



STEPHAN SCHMIDT
DIE SPIELE / THE GAMES

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Prologue

Mozambique, 1994

It appeared, at first glance, to be no more than a regular, minor demonstration: perhaps three hundred people, mainly men, moving through the city centre of Maputo, fists raised and chanting slogans. Several carried drums, others beat disused petrol canisters as they marched. Passers-by paid the march little attention, only a handful of drivers shouting out things that sounded, as they drove past, like curses to Thomas Gärtner, although unfortunately he spoke no Portuguese. It was his first visit to Mozambique. The newspaper had sent him to report on the UN Peacekeeping mission as it came to a close, and he had learned of the so-called 'Madgermanes' protests only last night by pure chance.

At ten o'clock in the morning, the city was already blanketed in oppressive heat. Many of the streets lay in ruins after years of fighting, and beyond the city centre the paved streets trailed off into sandy tracks where teenagers sold spoiled fruit or bundles of fire wood. It was nothing like Cape Town, where Gärtner had spent the last six months living in all the comfort afforded by the generous budget for research and travel available to him as a correspondent. It was a dream job, an unexpected boon, and one he was eager to prove himself worthy of. And how hard could that be, even for someone as inexperienced as him, when he was in a continent full of stories unfamiliar to anyone back home.

Half an hour later, he had filled two rolls of film and was digging the third out of his camera bag. His short-sleeved shirt clung to his sticky skin.

Why the men were called 'Madgermanes' he could only guess, but he found himself more interested in their story than in the assignment that had brought him here in the first place. They had worked for years as contract labourers in East Germany and had been thoroughly exploited by both their own government and that of East Berlin. A large portion of their wages had been withheld and used to pay off Mozambique's debts to its socialist sister state. Upon returning to Mozambique, the men found that, instead of accumulated wages they could put towards starting their future, they

had *nothing*. Exploited, deported, betrayed — the headlines seemed to write themselves in Gärtner's head as he followed the bizarre demonstration along. The participants wore jerseys from a range of German football clubs, waved flags with the black, red and yellow bands of Germany (sometimes with, sometimes without a hammer and sickle), and made an enormous amount of noise, which was nonetheless drowned out by the din of the traffic. At the head of the procession was an exceptionally large man, who seemed to be acting as the group's leader. He spoke German with a Saxon accent, as Gärtner had had occasion to learn the night before. Pure coincidence, this. Exhausted and annoyed after an interview with a government spokesperson who had parroted empty phrases at him for two hours, Gärtner had been passing the *Jardim 28 do Maio* park when he had heard a man's voice saying, in German: 'They fucked us over, so we fuck them right back. Simple.'

The speaker turned out to be a giant of a man, over two metres tall, broad shouldered and about thirty years old, a half-dozen men crouched around him on the ground. He wore a football jersey that Gärtner could only identify as he moved closer: Lokomotive Leipzig. It turned out to be an easy task to engage the man in conversation.

'Cape Town, eh?' the man said mockingly, when Gärtner had introduced himself. 'If you're going to Africa, might as well get the first-class experience.'

'The flight connections are good.'

'Especially to Europe. What brings you here?'

'ONUMOZ.' It was the cumbersome acronym of the UN peacekeeping mission that had been intended to stabilise this country ravaged by civil war. On the tails of the mission, Mozambique was teeming with NGOs and experts with deep pockets which were quickly emptied, and bright minds full of plans that ran aground just as quickly. The man made a dismissive gesture. 'They funnel money into a corrupt system and — would you look at that? Out comes even worse corruption.'

'A system that fucked you over?' Gärtner asked, with interest. 'How so? Tell me about it.'

It took the man barely a quarter of an hour to sketch out the last ten years of his life. Seven of them had been spent as a labourer in the Leuna chemical plant near Leipzig. He had been dismissed after the fall of the wall and was deported shortly before re-unification. Since then he had been attempting, in vain, to recover the money he had naively sent back home during his time working. Or some of it, at the very least.

'So where's the problem?' Gärtner pushed, and received the same answer he had heard so often in the last few days that he understood it, even in Portuguese:

'*É complicado, amigo.*'

'Why don't you turn to the German government?'

'Which one?'

'There's only the one, now, to my knowledge.'

'Exactly. It was the other one that was responsible for us.'

'That may be, but if you speak to fans of VFB Leipzig today they'll claim they were the ones who almost won the European cup in '87. You understand what I'm saying? The heir inherits all, the glory and the trouble.' It wasn't a convincing analogy, but it served its purpose. In an instant, the giant set aside his sceptical expression and extended his hand. 'Charles Murandi.'

'Pleased to meet you.' Gärtner felt, briefly, as through his hand was clamped in a vice.

'I was there in the stadium for the semi-final against Bordeaux.'

'They say there were over a hundred thousand people there.'

'Best night of my life. You're an Ossi, too?'

He almost felt inclined to say yes. He liked the sound of it — that 'too' coming from the mouth of this black African man.

'No, I'm not. Just circling back to your issue, though...'

But Murandi wasn't prepared to drop the topic of football that quickly. He recited the order of players in a penalty shoot-out like it was a poem. He was not just remarkably large, but also articulate and funny, and didn't sound at all like an unskilled worker, despite his coarse turns of phrase. He rested a hand on Gärtner's shoulder as they spoke, as if they had known each other for years already. There was alcohol, too, mainly vodka and cans of beer. A circle of listeners began to form around them, and when Gärtner eventually got on his way two hours later he promised to attend the demonstration the next morning.

That was how it had started. After all, he told himself as he loaded up the third roll of film, reporters often stumble across the best stories entirely by chance.

The sun was high in the sky when, two hours later, the march made its way back to the starting point in the park, which was already coming to be known informally as the *Jardim do Madgermanes*. They were entering the fourth year of protests, Gärtner was told, and he invited Murandi to a street cafe in the old market to learn more. While they ate chicken with piri-piri sauce and drank beer, his new acquaintance relayed the sobering facts. The general public showed no interest in their case, and the demonstrators had no idea how to give weight to their demands. 'We're outcasts,' he said. 'Odd fish, strangers in our own country. Nobody cares what they did to us.'

'It's not enough, in the long run, just to raise a fuss in public. You need to make it clearer who you are and what you want. What does Madgermanes mean, exactly?'

Originally it had been a mocking name, Murandi explained, given to them by others. 'It means *those who have been in Germany*, in the sense of: piss off back there, you bums.' The word came from the Bantu language, but the 's' at the end appeared to be Portuguese, and nobody knew where the 'd' in the middle had come from. 'It's a word that doesn't really exist,' he concluded through a full mouth. 'Just like we're not really supposed to exist.'

'Can you tell me why a guy like you ended up as a labourer in a chemical plant?'

'As opposed to becoming a millionaire, you mean?'

'For example. Or a teacher, an engineer, a doctor.'

Murandi licked his fingers clean of oil. 'Welcome to Africa, amigo.'

'Right, but... you went to school, after all.'

'Sure, for five years. Up in Beira with the Portuguese Padres.'

'And then?'

'I pursued various careers. Begging, selling things on the street, working in a mine. Until someone told me about an opportunity to work in East Germany. That sounded better than fighting in the civil war. In Leuna they all told me I should be grateful for my job, and I was. After the wall fell they told me to piss off.' He drained his beer with a long gulp.

'Another?'

'Now I'm thinking I should be a journalist,' Murandi nodded. 'Seems like a nice life. You can really expense all this?'

It turned out to be one of the most interesting conversations Thomas Gärtner had ever had. His new friend spoke of his Skat buddies and visits to the central stadium in Leipzig as if he had never lived anywhere else, then he would jump to his old friends from the coal mines in Tete, who had done their work barefoot and, when asked their ages, would answer 'about forty', or 'probably over thirty'. He claimed never to have had a family of his own. His best friend in Beira was the son of a Chinese shop owner, and a woman named Christa appeared frequently in his stories about his time in the East Germany, but whether she had been a serious partner or just a passing lover, Gärtner couldn't tell. Murandi turned a deaf ear to any unwelcome questions with the practiced ease of a politician. When the heat relented, they made their way together to Maputo's beachside promenade. The smell of grilled langoustines hung in the air, and Gärtner came to the conclusion that he had come to Africa to meet people like Charles Murandi. 'It might help your case,' he said, 'to try exerting public pressure back in Germany. On the government, I mean.'

'Might do, yeah.'

'You don't trust me, do you?'

'Journalists come, they write their articles, and they leave. That's their job.'

'Just you wait, amigo. I'm different.' After four or five beers, grandiose promises came easily to him, but he meant it earnestly, anyway. He'd been seeing a woman in Cape Town for the last little while. She was mixed race Indian, and her dark eyes enchanted him, but whether he wanted anything more from her or she from him... During his studies he had travelled around Africa and had later written his Master's thesis on colonial history — but honestly, he still knew nothing.

'How does it not drive you crazy? How are you not mad?' he asked as they sat on a crumbling bench on the edge of the *Avenida Marginal* and looked out at the ocean. 'I mean, after everything they did to you.'

'Right when I came back, if I'd have got my hands on one of the bastards that screwed us over, I'd have killed him.'

'I see. Good thing you didn't find any of them, eh?'

'Depends how you look at it,' Murandi said quietly. 'Would have been even better if I'd got the right guy.'

The palm trees on the beach were swaying back and forth in the evening breeze. A voice inside Gärtner held him back from asking further questions. They sat there for almost a full minute before the man next to him burst into raucous laughter, saying, 'That's nonsense, man, it's just a joke. You're pretty gullible for a journalist, you know that?'

'Don't underestimate me. Some day I'll figure out the truth.'

'And then?'

'Then I'll tell everyone,' he said. The horizon line where the water met the sky blurred, and the rushing of the waves resounded in his drunken mind like an echo. It was the start of something new, he sensed. The first meeting that he would one day look back at and wonder how differently his life might have turned out.

If he hadn't met the mysterious man beside him.

THE DAY AFTER THE MURDER

*Shanghai, Municipal Police Headquarters
Jing'an district, Wuning South Rd. 128, floor 7
Thursday, 2 September 2021 — 10:37 local time*

The footage from the surveillance camera reveals the following: a hotel corridor, empty at first, lined with radiators that give off a faint shimmer of heat, even in the black-and-white footage. When the timestamp in the upper corner of the screen jumps to 23:57, a middle-aged man emerges from the lift. He wears street clothes, jeans and a T-shirt, but his feet are cushioned in the hotel's slippers. His gaze fixed on the row of room numbers ahead, he moves down the hall with sure steps, coming to a stop in front of room 2516. (It is impossible to make out the room numbers on the video, but the four men watching it already know.) The man reaches a hand up to his throat, as if undoing a tie. After he knocks, several seconds pass without anything happening. The man's posture, leaning in towards the door, indicates he is listening closely, and he seems impatient, appearing to refrain from moving only with some effort. Is he drunk? When it becomes clear that there is to be no answer, he knocks again, steps back and glances at his watch. Finally, the door opens, without revealing the second person to the camera, and the man starts, as if he had been expecting someone else. Briefly, he turns, looking directly into the camera, and for one moment — Thomas Gärtner thinks, now, as he watches the video, massaging his abused wrists with a nervous and continuously regular motion, left, then right— for one moment it is as if he were looking directly at himself. Right here, in this grainy black-and-white footage, which had, perversely, replaced the function of his own memory. He wishes, in vain, that the man in the video would go back down the hall and disappear, but if that were the case then he wouldn't be here, but rather would be sitting in his own room (number 407) waiting for a call from Sascha Daniels. Does the police already know why he's in Shanghai? Is it even worth it anymore pretending he isn't a journalist? The Chinese authorities famously have little respect for his profession, and it will come out sooner or later.

The air in the small interrogation room is stifling despite the air conditioning. Beyond the dark slats of the closed blinds, the city is sweltering, the streets sticky as a steam room in the late summer heat. He shouldn't have come here — this is the only certainty he has this morning. He doesn't have the correct accreditation for the conference, anyway. What the hell had possessed him to board the plane and fly to Shanghai anyway?

'I need to make a call. It's urgent,' he says, for the third or fourth time.

'It's more urgent that you watch this,' says the official who introduced himself as commissioner Frank Luo. His English sounds odd, his vowels elongated, stretched out beyond reasonable emphasis, and his tone is one that suggests he is not a man who likes to repeat himself. His words are accompanied by a jerk of his chin towards the screen. The man in the hotel corridor hesitates, as if grappling with a sudden sense of foreboding that he was about to cross a line into a different life — one that will lead the Shanghai police to suspect him of a murder. The murder of a member of the International Olympic Committee who was known for his charm, his susceptibility to bribes, and his remarkably good contacts within the Chinese Communist Party.

Except, how on Earth could he have foreseen all that?

Eventually, the man on the screen enters the hotel room. The corridor is empty once more. Against his will, a small rasping noise escapes Gärtner's dry throat.

Frank Luo says something in Chinese to his colleague sitting at the desk, who extends a hand to skip ahead in the footage. A third officer stands in front of the closed door, feet planted firmly in a wide stance. Gärtner uses the brief pause to order his memories and find a clear train of thought. One and a half hours ago, someone had roughly shaken him awake by the shoulder, and while he was still rubbing his eyes, feeling a stabbing pain at the temples, the person had held a badge under his nose and said something about 'arrest', ordering him to 'get up and come with us' — all of it in the same strangely accented English with the extended vowels. There had been five or six uniformed police officers in his room, none of them giving him so much as a glance as they rifled through his possessions and placed anything they deemed of interest in clear plastic bags.

Shortly thereafter, the cool metal of handcuffs around his wrists. What's more, he realises, his editor-in-chief doesn't even know he's in Shanghai. He's off on one of his typical solo trips, the likes of which frequently send Röhrig into a rage.

What else does he remember? His arrival at the airport, his exhaustion after the long flight and the welcome coolness of the hotel lobby. His room was one of the cheapest available, on the fourth floor with a view out onto the rear yard... It feels, for a moment, as if there are other details attempting to surface in his mind, his whole body going taught with the effort not to lose the thread of it. The footage has ceased winding forward, but the corridor on the screen remains as empty as before. The whiskey he drank is less a memory and more a stale aftertaste in his throat. No, he can twist about as much as he likes in this chair, but he can't wring anything more from his aching head. There isn't any more.

'I'd like a glass of water, please.'

Frank Luo barks out two syllables of a command, and the officer guarding the door moves towards a pumpkin-sized water cooler in the corner of the room. A tiny plastic cup is deposited in front of Gärtner, one he has to grip with both hands, so badly he is shaking.

'Action!' growls the superintendent.

The timestamp shows that seven minutes have passed. The door of suite 2516 opens and out steps Thomas Gärtner. Clamped under his right arm is something that looks like a dossier, or a document folder. He takes two hurried steps out into the corridor, like a child crossing the road, then turns, closes the door to the room, and makes his way towards the lift, swaying slightly. Definitely drunk.

'*The End,*' says Frank Luo. The second officer closes the video, and for a moment it seems to Gärtner like the last remnant of his memories disappear along with it. 'Seven minutes are long enough to kill a man. Don't you agree?' The superintendent circles around him, arms crossed, and perches on the edge of the table.

'I want to talk to someone from the local consulate.'

'First you talk to us.'

'It's my right,' he insists, though it sounds thin, even to his own ears, like a rhetorical contrivance against fear. Rights aren't *yours* in China, you have to hope that they are administered to you.

'The consulate has been notified, Mr Gardner. We do not decide when they send someone. Perhaps in the meantime you will answer my questions.'

'I've already told you, I don't remember anything.'

'Nobody remembers *nothing*.'

With an effort, he attempts to steady his voice. 'I arrived at the airport yesterday at half past five. I took the maglev train into town and then the metro to the Plaza Hotel.'

'Unusual. People who stay at luxury hotels don't often use public transport.'

'Then I went to my not-very-luxurious room. Had a drink and... then I must have fallen asleep. Until you woke me.'

The room is quiet for a spell when he finishes, the only sounds the hum of the air conditioning and the metal slats of the blinds at the window behind him swaying gently back and forth. Only now does Gärtner notice the ceiling fan spinning overhead.

'Your arrival in Shanghai was three days ago.' Frank Luo's black eyes are completely motionless. He doesn't so much as blink. 'Interesting, don't you think?'

Gärtner turns reflexively towards the blank video screen. The date next to the timestamp had been yesterday's date, hadn't it? Yes, of course, the murder was yesterday, but it takes a moment for the information to sink in: he isn't missing the memory of a few hours, but rather of three days.

'Do you understand what I'm saying?' asks Luo.

'Yes and no.'

'Do you stand by your statement, that the last thing you remember is the evening of your arrival in Shanghai?'

He nods and instantly feels that this isn't true. He arrived in his room, had a drink... Then he called Lena, didn't he? Took a taxi to meet her. Was that the same evening? Images blur as they race through his mind without a clear order, like a film seen months ago. He notices, too, that nobody is following protocol. He's being interrogated, but nobody is taking notes, and he doesn't see a recording device anywhere. He's read this and that about the Chinese police state without ever taking a real interest in it. Maybe there are microphones built into the walls, or the computer in front of him records everything automatically.

'Fine,' says Frank Luo in a tone that indicates just the opposite. 'You saw that you were holding something when you left the room. Another video shows that it is a black dossier, not very thick, just a few pages. We were unable to find it in your room. Nor could we find your passport, by the way. Can you explain that?'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' says Gärtner. 'What about my lawyer, or rather the people from the consulate? I'm a German citizen and...' It sounds rather pathetic, he has to admit. *Well, you should have thought about that before coming here.*

'Why did you come to Shanghai, Mr Gardner? What are you doing here? Why are you staying in a five star hotel and taking the metro?'

'Too many questions at once.'

'What is your job?'

'Journalist,' he answers, because there's no point in lying. The police may well already know about the false visa; the superintendent certainly seems unsurprised.

'Did you know the victim? Is it for him you came here?'

'We've known each other for many years. I worked in Africa for a long time, I was in Mozambique for a while.'

‘Indeed. And now you stay in Shanghai, at the same hotel as him, even though it’s out of your price range, really. Why?’

He has often wondered why politicians, finding themselves embroiled in a scandal, continue to dispute their guilt long after it is confirmed. Now he experiences the same urge to put forward any and all tenuous alibis. It does not appear to be a rational action, but rather pure instinct. Frank Luo, meanwhile, remains expressionless, sitting with his arms crossed on the edge of the table and looking at him. His age is impossible to guess, anything between forty and seventy.

‘How did Mr Murandi die?’ asks Gärtner.

‘That will be revealed by the autopsy. It’s still unclear whose authorisation we need for it. The Mozambique Embassy has been called in, as has the IOC, the family needs to be consulted...’ For the first time, a hint of a smile shows on commissioner Frank Luo’s face. ‘CNN will probably offer a great deal of money to have the autopsy broadcast live on TV.’

Charles Murandi has no family, Gärtner wants to say, but decides against it. ‘So you don’t know what he died of.’

‘We were hoping you might tell us.’

‘So you can’t be sure that it’s a murder.’

‘But it could have been. Should that be confirmed, we shall be in the convenient position of already having a suspect. You understand, of course, that this affair will make headlines internationally. So shortly before the allocation of the Olympic Games... How many of your colleagues would be inclined to wager it was a heart attack, what do you think? Besides, I must say, you haven’t made a particularly strong case for yourself so far. You really don’t know what happened to the dossier?’

‘No.’

‘Are you a homosexual?’

‘What?’

‘The victim was naked, and there were traces of saliva on his forehead. Unusual, no? We’re still waiting on results from the DNA.’

Gärtner’s thoughts are swimming. ‘I’m not gay, and I won’t say another word without a counsel from the consulate.’

‘Bisexual, perhaps? Sometimes this, sometimes that. Seems to be all the rage in the West.’

‘Ask for Lena Hechfellner. She works in the legal and consular department. Do you need me to spell her name out?’

‘You know each other?’ asks Luo, though it sounds more like a statement than a question.

‘As I’ve said, the consulate has been notified. We have no intentions to blame you unjustly for a crime, Mr Gardner. You haven’t been charged with anything. We only have a dead man and certain evidence that indicates murder. We have CCTV footage that shows either the last man to see Murandi alive or the first man to see him dead — or both. This man claims to remember neither his visit to the room of the victim, nor the dossier he left the room with.’ Luo pauses, as if expecting Gärtner to protest. ‘You must admit, it would be irresponsible of us not to take an interest in you.’

Silence follows this statement, filling the room until another official sticks his head through the door and superintendent Luo follows him out.

The clock beside the door shows exactly ten minutes to eleven.

Shanghai International Convention Centre

Lujiazui district, 2727 Binjiang Avenue

11:29 local time

The news doesn't land like a bomb; rather, the manner in which it spreads is more akin to an invasion of termites, their quiet work invisible on the surface. Or, more precisely, there *is* no news, only a sudden and rapidly spreading disquiet. People move about, the rate of phone calls shoots up like a pulse in distress, and from one moment to the next it becomes impossible to reach the IOC press team. The crush of people at the refreshment booths increases. People stir their coffee, alert for anyone who might know anything, fighting off the anxiety that it might be too late already. Too late for what, exactly, nobody seems sure, but everyone desperately wants to talk about it.

When someone finally utters the name of Charles Murandi, the tension breaks, briefly, and then rises again immediately, stronger than before. Is it a matter of corruption, perhaps? The phrase 'scandal' is thrown around, but it's a hollow shell, with nothing to give it substance. Despite the IOC not having made any announcement about a press conference, one is expected to take place within the hour. Or the hour after. Nothing happens.

When Sascha Daniels' call to Thomas Gärtner goes to voicemail for the third time, he, too, begins to feel anxious. His colleague is capable of doing all kinds of things, but he would never leave his phone switched off all morning. Besides, they had an appointment. For a moment, Daniels stands uncertainly in the large atrium, which is bathed in dim light in a way that makes one unsure whether it is the panes of glass above that are coated in filth, or if it might just be what the sky looks like in Shanghai. In daylight, even the Bund, the waterfront area across the river, seems grey and unremarkable. He had been based in China, reporting for the *Handelsblatt*, for five years, has plenty of contacts, but now he is staring at the screen of his brand new Xiaomi smartphone (he left his iPhone back in Germany, for security's sake) and wondering who to call. He does not believe there will be a press conference within the next two hours. The IOC is a secretive organisation, and if the case truly turns out to be as sensational as everyone here seems to think it is... Charles Murandi, of all people! Had Gärtner gone behind his back and found someone with better connections, better access to sources than he had? Or was this whole thing a farce after all, the auto-complete headline of bored journalists?

'Lena Hechfellner,' he murmurs to himself, before he has quite come to a conclusion on the matter. A new acquaintance. They met four days ago at a reception given by the lobby of the Chamber of Industry and Commerce and, if he is being honest, he has been looking for a reason to reach out to her ever since. She is in her late thirties, like him, athletic, quick-witted, and divorced. He gathered from a passing comment that she plays squash, and had no trouble imagining her doing so.

He retreats, hastily, into a quiet corner next to a side entrance and rummages in his wallet for her card, then types the number into his phone. He can't imagine that Gärtner actually went behind his back with anything. The man is crazy, obsessive, but honest in his own way. A first-rate journalist, in any case. The tumbling waterfalls in their glowing green marble pools outside make for a constant harsh rushing noise in the background. Daniels appreciates the mostly faded gleam of old Shanghai. The new buildings tend more towards a mixture of bombast and kitsch. After living here

for five years, he had been happy, at the time, to leave. Only he is still awaiting the great leap forward in his career.

'Hechfellner.'

'Hello, it's Sascha Daniels.' He doesn't quite know how formally to address her, where they left things at the end of the evening at the CIC.

'Hello Sascha.' Ah, Wonderful. He pulls out the crumpled notebook from his breast pocket with quick fingers.

'Just thought I'd reach out. Wanted to ask if you've got time for a coffee. I'm dying of boredom here.'

'Nothing happening at the IOC?'

'The final vote isn't until tomorrow, today it's just rumours circulating.'

'I see.' Lena Hechfellner, as he already learned four days ago, rarely says the things other people might say in her place. Things like: oh, yes? What rumours?

'Apparently there'll be a press conference later.'

'Then surely you wouldn't have time for a coffee.'

'It'll be a while yet. Do you know how I can reach Thomas Gärtner?'

'My first thought would be to call him.'

'He's not answering.'

She doesn't respond to this, and Daniels experiences what he calls his 'journalist's sense' — the intuitive feeling that somebody knows something that he would like to know, too. Two older men in extravagantly elaborate uniforms stand guard at the nearest entrance. One of them casts a bored glance his way.

'Lena?'

'You're calling the legal department of the consulate because somebody isn't answering their phone?'

'I'm calling you because you know him.'

'Text him.'

'I have. Listen, he and I met up two days ago. Seems he didn't get the accreditation to attend the conference. He wouldn't say why not, apparently something went wrong. So he asked me to send him bits of intel every now and then, live updates, so to speak. And, well, now rumours are circulating that something happened to Charles Murandi.'

'To whom?'

'Oh, come on,' he says, though it feels a little too intimate to say, really. 'I find it hard to imagine the name never came up in your conversations.'

'You seem to overestimate the closeness of our acquaintance. That illustrious IOC guy?'

'That's the one.'

'I've no idea how I'm supposed to help you with this. Anyway, I need to get moving.'

'I just want to discount the possibility that Gärtner isn't picking up because it's *me* calling: would you just call him, quickly? If he picks up, tell him it's urgent. And if he doesn't, let me know, okay?'

'I thought you were rivals, professionally speaking.'

'Is that what he claimed?'

'Anyway, I don't appreciate being made a messenger between parties.'

'You're a diplomat, that's your job,' he says. 'Where do you need to get moving to? We can meet later, in town. Near the consulate, if you like.'

'The Chancellor is coming, as you well know, and it's all hands on deck here.'

'Call him, will you? Please!'

'We'll see. Talk later.'

After she's hung up, he replays the conversation in his head.

Her initial reaction to the name Thomas Gärtner was a little... He can't think of the right word, but as far as he knows the two of them know each other pretty well, so why is she calling him an acquaintance, as acquaintances go. Have they slept together? Possible, but she would doubtless handle it with the same cool attitude she had used to rebuff him at the CIC event, and just now she seemed momentarily... affected, though she hadn't wanted to let it show. And why did she pretend not to know the name Murandi at first? The talk in insider circles goes that he has taken great risks in his dealings with the Chinese. In fact, he's known to be something of a gambling man.

O jogador, they call him back home.

Now what?

Daniels' journalist's sense is telling him two things: firstly, that something is going on here, and secondly that there's an opportunity in it for him. He left the *Handelsblatt* because he had wanted to do more investigative work, but the bigger papers had no need of his services. Some of them had vaguely suggested that he contact them again if he had an interesting story. It's too early in Germany to call just now, really, but true editors-in-chief never really sleep anyway. The *Spiegel* offices in Beijing have stood empty for months now, because previous directors were too critical of the regime and consequently the current one has been unable to obtain a visa. The fewer foreigners in the country, the better — better, in this case, for him, too. He doesn't have any numbers saved in his new phone, but he had, wisely, had the foresight to write down Röhrig's number. Sascha Daniels notices, as he dials the number, that his fingertips are a little moist. He is either about to blow his last chance, or to knock on the right door at just the right moment.

*Airbus A350-900, Federal German Air Force
En route to Shanghai, somewhere above Russia
05:14 CEST*

A tense silence hangs over the cramped front section of the aircraft. The only sound comes from the usual roaring of the turbines outside. Dr Jens Kühn of the coordinations branch of the Chancellery has finished his report about the occurrences in Shanghai, which the Chancellor sat through impassively, glancing at her phone every now and then, as if to compare what was being said with her own sources. Seated around her are: Horst Seehofer, the Minister of the Interior, responsible for sport, Bayern, and holding the peace in the governing coalition; his secretary of state, Günter Renne; President Steinbach, of the German National Olympic Committee; Hans-Peter Sinnhuber, of the European Olympic Coordinations Organisation; and Steffen Seibert. A neutral observer might notice that all these men wear the same expression — grave, and a little helpless. The little red Olympics pin that Sinnhuber gave the Chancellor shortly before take-off now lies forgotten on a saucer stained with coffee. Everyone else is wearing theirs pinned to their lapels. The outgoing Head of Government's rumoured scepticism towards the attempts at a joint European application to host the Olympic Games is as old as the idea itself.

In the rear part of the aircraft, the passenger section, members of the press sit buzzing with impatience. They're already halfway across Russia and still the reporters are waiting for the obligatory round of questions. Because, for a moment, nobody is speaking, the Chancellor looks out of the window. Below her is the monotonous stretch of the Siberian taiga. Or possibly the tundra? This trip, her last official trip to China, had to be rather hastily arranged because it was unclear, for a long time, who would represent the joint European application there. If partisan backstabbing were to become an Olympic discipline, she could put forward several candidates for the medals. Despite Paris hosting the games in 2024, they are insisting on having both handball *and* track and field in 2032. It would be something to counter Le Pen, they argued. And besides, won't the Germans be thoroughly occupied with dressage? And the last other remaining competitor just had to be a similar historic venture put forward jointly by three east-African cities, of all things: Addis Ababa, Nairobi, and Dar es Salaam. Europe vs Africa. *The 'optics', as they say in the US, are not good*, thinks the Chancellor. And the fact that the Chinese are behind the African application, ready to build stadiums, airports and hotels in each of the cities, makes it all even more complicated. The whole affair has long since taken on a bipolar geopolitical character in the media, raising tensions and playing on people's emotions in an entirely unnecessary way. The higher the stakes, the dirtier the means.

And now this! Does anybody honestly believe that a writer for the *Spiegel* murdered an IOC member from Mozambique? In his hotel room in Shanghai! The story sounds so absurd that one can't help but think there must be something more behind it. But what? There have been rumours circulating for quite some time that China isn't actually too keen on the games being hosted in Africa, that the regime is primarily concerned with the goodwill the effort will garner them. The fact that the West would be thwarting the African dream, should it come to pass, would lend itself to being worked into a narrative that would be well received in the global South. The *Spiegel* ran a headline on it recently: *'All Just a Game?'* Perhaps that was even this Thomas Gärtner. The name doesn't mean anything to her. There's supposedly friction between the African states, too; apparently Mozambique is keen to use the unrest in Ethiopia to put forward its own capital city as an

alternative to Addis Ababa. There are known to be massive oil reserves off the coast of Mozambique, and China is seeking greater independence from the Gulf states... It's not just too many emotions that are running high, here, but also raw, fierce power politics — but is there actually any other kind of politics?

The Chancellor looks around discreetly. In anticipation of a series of PR events, she has left behind the majority of her staffers, and is beginning to worry that this may have been a mistake. This Mr Gärtner was apprehended early in the morning. Nobody in Germany will believe he is guilty, and the hypotheses she is currently mulling over may well be taken up tomorrow in the global news as statements of fact: the idea, for example, that he is a German hostage being used to weaken Berlin's support for the European games. That arrest of the two Canadians a while back might have been for different reasons, but they still remain in custody. Some call it state terrorism; if she were to do so as well they could bid the pilot to turn right back around. Right here, above this... the phrase 'boreal pine forest' rises up from somewhere and floats through her mind; she lets it pass.

China. There's no other country where she so wishes to be able to take a look behind the facade, though she worries, at the same time, that she wouldn't recognise anything she saw. The Chinese perspective seems so deeply rooted in a history that is too little known outside of the country itself. In every conversation she has had with the Head of State or Prime Minister, she has spoken for no more than a third of the time. She asked Obama once if it was the same for him. He had nodded and told her that a third was quite a lot. The Chinese leadership tended towards broad-ranging historical digressions that always began in the nineteenth century, and it had taken her some time to realise that they weren't digressions at all, on the contrary: in their view, they are addressing the very core of the problem. Because as soon as the boundaries of the conversation are set wide enough, China is in the right. They are not, for example, colluding with Russia to weaken the West, but rather are generously moving past the injustices done to them by the Tsars. The vast swathes of Manchuria which the Russians ruthlessly annexed — water under the bridge. China extends a hand in every direction, forgives injustices, hands out contracts and awards points for obedience. Anyone who claims they have ulterior motives are suffering from typical American paranoia. Europe, she hears every time she visits, must be freed from this. It must! Difficult to say whether they're begging, threatening, or simply offering a sober recommendation. The inflection of the Head of State always stays the same, in any case

'From whom are we getting our information?' she asks, at last, because everyone seems to be waiting for her to speak. 'If the Chinese authorities refuse to cooperate, that is?'

'The Consulate in Shanghai is supposed to be granted rapid access to the detainee. Until they are, we're shut out.' The ballpoint pen that Dr Kühn has been gripping in his hand all this time makes a slow path back into his inside jacket pocket.

'Is there somebody from the *Spiegel* on board?'

Seibert nods. 'Mr Neuenkirchen. Should I fetch him?'

'Wait a moment. Can we rule out the possibility that there's something else going on here? Do the Chinese need leverage? If yes, then for what and against whom? Us? I don't like travelling to a country without knowing what awaits me there.' Though that's exactly how she feels every time she goes to China, actually.

The men glance at one another uncertainly. The entire plane vibrates, briefly, the cups and dishes on the table rattle quietly. Only the northern hemisphere has boreal pine forests, she calls to

mind. Good to know. An enormous body of water looms on the horizon. The vibrations stop, and all is quiet again.

It's another four hours until they land.