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The Marostica Chess Festival under Attack

NEW IN CHESS

When they arrived at Ronald Meraner's parking lot, Godfried parked his car facing the exit so they could make a quick getaway if necessary. They walked past a lawn with sprinklers. In the center stood a statue of a rearing horse perched on top of a pedestal. Strategically-placed cameras covered the entire estate, which, apart from a wrought iron gate, was completely fenced in.

'We can forget about using the element of surprise to our advantage,' he said to Gino. 'He can see us coming a mile away.'

'I should have known, *amico*. Do you see any sign of life?'

'There's a silver-gray Ferrari Enzo in front of the door. Even with money problems, that asshole still manages to keep up appearances.'

Godfried felt his heart pounding as he pressed the doorbell and a red light came on.

'If a 5-foot-tall Korean guy wearing a bowler hat opens the door, we'll know for sure that we're in a movie, Gino.'

But the door remained closed, and a scratchy voice came from a loudspeaker. 'An unexpected visit. Surely this can't be a coincidence! We met for the first time a day ago, and now you're already paying me a visit. And in the company of Inspector Cancellara, another unfortunate man from a bygone era. Gentlemen, do come in!'

The door swung open, and Ronald Meraner came towards them with outstretched arms. 'Welcome, welcome. Let me guess. You were wondering what I have to do with the death of Oskar Brugger, with whom you shared a pleasant exchange just 24 hours ago and who is now, unfortunately, no longer with us...'

Godfried was surprised by the audacity of the elderly horse tycoon, who must have been taken aback by their arrival. The wily old fox effortlessly took the initiative before they had even set foot inside the building.

'Apologies for our unannounced visit, sir...'

Meraner's manicured hands nonchalantly waved away the apology. 'Absolutely tragic. Intensely sad. Pitiful. A disaster. I have no words for it,' he said, contradicting himself. 'We will of course make sure that his family gets all the support they need, but sadly that won't bring Oskar Brugger back... Am I right in assuming that your unexpected visit is due to his... uhm... passing?'

He inspected a Davidoff cigar and carefully cut off the end. A sweet smell of caramel and cocoa filled the living room. Gino looked disgusted.

'We were wondering if you might be aware of any connection between Oskar's violent death and the accident that befell his brother. Do you see a link between the two deaths?'

Meraner seemed to have an idea.

'Well, yes, detective, that's true... Good old Andreas. He drowned unexpectedly last year. Do you happen to know that man was a sublime cook? If he hadn't gambled away most of his salary in the casinos, he could have been the owner of a Michelin-starred restaurant, or a chef in a Michelin kitchen. The lord works in mysterious ways, gentlemen. But what on earth could be the connection between these two catastrophic events?'

'Do you have any other members of the Brugger family on the payroll?' asked Godfried.

‘Not off the top of my head,’ Meraner said apologetically. ‘More than four hundred people work at the equestrian center, and that’s not even counting the back office. So, as you can imagine, I don’t know all my staff by name.’

‘I understand, but if two of my employees had been murdered in quick succession in my company, two brothers no less, I would at the very least ask myself whether or not it had something to do with me.’

‘What makes you think Andreas was murdered? As far as I know, he just fell ill while he was swimming.’

‘That’s not what Oskar told me,’ Godfried said bluntly. To his satisfaction, he saw Meraner go slightly pale beneath his fake tan.

‘Gentlemen... gentlemen... he was a grieving man, mourning the loss of his brother. Those accusations are completely unfounded and cannot be substantiated in any way. And from a respected police officer no less... well... a formerly respected police officer... I don’t quite understand...’

He cut the last sentence short midway. Godfried could see that Gino had taken this snide comment to heart but was trying to stick to his role as the good cop, before abruptly interrupting Meraner.

‘We would like to talk to you, *Herr Meraner*, about the awful threats that have recently struck Marostica, for the second time in a year now. First a kidnapping, and now blackmail. How kind of you to offer our city council the services of your security personnel. This will come in handy if the living chess game is to go ahead, after the terrible threats that have been made to our city.’

Meraner refused to be ruffled. ‘I feel it is my duty, my dear sir. I hold every town in the Veneto region dear to me, but Marostica has a special place in my heart. This is also partly because I have been making my carefully selected Lipizzaner and Frisian horses available to them for many years now, to add some extra glamour and pres-

tige to the event. But the main reason for my affection is that, throughout my life, I have always deeply cherished the beautiful game of chess, like a form of art.'

Meraner pointed to a skillfully painted portrait of himself that hung next to a few framed diplomas. Judging by his smile, he still had his own teeth. His hair was blow-dried into a comb-over: an elaborate structure with thin strands of hair attempting to mask the baldness, not to mention trying to hide the obvious inferiority complex, all held in place with a thick layer of hairspray. His hand hovered over a position on the chessboard as if waiting for divine inspiration.

'Do you see those ivory miniature pieces from China beneath the glass dome? Enchanting, aren't they? And please, take a look over there... Are you familiar with Duchamp - Marcel Duchamp - a contemporary of Picasso? I have given that painting a place of honor as the centerpiece of my collection. I consider myself fortunate that I've been able to acquire this unique work of his.'

Above an immense dresser hung a canvas depicting two chess players focused solely on the game they were engaged in.

'Duchamp was one of the founders of modern art, but also a famous chess player who played for the French team,' Meraner continued. 'During his honeymoon, he was so busy solving chess problems that one night when he was fast asleep, his wife, out of sheer desperation, glued the pieces to the chessboard. Shortly afterwards, the marriage was annulled.'

Meraner hiccupped as he began laughing, slapping his thighs in amusement. 'The same thing could have happened to me, gentlemen, if the first Mrs. Meraner hadn't traded me in for her strapping young tennis instructor three decades ago.'

Godfried felt it was time to poke the bear a little. It didn't look as if they were going to get any coffee anyway.

He laid his cards on the table: 'I believe your involvement in the crisis in Marostica might simply be a way to keep the inside track on the measures the authorities are taking. I consider your offer to make your security team available to be nothing more than a cheap ploy to gain favor before the upcoming elections. Well, I can assure you, *Herr Meraner*: when we're done with you, your dwindling popularity will be the least of your worries.'

Any fake pleasantries the horse tycoon had shown were now well and truly out the window. He glared at Godfried, as if he was looking at something that had crawled out from under a rock and needed to be stamped out.

As they had agreed, Godfried went to the toilet so that Gino could apologize for his companion's rude behavior. *Does soft muzak playing in the background as you lower the seat make taking a number two that much better, compared to a regular toilet?* Godfried couldn't help but chuckle at his own musings. When he rejoined the little group, Meraner looked at him with a little less disdain than before his quick bathroom break.

'Your friend just told me that you are still suffering from the aftereffects of your kidnapping last year. I'm sorry to hear that. I will overlook your doubts and suspicions about my motives, but you must believe me when I say that you hurt me with your distrust with regard to my intentions.'

'I don't have to accept anything from you, *Herr Meraner*. You're sitting here playing the generous benefactor, but this phone,' he waved his iPhone, 'contains detailed information about land maps of the Asiago Plateau, proving that you own large plots of land there.'

Meraner immediately became defensive.

'What are you implying? How is that of any relevance whatsoever?'

He narrowed his eyes and then laughed with relief, acting as if he had suddenly remembered some trivial moment from his past.

‘But of course, you’re right! An old investment that never paid off. Is there a date on those papers? I must have bought that land a lifetime ago. But I’m afraid I still don’t see the connection...’

Godfried and Meraner continued to stare each other down, before Gino spoke up. ‘Mr. Meraner, with the help of Godfried Vos, I have managed to determine the location where he was held captive by Andreas Brugger last September: in a small building that was constructed on your land. To be clear, Andreas was the deceased brother – the one who did not like swimming – of your groundskeeper Oskar Brugger. Oskar was murdered yesterday after you saw him talking to Godfried.’

Meraner rose from his seat, but Gino interceded. ‘Please, relax. If we had any malicious intent, we would not be sitting here. Instead, you would have had a visit from the Marostica police. No one knows what we have discovered. No one even knows we are here. Your secrets are as safe with us as the Berlin Defense in the Spanish Opening.’¹⁹

Meraner appeared to calm down for a moment, but then decided to go on the offensive. ‘Do you really think, Mr. Cancellara, that I regularly inspect eight thousand hectares of wild land to make sure there is no criminal activity taking place? I admit, about a third of the area around Asiago is my property. But you can’t hold me responsible for a couple of crooks who decide to make use of the vast emptiness of the Plateau.’

The wily old fox is also quick-tempered, Godfried thought.

Gino laughed with mild derision. ‘So you’re pleading ignorance. I’ve heard it all before. I would expect more from you, *Herr Meraner*. Do you think this act will hold up in court?’

The policeman paused emphatically. 'But maybe that won't be necessary. The only reason my friend and I have come to Belluno is to make you an offer you can't refuse.'

Meraner's thin legs shook as the mafia jargon sank in. This was the moment to play bad cop again, Godfried decided.

'Gino, I think we're wasting our time here. Mr. Meraner doesn't even want to hear about how he can save his own skin. He'd much rather be put under a microscope for the next few weeks...'

This was a crucial moment, he realized. Meraner would either take the bait or show them the door.

'What is it that you want?' sputtered the horse tycoon. 'And how do I, supposedly, save my skin? And who is putting me under a microscope? What proposal do you have for me?' He casually studied his fingernails, as if he didn't really care what his guests had to offer him, but his hands were trembling.

Gino presented their plan.

'We have strong suspicions, *Herr Meraner*, about your involvement in the murders of Andreas and Oskar Brugger. These suspicions are so convincing that a good friend of Mr. Vos, who works for the national news channel in his country and reported on his kidnapping, would very much like to devote an entire news broadcast to the current events taking place in Marostica. One phone call and she will fly to Verona, meet a colleague from the RAI television station there, and together they will interview Godfried in front of the remains of the location where he was abducted, on your property. It will be quite the spectacle, you know. I hope you have a good PR team. They should definitely start preparing for the worst. I predict that after this report, your name will be all over the news everywhere. Right before an attack on the living chess game is dominating the headlines, the supplier of the horses, the well-known politician Ronald

Meraner, turns out to be at the center of a scandal. It doesn't look good, does it?'

'Yes, yes,' Meraner nodded impatiently. 'I understand that you are trying to blackmail me - me, a hard-working local businessman. And you dare accuse me of blackmail?! Nevertheless, tell me, how do I prevent my good name from being dragged through the mud?'

He was sniffing at the bait. Now it was Godfried's turn again. He tried to chuckle falsely, as he thought a seasoned criminal might do.

'Don't you understand? We want money. We want a share of the settlement money Marostica will have to pay to ensure the chess tournament goes ahead unhindered. What are you going to do to put pressure on the organizing committee? I'm sure you can think of something to settle your debt with the mafia. My kidnapping cost me a million last year, a fortune. My good friend here is struggling to give his children the education they deserve after a lifelong criminal attacked him, or should I say, 'a local businessman attacked him'? I'm sure you don't want your house besieged by *paparazzi*, or the financial police coming to seize your records. Or the paramilitary police investigating a burned-down shed on the Asiago Plateau, not to mention your equestrian center. If you pay up, we will keep quiet. That's the offer we're putting on the table. If you refuse, you're done for. If you accept, we have a deal, provided you convince us that we can trust you.'

Sitting back in his leather armchair, the horse tycoon lit his Davidoff again. He stared thoughtfully at Godfried, and then at Gino, and back again, as if trying to read their minds. Then he nodded, as though he had made his decision, before rising from his seat.

'Gentlemen, I need to freshen up. Excuse me for a moment.' Meraner scurried out of the room, frantically puffing on his cigar.

Gino hissed at Godfried and put his finger to his lips. Was it possible Meraner suspected that they were wearing a wire? Before he could think of the answer, four burly men – in uniforms from the *Centro Hippico* – entered the room. Behind them shuffled the little man himself, as if he were driving a four-horse carriage.

‘Gentlemen, this won’t take long... It’s pointless to resist. Each of these men can control a bucking horse with his bare hands.’

They were immediately grabbed and searched. The recording equipment was ripped from Godfried’s body, removing a strip of chest hair as well.

As they were pushed towards the door, they heard Meraner crow: ‘Apart from these little stories you have concocted, you have nothing at all. And if you get any more big ideas, my lawyers will know where to find you. My PR department will indeed be busy. Soon I will be attending the rehearsals of the living chess game, together with the clients from my therapy center. Would your reporter like to come along to cover the story?’

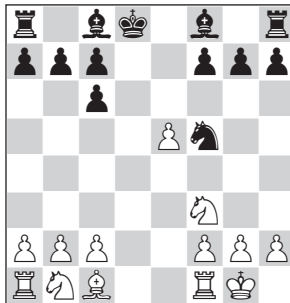
His boisterous laughter turned into elaborate coughing that forced a pause before Meraner added: ‘Now get out of my house.’

19.

The Berlin Defense (page 174)

Harry Nelson Pillsbury – Emanuel Lasker St. Petersburg 1895

The *Berlin Defense* – also known as the *Berlin Wall* – is a variation of the *Spanish Opening* or *Ruy Lopez*. The first moves are: 1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 ♘f6. Here, short castling is most commonly played, despite the threat to the e4-pawn. The *Berlin Wall* arises after 4...♘xe4 5.d4 ♘d6 6.♙xc6 dxc6 7.dxe5 ♘f5 8.♚xd8+ ♚xd8.



The Berlin Defense was used a lot by Emanuel Lasker. As an 11-year-old boy, Lasker was sent by his father from Prussia to Berlin to become independent. He earned a living by playing chess in coffeehouses. He quickly developed into a world-class player and defeated the then World Champion William Steinitz in a match in 1894. Lasker remained World Champion for no less than 27 years. In 1921, he was dethroned by José Raúl Capablanca. The Berlin Defense fell into disuse, but in 2000 Vladimir Kramnik won the world title from Garry Kasparov by reviving the Berlin Wall with Black.

The most beautiful game Emanuel Lasker ever played with Black, according to the man himself, was in a Queen's Gambit against the American Pillsbury:

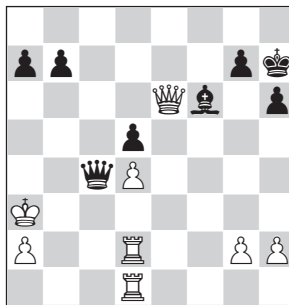
1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.♘f3 c5 5.♙g5 c5xd4 6.♚xd4
 ♘c6 7.♚h4 ♙e7 8.0-0 ♚a5 9.e3 ♙d7 10.♙b1 h6 11.cxd5
 exd5 12.♘d4 0-0 13.♙xf6 ♙xf6 14.♚h5 ♘xd4 15.exd4 ♙e6
 16.f4 ♚ac8 17.f5 ♚xc3 18.fxe6



18...♚a3

The rook sacrifices itself for the second time. Now it must be taken, otherwise 19...♚xa2 follows.

19.exf7+ ♚xf7 20.bxa3 ♚b6+ 21.♙b5 ♚xb5+ 22.♙a1
 ♚c7 23.♚d2 ♚c4 24.♚hd1 ♚c3 25.♚f5 ♚c4 26.♙b2 ♚xa3
 27.♚e6+ ♙h7 28.♙xa3



Here Lasker announced mate in five moves:

28...♚c3+ 29.♙a4 b5+ 30.♙xb5 ♚c4+ 31.♙a5 ♙d8+
 32.♚b6 ♙xb6 mate