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# **THE SPONSOR**

**Murder at the North Sea Chess Tournament**

**NEW IN CHESS**

# Prologue

*Saturday afternoon, January 14, De Brinkhof*

Godfried had forgotten his name badge, but luckily the faceless giant with the earpiece recognized him. The security guard opened the door just far enough for Godfried, with a deep exhale and his stomach held in, to squeeze through the gap and into the tournament hall. Thanks a lot buddy. Inside, he quietly made his way to the table where, for some reason, the arbiter and the second also completely ignored his presence. Nice, they could be a bit more friendly. After all, it was his money that kept this whole thing going. Without his yearly 100k contribution, they would be playing in front of empty seats in a shack somewhere out in the sticks.

Godfried loosened his belt a notch and, as always, watched the players prepare as the next round of games got underway, following a rest day. Would the break affect them in any way? It was crunch time, the business end of the tournament. So far three players shared the top spot with the same points total: his fellow countryman Christian N’Koulou from Hoogeveen; Park Myung-hee from North Korea; and Salvatore Biancucci, the Italian grandmaster, accompanied by a devoted second determined to flaunt her more than ample “assets” as much as humanly possible.

Godfried's eyes rested on the somewhat frail looking chess player from North Korea, when suddenly he was distracted by unrest in the crowd. What was going on? The glass partition made it impossible to hear what was happening, but by now the spectators had all risen to their feet, nudging each other and gesturing frantically. Then he saw it too. The seat opposite Esther Sivok, a gangly chess player from Prague, was empty. Judging by the flag bearing the famous stars and stripes it was Simon Berliner who was missing. But why? The Czech player clearly did not know what to do in her opponent's absence and looked around helplessly.

The restlessness of the crowd started to make the players nervous as well. Biancucci, with his typical theatrics, vented his frustration with the tournament officials. Alexandr Barovsky, from Ukraine, could be seen impatiently pointing at the clock. Only our North Korean friend, Park Myung-hee, remained seated and focused on her board. She tried to use her hands to block out all the commotion. Her Russian opponent, Valery Kerzhakov, had opened with e3. So now she had to decide whether to reply with an equally passive move, or go on the offensive instead.

Park, by default, had already been getting a lot of attention during the event. Many years ago, China and the United States sought to improve diplomatic relations by organizing a table tennis tournament between the two countries. This was the first time a chess player from North Korea had taken part at an event held in "the West," a sign perhaps that they were looking to build bridges with the rest of the world.

Godfried stood up and tightened his belt again. An absentee chess player wasn't without precedent. He had read about the legendary Bobby Fischer, who refused to attend the second game of his world-title match with Boris Spassky because the cameras in the playing

hall were bothering him. The arbiter started the clock, and Fischer lost due to time forfeit. Eventually his demands were met, the equipment was removed, and he somehow made an incredible comeback to be crowned World Champion.<sup>1</sup> Insiders suggested he had been playing mind games with his opponent all along, as a means to show his superiority. But Simon Berliner, a klutz with a messy hairdo, would never even think about doing something like that. He wasn't the calculated, conspiratorial type, but rather more of an introvert.

"Geurt, you should just let Berliner's clock run and tell the others to continue play. It's a bit of an anti-climax, but hey the Czech gets the win, right!?"

The look on the chief arbiter Geurt Plomp's face was even more sour than usual.

"I know the rules," he snapped back at Godfried, "But look!" By this point, no one aside from Park was still seated. "I want to know where Berliner is. Get someone to check his hotel room. He could be sick or maybe he overslept? Or went for a walk in the forest and twisted his ankle. Who knows!"

The second rushed out of the tournament hall, and Godfried started wandering too. He was desperate for a coffee, but that was going to be a challenge to say the least. The spectators, following the games from behind the glass and through the monitors, had flooded the coffee area after play had stalled.

Forget it.

He let out a sigh and sat down on one of the sofas, fumbling with his belt. I seriously need to lose some weight, he thought to himself. Thankfully the tailored suit disguised some of the obesity, but yesterday when he was with Anja, he actually found himself short of breath. At each tournament, he would meet up with her during the rest day. And each time they'd go to a new restaurant they hadn't yet been to. This time, he had reserved a table at

Yamazato, the restaurant at the Okura Hotel, where they looked back fondly on memories of their lucrative partnership together.

Anja had handled all his international contracts when she was still working for Godfried's company as an employee. Later, she'd branched out on her own, based in a high-end tower block on the Zuidas, also known as Amsterdam's "Financial Mile." She had spent the last months mediating the sale of Godfried's company to a Japanese multinational. Just a year to go for the deal to go through, and, barring any mishaps, he'd be a free man.

At the end of the evening they gazed out over the city lights of Amsterdam, from the bar on the 23rd floor. He put his arm around her shoulders and started humming the melody to Billy Ocean's "When the Going Gets Tough," just to tease her a bit. When they were still close colleagues, they'd often ended up in bed together. It was a rare occurrence these days, and that morning he'd been reminded why. He was exhausted. Anja tactfully ignored it, but Godfried swore to himself he would finally put that gym membership to good use.

Anything happening?

Even in a room full of people buzzing around, it's still easy to feel alone, a feeling Godfried was no stranger to. But this year the tournament felt different somehow. The spark he felt in the earlier years had noticeably faded. What used to be a welcome break in his daily routine felt increasingly like a chore.

His company sponsored the event. But he was now in the process of selling his business. Did he really want to keep shelling out a 100 grand, out of his own pocket, just to keep this circus going? As one of the main sponsors of the North Sea Chess Tournament, he enjoyed certain benefits, like staying in the players' hotel. If he wanted, he could eat with the organizers and executives. During

the tournament he could sit in the hall with the players and the officials. These privileges had, thus far, given him an insider's view of how the players and their entourage behaved and interacted with each other, in the arena as well as outside. He had probably at least six or seven notepads at home, full of his accounts of the tournament, observations and stories he'd put to paper over the years, ranging from the ridiculous to downright scandalous behavior of some of the grandmasters and their entourage. He recalled one of his first tournaments, in 2003, when the mother of the world's youngest grandmaster—Joeri Zhirkov from Lithuania—used her looks to seduce her son's next opponent. The poor guy didn't stand a chance and hopelessly lost the game the next day. Another memory that made him chuckle to himself was the tale of the legendary Svetozar Gligorić, the Serbian grandmaster who was addicted to chocolate milk. If he was playing too well, his opponents would “take measures” to ensure his favorite beverage was nowhere to be found even remotely close by. And what was the name of that young “rebel kid” again, the one with back problems—or so he claimed—who was given permission to play his games on a massage table lying down? It completely threw his opponents, and he won all of his games during the Tilburg chess tournament. What was his name again, for crying out loud? It was on the tip of his tongue... Long hair, somewhat “rotund” face, obsessed with playing foosball... Ah, that's right: it was Tony Miles! AKA the Beast of Birmingham. Apparently he was committed to a psychiatric hospital some time after that.

The melancholy that had been tormenting Godfried all week was now starting to cause him a sense of discomfort.

Gone were the days when Jan Timman and Hans Böhm would show up with a few cases of beer in the back of the

van, and a string of groupies following them from one tournament to the next. The new generation didn't share the same cavalier spirit. Take N'Koulou, he just spends the evenings playing board games with the other members of his home chess club in Drenthe. Either that or he just sits at his laptop analyzing the game before going to bed for an early night. On the opening night of the tournament, Godfried asked Valery Kerzhakov about his thoughts on the new FIDE chairman who, thanks to the support of President Vladimir Putin – and the alleged state bribery that no doubt aided the process – had defeated Garry Kasparov in the battle for the presidency of the international chess federation. In the past, this question would have led to a heated discussion, possibly over a cold vodka and a nice cigar (or two). Nowadays? Well, the pale Russian “preferred not to get involved in politics,” and to make things worse his drink of choice was a glass of milk. Warm milk for Christ's sake!

Only Halldórsson had remained unchanged by the times. Much like him, Halldórsson had tried to make advances on the North Korean player and, when that didn't work, he set his sights on Biancucci's voluptuous “companion”! Let's see if there's any noticeable “awkwardness” between the two tomorrow morning at breakfast... or not.

He vowed some day to write down all these stories in full and get them published. It was explosive stuff for the gossip columnists out there, and would no doubt stir up some controversy in the mainstream headlines to boot. A tell-all book, an insider perspective of an elitist world unto itself, would surely give him gravitas among the intellectuals and a wider respect that so far, barring his hometown, had eluded him.

The lines in front of the coffee machines had finally cleared. Godfried pulled himself up from his chair. He made his way through the crowd only to discover that his

credit card didn't work here, and on top of that he had no coins. At that moment, the crowd suddenly parted like the Red Sea. The chief arbiter, Geurt Plomp, made his way to the middle of the room with an ominous look on his face. His eyes were fixed on the arrangement of dried flowers installed to brighten up the room. He stretched his arms, as though he wished the water would go back.

The crowd had fallen completely silent.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I have a terrible announcement to make. It's about our good friend Simon Berliner. Just moments ago we found him dead in his bathtub. Immediate attempts were made to resuscitate him, but sadly...”

Plomp was unable to finish his sentence, the shock of what had happened seemingly sinking in. He was forced to raise his voice to drown out the ever-growing murmurs among the crowd.

“Please, stay calm. I would like to ask everyone to quietly make their way to the exits, in an orderly fashion. As for the players still taking part in the tournament, please... I want to ask the participants...”

Time to get out of here, Godfried thought, as he slipped out through one of the side exits. They don't need me, plenty of officials there to help manage the situation. It was the last thing he needed, after what had already been a hectic week. God almighty! There goes my tournament.



# Chapter 1

*Thursday afternoon, January 5, Montesciarone*

After his *riposo*, Salvatore Biancucci wanted to personally collect the outfit he'd selected. His tailor had been taken aback by the choice to opt for a bright canary yellow fabric. In the past, *Il professore* always tended to go for a more understated tone, something in cashmere wool.

But he insisted that his mind was made up, so old man Zambrotta had no choice but to abide by his client's wishes. With all the pins he was holding in his mouth, the hunchbacked old man, who'd also dressed Biancucci's father over the years, was unable to say much anyway. Mumbling and groaning to himself, he went about his work. Biancucci appreciated the old man's discretion. He was also well aware of the fact that, since his last fitting, he had shrunk another inch in height and expanded horizontally.

After some hours of good old-fashioned craftsmanship, marveling at the end result, he made sure he took the time to shower his tailor with praise for his efforts. In turn the tailor would assure the maestro that the honor, in fact, was all his, thereby fulfilling his part of the ritual. Salvatore could then dash home and finish preparing for his departure.

But this time Giacomo Zambrotta didn't follow the script.

“Maestro, if it's not too much of an inconvenience... Would it be possible to settle the bill with you one of these days? Naturally you pick the best possible materials, but they require payment on delivery... And there are still two outfits outstanding, so you understand if I...”

Great, now this.

“Those accounts still are still open?” Biancucci feigned surprise. “Tomorrow I'm going abroad for a few weeks, spreading the word of our beloved hometown to the rest of the world. As always I will sing your name from the rooftops as the best tailor in our fine region. And then, *amico mio*, as soon as I return home I'll give the guys at the bank a call and give them a piece of my mind.”

Time to bail.

He took one last glance in the mirror to check that his silk scarf was raised high enough to cover his wrinkled neck, and wasted no time making his exit from the tailor's.

Biancucci always took the main street into the scenic Montesciarone center. During the off-season, the shop girls would chat away outside, or sit and paint their nails in the sun. He shed a few years with each respectful greeting and bright smile they gave to him.

He took the long route back, strolling through the streets overlooking the beautiful rolling hills that surrounded Montesciarone for as far as the eye could see. Another family estate lay among those hills, on the verge of collapse. Despite his prominent status in the town, the local council had refused to grant him a subsidy to have the estate restored to its former glory.

On the way to the Palazzo, where he had been born and which he still called home to this day, he soon forgot about his exchange with the tailor earlier in the day. Typical small-minded, local business, always complaining.

He, Salvatore Biancucci, had bigger fish to fry. The tournament was scheduled to start on Saturday. The organizers had again offered him a lower starting fee than the year before. Still five figures, just about, but at this rate it would soon be four. He needed a tournament win to turn things around and maintain some sort of market value for his appearances and publications. But how to win when your ability to concentrate is on the decline and the whole mental process is becoming harder and harder? Added to that, he also had a major dislike of computers. He owned a premium, state-of-the-art Mac, far more advanced than the stuff the young guys were using. But, to him, having a machine calculate different plays and variations was like asking a stranger to cook him his dinner.

His expenditures definitely weren't the problem or the reason he'd hit financial dire straits. He'd been following the same pattern for years. It wasn't his fault he had great taste and wanted only the best travel and accommodation, fashion, and food. And not to forget the women in his life. Ambra, his trusted second, was knowledgeable and would sometimes help him look things up, but she just mainly accompanied him because it looked good in public. He didn't even want to think about how much that all cost! The condo, the clothes, never mind all the jewelry... She only slept with him on rare occasions. He had to be driven all the way to Siena to get his kicks nowadays, for crying out loud. No, it had to be his earnings. Something had to give, starting with this upcoming tournament.

Biancucci sat for a moment on the patio, hidden behind the lion's head on the door of his Palazzo. His little hide-away in the city, where his family had resided since the 1500s. Surely he wouldn't be forced to leave the family property, would he? A scandal like that would ruin him. His father had always advised him to study law and — like him, his grandfather and his great-grandfather before

him — to establish a position for himself in the *magistratura*. But Salvatore excelled at chess. He wanted to see the world, and knew full well that the family heritage would enable him to do so for life. It wasn't until he had been forced to look into his finances that it became clear the family's trust fund had already largely been spent on restoring and maintaining the Palazzo.

Luckily for him, backed into a corner, it turned out his financial predicament made him even more creative than he already was. The plan he had developed in recent weeks rivalled some of his best strategies over the years. And his dazzling yellow suit, fitted specially for him, would play a crucial part in this. He was eager to travel to the Low Countries, where the cold around this time of year chilled his bones and he was forced to make do with what they called "hearty winter dinners."

He bowed his head in acknowledgment of the portraits that looked down at him along the stairs in his house. All with a kink in their nose, just like him. The man in the red cardinal's hat, a direct forefather, was given a warmer greeting than the rest.

His housekeeper often caught him talking to his relatives.

"I still talk to my deceased mother sometimes," she said, to make him feel better.

No surprises there. Did she ever keep her trap shut? She meant well. Most importantly, she was discrete. Over the years she had become a permanent fixture around the house, and it meant he could live the way he wanted. The fact that she talked his ear off from the moment he entered the room with the angel-covered ceiling was a small price to pay.

"Ah, *professore*, finally, where have you been. What are you wearing over your arm, shouldn't it go in your suitcase? Is that the color you have chosen for your outfit this year? Dear heavens, chess players are looking more and

more like circus clowns. I have prepared your favorite dish for tonight. My brother-in-law gave me a delicious leg of hare and some fresh truffle. The timer and the temperature are set, all you have to do is turn on the oven. Tomorrow at half-past-eight Paolo will be at your door to take you to the airport. His wife has finally given birth to their child, a baby boy. It was an en caul birth, so the family is counting on good fortune. Don't forget to congratulate Paolo!?"

Salvatore Biancucci heard her, but his attention was elsewhere. He put the black king, which Maria had moved while dusting, back into place. With a Golden Fleece necklace around it, the piece looked more like Charles the Fifth, although he was an emperor. The boxwood chess set had been in the family for centuries. For as long as he could remember, as a tribute, the board was set on the final move of the "Immortal game" between Adolf Anderssen and Lionel Kieseritzky, played out on June 21, 1851 in London. The eventual loser had only lost three pawns. The winner was missing his queen, both his rooks and a bishop. With the remaining bishop and two knights he checkmated his opponent on the 23rd move.<sup>2</sup>

If only she'd leave, then he could quietly go through the plans he'd put together to win the tournament, a must-win for him, and his crew.

"Maria," as he interrupted his housekeeper mid-sentence, "What would I do without you? You don't need to lock up tonight, I'll do it myself later. Remind me to pay you double your regular fee when I get back. My mind is already on the Dutch coast, and I forgot to stop by the bank."

Finally, some peace and quiet.

Salvatore Biancucci took out the list of his upcoming opponents. He had underlined four names that stood between himself and his inevitable victory. He could handle the rest.

It was time to put the computer to use. The files were stored on the desktop: Halldórsson, Kerzhakov, N’Koulou and Sivok. He would start with the last name on the list, Esther Sivok from the Czech Republic, and the reason he had chosen his yellow suit.

His plan to sabotage her had been years in the making. It happened during the tournament in Linares, a small town in Andalusia, where the ailing Spanish motor industry was looking to raise its profile with an international chess event.

At breakfast, he sat next to Esther, whom he had written off as a possible conquest since their first meeting. Attractive, but sadly unapproachable. Lesbian, most likely.

When the waiter came by with a tray of scrambled eggs, he saw how she tensed up and covered her eyes. “*Dej to pryč, to je žluté,*” she muttered. When he gave her a puzzled look and the waiter slid the eggs onto his plate, she slid back her chair and hurried over to another table, sugar loaf in hand.

From that moment on, he’d continued to pay attention to her. He still had no idea what she’d said back then, but when he later spotted her quickly removing a slice of lemon from her fish and consistently picking out the pineapple and corn from her salad, he used a search engine to look up the Czech word for “yellow.” “*Zlutá,*” he read aloud. It was possible that was what she’d been rambling on about that morning. We all have our weird little idiosyncrasies, I guess. It’s like Maria says: “Nobody’s perfect.”

But when he had to devise a way to throw her off her game when they next met, her apparent “issue” with the color yellow might just be a godsend. Suddenly the internet was his best friend. Esther Sivok’s fear had a name: xanthophobia, which could take on extreme forms. He read about a girl who had been trapped on the stairs