Winning Chess Strategies: Exploiting Weaknesses

Cyrus Lakdawala

POPULAR CHESS

About the Author

Cyrus Lakdawala is an International Master, a former National Open and American Open Champion, and a six-time State Champion. He has been teaching chess for over 40 years, and coaches some of the top junior players in the US.

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Introduction

Old guys like me always believe that "ago" is so much better than "today". I remember when chess engines and databases became available in the 1990s, and I foolishly thought: "This great leap forward will usher in a Golden Age of easy study!" I was wrong. Today, the misguided tendency is for club-level players to study data in bulk rather than focusing on easy-to-grasp concepts, which leave an imprint on the mind and whose patterns we are capable of remembering.

The aim of this book – and this series in general – is to master chess themes efficiently by understanding concepts rather than dealing with concrete details. The key focus of this book will be technical endgames.

Technical chess is a job that many of my students believe is beneath them. They always want to win with brilliant attacks, but those, of course, don't happen that often. It is not a coincidence that the mastery of technical positions is the bread and butter of many professional players. Having good technique means scoring excellently against club-level opposition.

In large part, we will try to clarify an ever-confusing question: what exactly is a weakness in chess? Weaknesses generally arise as unintended consequences from either overestimation of our position or a lack of vision of how the optimistic present will soon become the unpleasant future. That is obviously not a fully satisfactory answer, but that's the catch: there isn't a simple one.

Correctly identifying weaknesses is a somewhat advanced job in chess, and it requires practice and experience. So, breaking down the aims of this book, we could note:

1) How to identify a weakness

Sometimes we can believe a square, pawn, or piece is weak, yet if there is no concrete way to take advantage of it, then it's not a real weakness and we misidentified it.

2) How to formulate a plan after we correctly identify weaknesses

Chess grants us all the freedom of religion when it comes to style and our choice of openings. However, when it comes to plans in critical positions, only one religion is allowed: the correct one. There is no greater danger to our position than a partially logical plan, which can be just as bad as no plan at all.

3) How to defend our own weaknesses

We will also learn how to triage problems in order of precedence, from the most dire to the least. When defending our weaknesses, we learn to endure all hardships – hunger, thirst, and poverty – and hunker down with the stubborn, survivalist mindset of the defender. To do this, we must anticipate the opponent's plans and come up with survivable counters.

4) How to convert our opponent's weaknesses into a full point

If we gathered all our shed tears after we threw away winning positions – allowing opponents to draw and even win – they would equal the water of the Earth's combined oceans. One goal of the book is to train ourselves in the most difficult thing in the world: efficiently exploiting the opponent's weaknesses and winning a won game.

Cyrus Lakdawala,
San Diego,
June 2025

Chapter One

The Principle of Two (or More) Weaknesses

You've managed to create a single weak pawn in the enemy camp. The trouble is, you attack it three times, and the opponent defends it three times. How do you make progress?

The way forward is to try and create a second (or even third) weakness, which then distracts the opponent from the first. When we manage to create multiple weaknesses in the enemy position, our opponent doesn't know which direction we come from, and the defense stretches to breaking point.

An analogy would be the bad hombre in an old black-and-white Western movie, who walks into a bar and then begins to bully a random, mild-mannered patron by shooting bullets just inches from the patron's feet. Then the bad hombre announces: "Dance!" That is what it feels like. The defender doesn't know in which direction you will shoot, but you do!

What we attempt to learn in this chapter is how to destroy the opponent's defensive harmony and coordination by switching back and forth between targets.

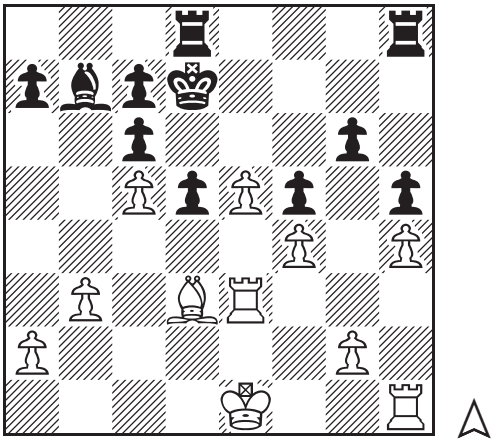
Game 1

Garry Kasparov – Etienne Bacrot
Sarajevo 2000

Black's position is a portrait of pain, for the following reasons:

1) Black's dysfunctional bad bishop is a sullen presence, since it is blocked by its own pawns fixed on the same color. In the meantime, White's bishop radiates power, gazing in both directions.

2) Black suffers from weak dark squares. Why? Because Black's bishop and most of his pawns control only light squares.



3) White's protected, passed e-pawn is an asset, while Black's passed d-pawn is unable to move forward without getting lost.

4) White's king has the option to travel up the board to d4, while Black's is stuck in a defensive posture.

5) Black is saddled with multiple pawn targets, the main ones being g6 and a7. You may be asking: "How is a7 a target?" Well, White has access to the dangerous plan of b3-b4 followed by ♖a3. Black may be forced to push the pawn to a6, after which Black's bishop becomes an even more miserable creature than it is now.

6) Black is stuck with a hole on g5. Why is this important? Because White can post his rooks on g5 and g3, after which Black must watch out for bishop sacrifices from White on either f5 or h5.

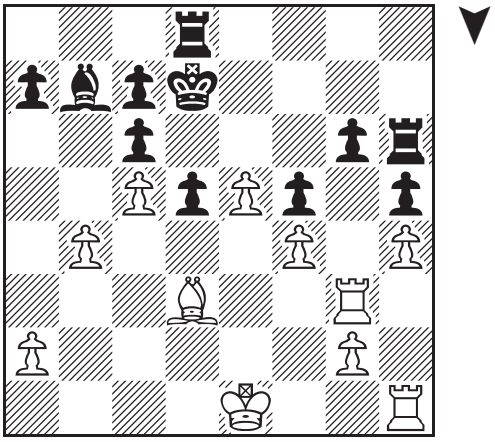
Conclusion: Black is busted. Still, Kasparov's win won't be so easy, since Black will try to defend all his weaknesses and try to erect a fortress.

24 ♖g3 ♖h6!

Those who are hunted crave darkness. This isn't exactly the ideal post for a rook to lounge in, yet it's Black's optimal defensive idea.

On 24...♖hg8? Bacrot probably saw the direct refutation: 25 ♖g5 ♗c8 26 g4! (crashing through; 26 ♖h3 looks logical, but after 26...♔e7 27 ♖hg3 ♔f7 Black breaks the pin and, for the moment, keeps his position together) 26...hxg4 27 h5! when Black's kingside structure collapses.

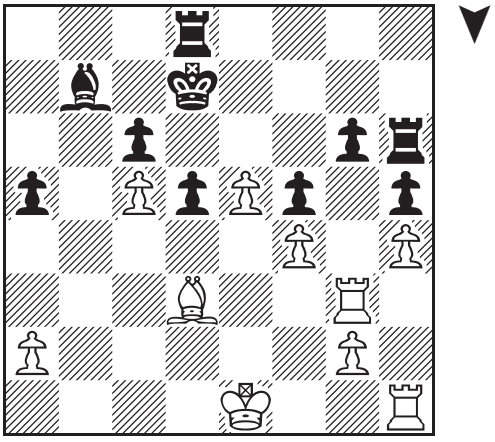
25 b4!



Please meet Odin, the most powerful deity of the chess pantheon. Kasparov understood chess a bit less than Caissa, but a bit more than all other humans of his time, with the exception of Anatoly Karpov. The idea behind this powerful move is to clear the path for a future ♖a3. The timing is also important, as against anything else, Black would have the option of playing ...a7-a5.

25...♔e6

25...a5 is met with 26 b5 cxb5 27 ♗xb5+ c6 (unfortunately, this is forced; the more natural 27...♗c6 loses to 28 e6+, breaking the connection between the black king and bishop) 28 ♗d3.



The opening of the queenside benefits the side that doesn't have a rook on h6, and Black is completely lost: for example, 28...♖b8 29 ♔d2 ♗c8 30 ♖b1. After a swap of rooks, White's king can walk over to a4 and then pick off Black's weak a-pawn. Or White can simply move his g3-rook to a3, with similar results. Black cannot hold on to two weaknesses that are so far apart.

26 ♔d2 ♖a8

Of course, this is just for show, since Black isn't really threatening to play ...a7-a5.

27 ♖b1!

The g3-rook is perfectly placed, so the other rook starts a journey towards a3.

27...a6

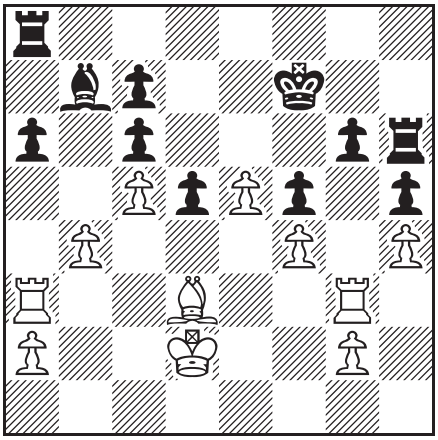
The black bishop is in a sorry state, since all but one pawn sits fixed on the wrong color.

27...a5 28 b5 is equally hopeless.

28 ♖b3!

Destination: a3.

28...♔f7 29 ♖a3



Black is a beaten-down nation, yet there remains reasonable hope for a fortress draw since, for now, White's pieces lack a clear method of entry. However:

1) Bacrot's pieces are tied down to defending the weaknesses on a6 and g6.

2) There is potential for sacrificing a piece on f5.

3) If all else fails, White can play for a pawn break on b5.

29...♖hh8 30 ♖g5!

This way Black must watch out for potential piece sacrifices on f5 or h5.

30...♖h6 31 ♔c3

When our opponent is doomed to passivity, we should make all the small available improvements before delivering a blow. Why not put the king on the more active d4-square?

31...♖b8 32 ♖a5!

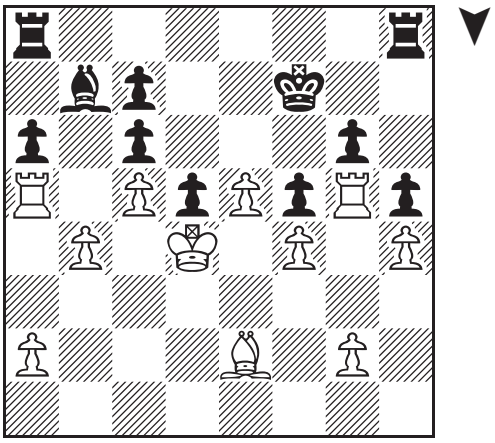
Threatening ♗xa6.

32...♖a8 33 ♔d4 ♖hh8 34 ♗c2

Kasparov shuffles. This is partly seeking to reach the time control on move 40, which then

adds a full hour to his clock and gives him time to leisurely work out the details. But it is also a good strategy on its own, as one black inaccuracy is all White needs to pounce.

34...♖ab8 35 ♗d3 ♖a8 36 ♗e2!



Clearing the third rank. This is White's best possible set-up. The king is on the best available square, the bishop targets both flanks, and the third rank is cleared, meaning that both rooks can swiftly move from one wing to the other.

36...♖hb8

This doesn't make much sense, but it's not like anything does.

On 36...♖h6 White switches his focus to the queenside with 37 ♖g3!. Our car's rearview mirror announces the dire warning: "Objects are closer than they appear!" Black's a-pawn is doomed when the g3-rook swings to a3.

37 ♖a3!

Now that all of Black's forces are concentrated on the queenside, Kasparov switches back to the kingside, preparing ♖ag3.

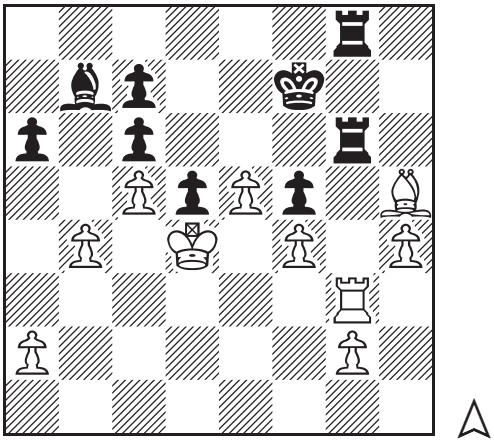
37...♖h8

A sad necessity.

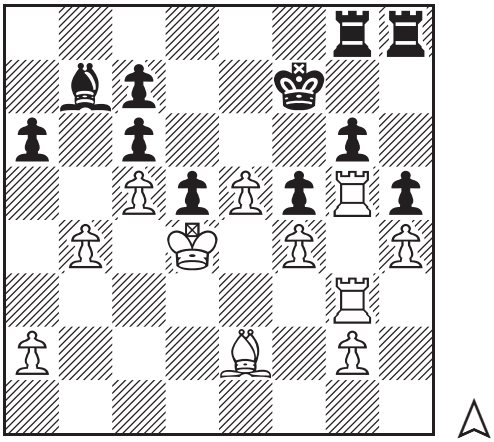
If 37...♗c8 then the threat to the b4-pawn can be ignored with 38 ♖ag3!. The point is that after 38...♖xb4+ 39 ♔d3 ♖xf4 40 ♖xg6 Black must give up an exchange by putting the rook on g4, or else White has a winning attack.

38 ♖ag3 ♖ag8

38...♖h6 also loses, to 39 ♖xg6! ♖xg6 40 ♗xh5 ♖ag8.



41 e6+! is a classic case of overloading the defender. Black's king is tethered to the g6-rook and after 41...♔f6 42 ♖xg6+!? ♖xg6 43 e7! ♖g8 44 e8♕ ♖xe8 45 ♗xe8 the endgame is obviously hopeless for Black.



Exercise: There will be no happy fortress draw ending for Black. Do you see White's combinational breakthrough idea?

Answer: Sacrifice/overloading/simplification.

39 ♗xh5! 1-0

Bacrot did not see any reason to continue. Black's problem is that taking the bishop either way allows White the same combination: 39...♖xh5 loses to 40 ♖xh5 gxh5 41 e6+! ♔f8 42 e7+! when Black collapses, and 39...gxh5 40 ♖xg8 leads to the same thing. Instead, trying to hold on to the g6-pawn with 39...♖h6 loses in many ways, among them 40 e6+! ♔f6

41 ♖xg6+!, transposing to the note on 38...♖h6.

Pay close attention to how Kasparov sent the defenders scurrying back and forth, between attacking the kingside weaknesses on g6, f5, and h5, and the a6-pawn. Eventually, Black's coordination got messed up and allowed White a winning breakthrough combination

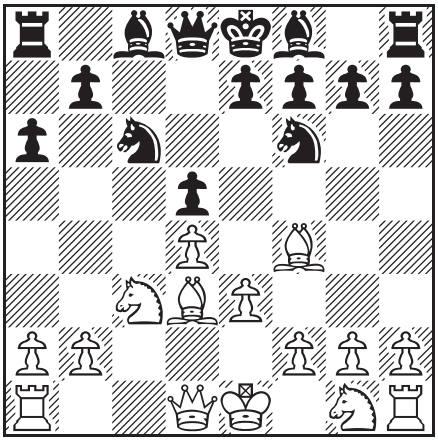
The big difference between the two camps was the number of weaknesses, and that's also exactly what allowed White to be so much faster in traveling from one side of the board to the other. When you don't have to be tethered to your own weaknesses, you experience a completely different level of freedom.

In the following game, Black's pieces lost all their mobility and were pretty much frozen in place on the queenside. Even so, this wasn't enough for White to win until he began operations on the kingside, in search of a second weakness.

Game 2

Alexander Ipatov – Jaime Cuartas
Barbera del Valles 2008

1 d4 d5 2 c4 c6 3 cxd5 cxd5 4 ♗f4 ♘c6 5 e3 ♘f6 6 ♘c3 a6 7 ♗d3



7...g6?!

Fianchettoing the bishop is positionally questionable when White has a stable pawn on d4.

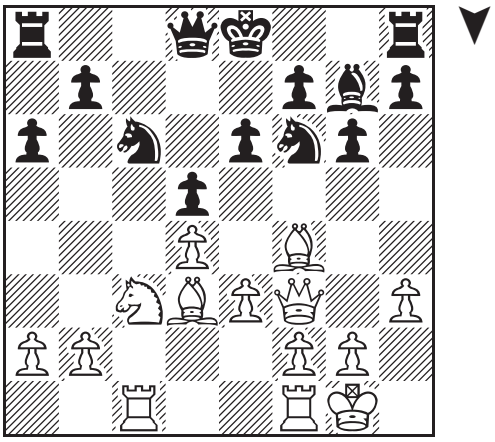
8 ♘f3 ♗g4

Black doesn't mind giving up the bishop pair, since the game, for now, is closed. However, as we learned elsewhere in this series in *Exploiting the Bishop Pair*, the structure remains somewhat fluid and despite the current symmetry, it will at some point change when the bishops will get to prove their value.

9 h3 ♗xf3 10 ♕xf3 ♗g7 11 0-0 e6

Black usually castles, yet ...e7-e6 generally needs to be tossed in at some point.

12 ♖ac1



12...♘h5?!

Principle: A knight on the rim is dim (or grim!). This doesn't make sense, since White's bishop has a place to hide on h2.

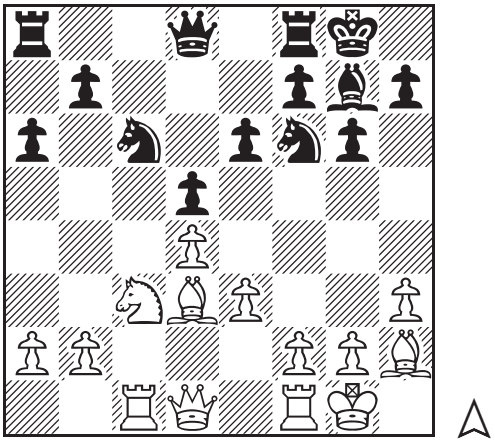
Sometimes it's best to just walk away from confrontation, saying "This is not my fight." Indeed, Black is better off with 12...♘d7!, aiming to castle. If 13 ♗d6 then Black can play 13...♗f8. Even the immediate 12...0-0 is a better approach, despite the somewhat annoying pin with 13 ♗g5.

13 ♗h2 0-0 14 ♕d1

Returning pieces to their initial squares is hard for some people. If we think logically about it, the queen wasn't doing much on f3 and will be put to more efficient use on the queenside.

14...♘f6

Admitting that the little excursion to h5 was a waste of time. 14...e5? only gets Black a doomed isolani: 15 dxe5 ♗xe5 16 ♗xe5 ♘xe5 17 ♗c2!. The bishop goes to b3, and Black is unable to keep the d5-pawn. The only try would be 17...♘f6 18 ♗b3 ♘c4, but then 19 ♘xd5! is possible anyway.



15 ♘a4!

Both c5 and b6 are weak.

15...♘d7

Practically forced. If the white knight is allowed to reach c5, then the black pawns on b7 and a6 come under serious pressure.

16 ♗d6

The immediate 16 ♕b3! is a bit more accurate and forces 16...♖a7. The downside of the game move is highlighted by Black's 18th move.

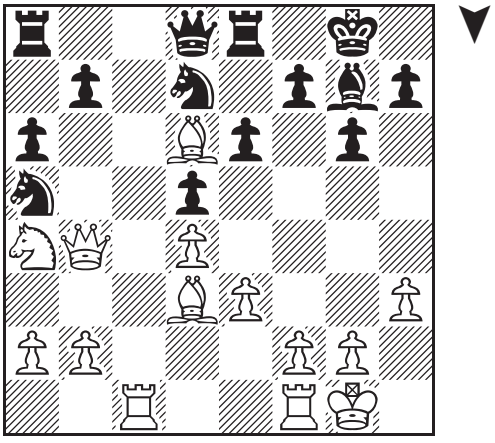
16...♖e8 17 ♕b3

Attacking b7.

17...♘a5

17...♖a7 is a not-so-tempting option.

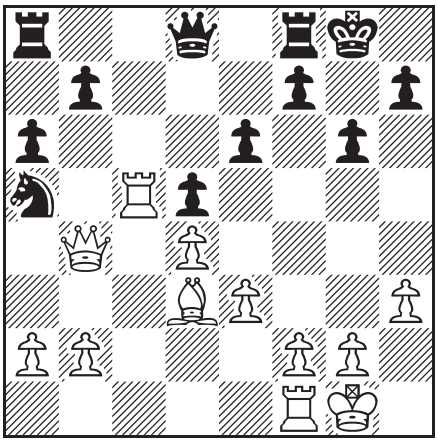
18 ♕b4



18...♗f8!

Principle: Eliminate your opponent's bishop pair by swapping one of them off. This is the only move not to lose. Without the inclusion of 16 ♗d6 ♖e8, this wouldn't be available, and Black wouldn't have a remedy to the threat of ♗c7, picking up the knight on a5. That's why 16 ♕b3! couldn't be answered with 16...♘a5. However, one could argue that it wasn't necessary to spot this tactical detail in order to understand that ...♖f8-e8 is more useful for Black than ♗h2-d6 is for White. The black rook, anyway, has to move from f8, as the bishop on g7 is terrible and needs to be rerouted to the a3-f8 diagonal. You could even claim that, if this is the case, then Black shouldn't fianchetto the bishop in the first place, and, well, you'd be right. I've already said that 7...g6?! isn't the most logical approach.

19 ♗xf8 ♖xf8 20 ♘c5 ♘xc5 21 ♖xc5



21...♕d6!

Your new refrigerator is on the fritz, in a state of broken/not broken, but it is under warranty. When you call for the repair person to come over, the company agrees but adds: "We can't guarantee either the date or the time." This is what it feels like when we defend in that unpleasant twilight zone of OK/not OK, as Black does here. Black is defending well and has decent chances to hold the game. The knight, which hangs two different ways, doesn't really hang, and Black gets to develop the queen, which previously seemed impossible.

22 a3!

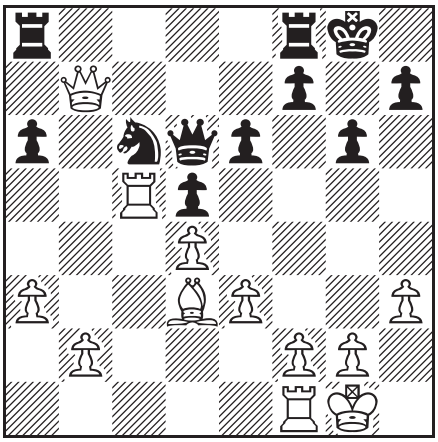
White protects the queen, dealing effectively with ...b7-b6 and threatening to take on a5.

The exchange sacrifice involving 22 ♕xa5? b6 is possible, but completely unnecessary.

22...b6?!

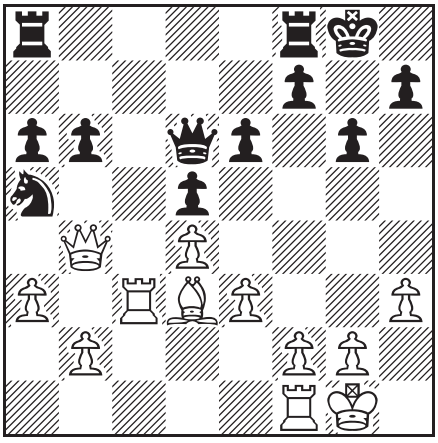
One of the only two possible moves, but unfortunately a mistake. With one move, Black creates three weaknesses on a6, b6, and c6. When pressed, we must hang in there, since there is no other place to hang. The engine would still hold the resulting position, but in practical terms, this may be the spot where Black lost the game.

The correct solution was 22...♘c6!, but after 23 ♕xb7 Black needs to find more strong moves to survive.



The correct defence runs: 23...♘e5! 24 ♗e2 ♖fb8! 25 ♕c7 ♕xc7 26 ♖xc7 ♖xb2 27 ♖e1 ♘c4!. Forced moves can still be strong ones. Principle: Rook endings can be drawish, even when one side is down a pawn, as long as the material-down side's rook or rooks are active. After 28 ♗xc4 dxc4 29 ♖xc4 ♖a2 30 ♖a4 h5! 31 ♖c1 ♖b8 32 ♖xa6 ♖bb2 33 ♖f1 ♖b3 Black will reach a 5 versus 4 single-rook endgame, which offers decent practical chances to hold.

23 ♖c3!



Now that the black b-pawn is on b6 instead of b7, Black cannot clog the c-file by placing a knight on c6, which means that White will gain complete control of the only open file. In general, that is one of the most significant types of positional advantage anyone could ever hope for.

23...♖fd8

After 23...♕xb4?! 24 axb4 ♘b7 25 ♖c6 Black is also in trouble.

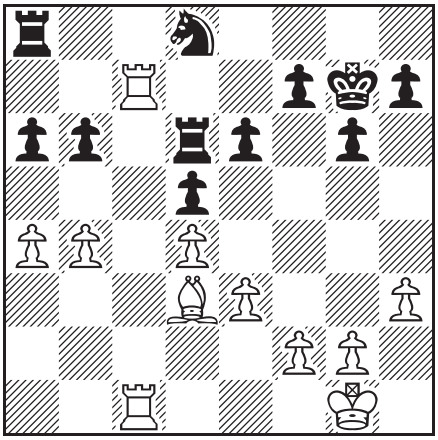
The engine suggests 23...♘b7! 24 ♕xd6 ♘xd6 25 ♖c6 ♘c8, which looks awful, but it is at least hard to break down, and Black can hope to hold after slowly improving his solid position with ...♖d8 and ...♔g8-f8-e7. Still, White's advantage is indisputable.

24 ♖fc1 ♔g7 25 ♕xd6 ♖xd6 26 b4 ♘b7

Richard Reti warned us never to fianchetto our knight! Black would be in great shape if he had time for ...b5, ...♖d7, ...♘d6, and ...♘c4, but, of course, that's not happening any time soon.

26...♘c4? 27 ♗xc4 dxc4 28 ♖xc4 is completely lost for Black, since in addition to the extra pawn, White has absolute control over the only open file.

27 ♖c7 ♘d8 28 a4



Let's assess:

1) The bad news for White is that Black's position is quite solid, as the f7-pawn is safely guarded by Black's knight and king, and the a6- and b6-pawns cannot be attacked more times than they are defended.

2) Black's position is super passive, with a sad, immobile knight versus White's powerful bishop. Black's rooks are also pretty much frozen in place. Only the black king can move.

28...a5?!

Black wants to get his a6-pawn away from its current light square, where it serves as a target for the d3-bishop. Forcing White to put more pawns on the color of his bishop is usually a good idea, isn't it? In this case, it's a definite no. The most important ingredient in a successful defensive effort is the ability to create counterplay, and after this, Black is doomed to passivity.

28...♔f8?! can be met with 29 b5!? when denying the exchange with ...a6-a5 would lead to the game structure, and 29...axb5? 30 ♗xb5 is even worse, as the bishop from b5 has the ability to go to e8, meaning that the final piece Black could move, the king, is also frozen.

The only way to create counterplay was 28...b5!!, fixing a target on the face of the pawn on b4. White's initiative has a harder time gaining traction after this trick. The b-pawn isn't really hanging since Black will regain it by piling up rooks on the b-file. White needs to play 29 a5!, but then Black has better chances to save the game, since if either of White's rooks move off the c-file, Black can play either ...♖c6 or ...♘c6.

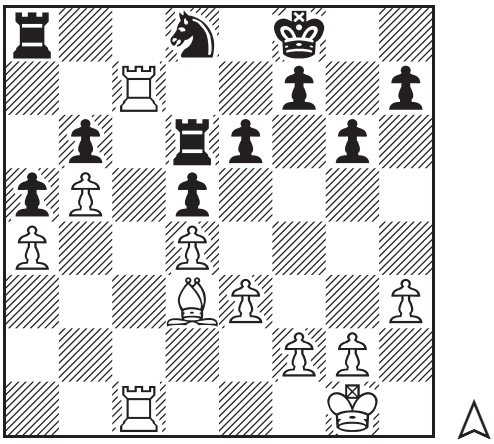
29 b5!

There are two effects from this move:

1) The b6-pawn is a fixed target.

2) Black is forever deprived of either ...♖c6 or ...♘c6 should one white rook move off the c-file, as any slim chances of finding counterplay through these resources are eliminated.

29...♔f8



OK, Black is doomed to passivity, but how is White going to break through? Is the weakness of the b6-pawn enough? No, it's not.

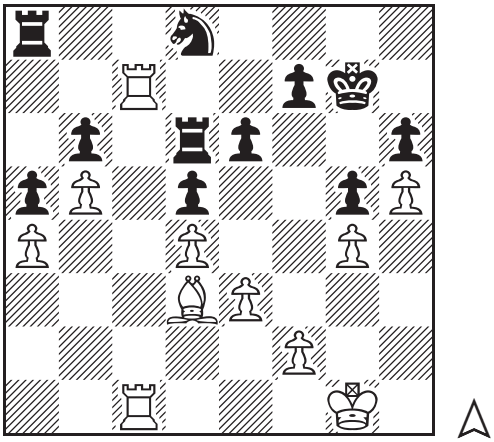
30 g4!

White begins the kingside expansion project. He needs to create a confrontation that leads to a second weakness on the kingside.

30...h6 31 h4 g5 32 h5!

The h6-pawn becomes a fixed weakness on the kingside.

32...♔g7



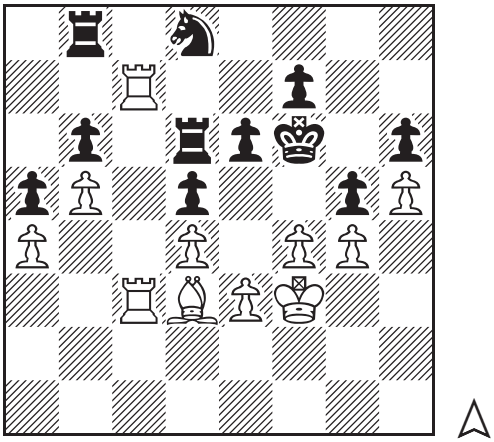
33 f4!

Creating as much confrontation on the kingside as possible. Black's army, stuck on the queenside, is strikingly unable to participate in the fight for the kingside.

33...♔f6 34 ♔f2 ♖b8 35 ♔f3 ♖a8

35...♖b7 36 ♖xb7 ♘xb7 37 ♖c7 transposes to the game.

36 ♖1c3 ♖b8



37 ♖a7!

With the scary intention to double rooks on the seventh rank. White needs to trade a pair of rooks to make progress.

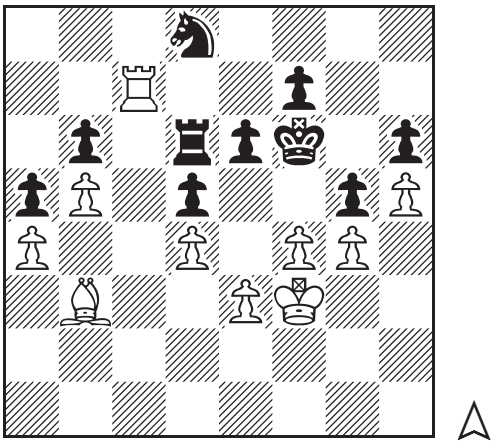
37...♖b7

37...♔g7 38 ♖cc7 is also hopeless for Black, who faces the newly created threat of ♗g6.

38 ♖xb7 ♘xb7 39 ♖c7 ♘d8 40 ♗c2! ♔g7

40...gxf4 makes the win easier for White, as after 41 exf4 Black's king must move to g7 all the same, and White just gained the possibility to create a passed pawn and simultaneously create a path for his king to infiltrate the black camp: 41...♔g7 42 g5 hxg5 43 fxg5 ♔g8 44 ♔f4! (threatening ♔e5, trapping Black's rook) 44...e5+ 45 ♔xe5 ♖e6+ 46 ♔xd5 with an easy win for White.

41 ♗b3 ♔f6



Exercise: Come up with a plan for White.

Answer: Step 1: Black is in a semi-zugzwang, and we need the king to move to g7, so we waste a tempo by shuffling the bishop to a2.

42 ♗a2!

To refuse to decide upon a decision is, in a weird way, a decision. We are programmed to believe that waiting is synonymous with failure, which is the exact opposite of the truth when it comes to zugzwang. Now, Black's king is forced to back down to g7.

42...♔g7

Step 2: A pawn breakthrough.

43 e4!

White threatens to trap Black's rook with e4-e5, so exchanging is forced.

43...dxe4+ 44 ♔xe4

Do you see Black's problem? There is no remedy to the coming ♔e5. That's why GM Ipatov, despite being 15 years old when this game was played, had the prophetic idea to put his bishop on the a2-g8 diagonal before playing e3-e4 – the d5-square is under control.

44...gxf4 45 ♔e5

That's it. Black must resign since there is no place for the rook to go.

45...♘b7

Hey, I distinctly remember saying, "Black must resign!" Our move choices grow incredulous when we are out of reasonable options. Of course, this gives away a full piece.

After 45...♖d5+ 46 ♗xd5 exd5 White wins, so long as he doesn't fall for the knight fork cheapo on e6.

46 ♖xb7 ♖d8 47 ♗xe6 1-0

OK, that's enough.

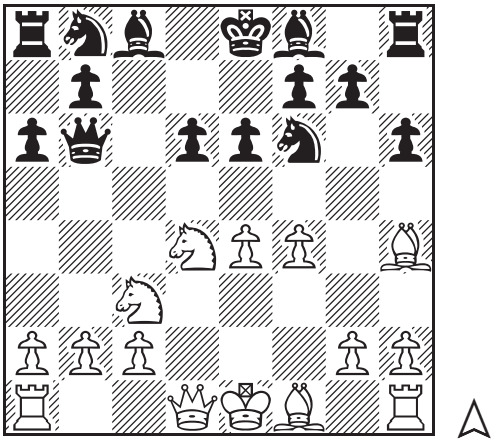
The single weakness on b6 wasn't enough for White to win. He only made progress when he opened a second front on the kingside with 30 g4!, which eventually led to the creation of a weakness on the other side of the board in the shape of the pawn on h6. In the end, Black's defense was stretched to breaking point, and the previously passive pieces on d6 and d8 were the ones that paid the price.

The following game doesn't neatly fall into the sphere of a single chapter, since it involves holes, bad minor pieces, a weakness in a color complex and, finally, the most important factor, the principle of multiple pawn weaknesses.

Game 3

Sergey Karjakin – Maxime Vachier-Lagrave
London 2017

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♘xd4 ♘f6 5 ♘c3 a6 6 ♗g5 e6 7 f4 h6 8 ♗h4 ♕b6!?



MVL's specialty used to be this delayed version, with ...h7-h6 and ♗g5-h4 tossed in, until 2018. Then, he migrated to the immediate 7...♕b6.

Is it better to play many different openings and be a Jack of all trades, who is difficult for opponents to prepare for? Or should we cultivate a narrow/predictable opening repertoire,