at her profile, then went on, now banteringly, "My dear Major, how does a firebrand like you—a puritan, yes, but a firebrand also—manage, without going crazy from boredom, to endure *this*?" He spread the fingers of one hand toward the floor below. Played at fifteen moves an hour, chess is a slow game. Not a piece was grasped—by tentacle or other member—not a button was pressed while his fingers stayed outspread. "And it goes on for a month!" he finished. Then his voice became elaborately sar-

donic. "For refreshment do you perhaps visit the Rose Hall, where the great bridge tournament is in progress? Or do you recruit your patience in the Black Hall, where they endlessly play that peculiarly intricate Centaurian backgammon?"

"I dislike bridge, I can barely tolerate chess, backgammon I despise," she lied flatly. She was still searching for the thought about chess that his arrival—*only* a coincidence?—had chased away.

"Perhaps you go too far in undervaluing games," he said, seeming now to shrug off all feeling and become philosophical. "To begin with our own planet and time of recruitment, who can say how much of the shared passion for chess had to do with healing the differences between Russia and the West, or how long the whist mind and bridge mentality maintained British might—or what k'ta'hra did for Alpha Centaurus Two?"

She lifted, dropped her shoulders. The alarm bell was still dinning faintly. She must search again, thoroughly, before the elusive thought dived back forever into her deep unconscious.

And the wasp was still faintly whining somewhere, as if in endless search.

The enemy Colonel lectured on: "The games played at the three tournaments here at 6I Cygni 5 represent the three basic types found in the known universe. First, the track games like backgammon and k'ta'hra and parcheesi and dominoes and an American money-fraught monstrosity I remember was called Monopoly. In those games there is a one-dimensional track or trail along which pieces move according to the throws of dice or their equivalents. No matter how much the track curves, or even knots, it remains one-dimensional.

"Second, there are the board games like chess and checkers and Go and Martian jetan—two-dimensional."

Erica put in, frowning slightly, "It's odd that most intelligent planets should be addicted chiefly to board games or track games. On most planets where chess flourishes, k'ta'hra languishes. And vice versa. I wonder why?"

He shrugged. "Finally, there are the card games, where the essential element is the marked counter, the piece of unknown value, whether it be a card or a hinged Barnardian egg or a

bamboo-and-ivory Mah-Jongg block. Hearts, pinochle, skat, and the emperor of them all, contract bridge.

“Then there are the mixed types. Cribbage to some degree mates the card game with the track game, while I recall one named Spy—our game, eh?—in which pieces of masked value are moved on a board. But in the aggregate—”

At that instant the whining buzz grew louder. And louder.

Coming straight at Erica across the hall, increasing in speed every instant, was what looked like a rather large wasp.

The Spider Colonel grabbed at her, but she had moved like a snake away from him down the rail.

The insect shifted its aim, still driving straight at her.

A flat gray gun, snatched from a breakaway pocket at her right hip, was in her hand. She fired.

There was no sound, but the insect veered sharply as the tight inertial beam missed it by a centimeter. It whizzed between them across the golden rail.

The Colonel had his own gun out. He aimed and shot.

The insect veered downward, striking the floor brightly tessellated with red and gold.

There was a sharp explosive *whisht!* A blinding blue stiletto of flame a foot long lanced out.

Then there was only a fuming narrow groove in the gleaming tiles. Across it, Erica’s eyes met her adversary’s for the first time.

“An assassination missile,” she said flatly.

“That’s clear enough,” he agreed. “Shaped charge.”

From the hall below there came a mutter of questions and hushings—guttural and whistled, musical and atonal. Inhuman dark-clad figures were coming up the ramp.

“And set to home on me,” she said.

“I tried to throw you out of the way,” he said.

“Or hold me still when it struck. My flesh would have muffled the explosion and the flash. Then your fake nurse and stretcher-bearers—” She looked around. The two robots and the bird-woman were gone.

The dark figures that had mounted the ramp were moving toward them.

“I can explain—” the Colonel began.

“You can explain this explosion to the tournament officials!”

She darted past the arresting arms of a gold-badged multi-brach from Wolf I to the express elevator, stabbed the button for Floor 88 and jumped into the empty shaft.

The field seized her and whipped her up. Through the shaft's transparent back she had quick glimpses of scarlet sea and yellow land between the blurs that were downward-whipping passengers. At Floor 43 there was a squeeze. She wondered, *What attack now? A centipede down my back?* But the field's cybernator juggled the crowding passengers with ease.

At 88 she bounced out. Her door-spy murmured "All clear" so she didn't search her room with its conventional bed, dresser, micro-viewer, and TV-phone with dangling soft-sheathed metal power-arms, used for long-distance check-signing, handshakes, and anything else.

She headed for the bathroom, stripping off her uniform. Her Order of Ophidian Merit caught her eye. Her thumbnail dented the black metal. It was the thinnest shell, all right, holding almost certainly the electronic bug on which the assassination missile had homed. When had the switch been made?—and why had von Hohenwald . . .? She cut off that speculation.

She turned the shower to warm needle and hesitated. Then with a shrug she reached behind her back, loosed the narrow straps of her warning plate, quickly swabbed it and the straps with eau de cologne, and hung it on the towel rack.

Directly the cleansing, mind-clearing tropical rainstorm hit her, the thought about chess she'd been hunting for sprang up crystal clear.

Next instant the bathroom filled with white light flaring in the dot-dot-dash rhythm of the current Snake identification code. It was the TV-phone call-light, which she'd earlier set to "dazzle."

She ran to it eagerly. *This* time her report would knock back their ears. She switched on voice and—after a glance at her dripping nakedness—caller-to-receiver sight only. She could see, but not be seen.

With holographic transmission, the TV screen was like a window into another room. Erich von Hohenwald's scarred face looked through.

She damned herself for her non-reg removal of warning plate.

She said, "How did you break our ID code?"

He grinned, not quite at her. "A stethoscope against the gold rail one hundred feet away. You slipped, Major. Sorry to interrupt your bath—that's a shower I hear, isn't it?—but . . ."

Two of the three dangling power-arms straightened abruptly, swung blindly sideways, hit and imprisoned her wrists. The third fumbled for the button that turned on receiver-to-caller sight.

Without pausing to damn herself this time, she jabbed out a foot and toed off the power in the arms. They fell away.

Rubbing her wrists and glancing down at the water pooling on the expensive carpet, she smiled a bit smugly and said, "I'm glad you called, Colonel. I've just had an insight I want to share with you. You were talking about basic games. Well, the chessboard is clearly a spider's web with crisscross strands—in Go you even put the pieces on the intersections. The object of the game is to hunt down and immobilize the enemy King, just as a spider paralyzes its victim and sometimes wraps it in its silk. But here's the clincher: the Knight, the piece most characteristic of chess, has exactly eight crooked moves when it stands in the clear—the number of a spider's crooked legs, and eyes too! This suggests that all chess-playing planets are Spider-infiltrated from way back. It also suggests that all the chessplayers here for the tournament are Spiders—your shock battalion to take over 61 Cygni 5."

Colonel von Hohenwald sighed. "I was afraid you'd catch on, dear," he said softly. "Now you've signed your abduction warrant at the very least. You may still be able to warn your HQ, but before they can come to your aid, this planet will be in our hands."

He frowned. "But why did you spill this to me, Erica? If you had played dumb—"

"I spilled it to you," she said, "because I wanted you to know that your plot's been blown—and that my side has already taken countermeasures! We've made a crooked Knight's move too. Has the significance of track games never occurred to you, Colonel? The one-dimensional track, sinuously turning, obviously symbolizes the snake. The pieces are

the little bugs and animals the snake has swallowed. As for the dice, well, one of the throws is called Snake Eyes. So be assured that all the k'ta'hra players here are Snakes, ready to counter any Spider grab at 6I Cygni 5."

The Colonel's mouth almost gaped. "So you damned Snakes were plotting a takeover too! I must check on this. If you're lying... But even if you are, I'm forced to admit, Major Weaver, that it's just about the finest improvised bluff I've ever had thrown at me."

He hesitated a moment, scowling, then snappily lifted his hand to the edge of the close-cropped hair in a congratulatory salute.

She smiled. Now that she'd cut him down to size, she could see that he was quite handsome. And he'd done his best to warn her about the homing bug in her O.O.M.

She said, "It's no bluff, Colonel. And I must admit that this time both you and I, enemies, have worked together to achieve this . . . stalemate."

While saying that, she found her black lace negligee and fastened it closely around her damp body. Now she stooped to the TV and switched on receiver-to-caller sight.

He smiled at her, a bit foolishly, she thought. A touch of disappointment, a touch of appreciative delight.

She straightened her shoulders, snappily lifted her hand—to her nose, which she thumbed at him.