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Der Regler

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Part 1 – The Deception

Day One

11 May

Galle, Sri Lanka, 7:30 p.m.

Gabriel Tretjak was sitting in an English club seat, watching the waiter as he brought him a gin and tonic. The waiter was dressed in black trousers, a black jacket and a neatly buttoned white shirt. He was old, and there was something about him, probably his slightly bent, upwardly protruding nose and the deep lines around his mouth, that reminded Tretjak of an Indian rhinoceros he had seen a few times in Hellabrun Zoo. The zoo director had been blackmailed by one of the keepers and had called Tretjak in to put an end to the whole unpleasant affair. It was all about illegal medication for exotic animals. Tretjak had waited by the rhinoceros house where the zookeeper worked to arrange their first encounter. He loved rituals, and so they kept meeting up at the same spot after that. Until the matter was sorted out. That was how Tretjak had learned rather a lot about rhinoceroses. They were very sensitive to even the tiniest changes in their habitat, instantly becoming suspicious and unpredictable. That was something common to almost all animals: changes meant danger. Gabriel Tretjak knew it was no different for human beings. For people too, changes alerted their senses, and he had often made use of the phenomenon. But in contrast to rhinoceroses, changes had to be larger for people to notice them. If they were only minor things, slight deviations from what they were used to that didn't really interrupt the flow, people remained in a state of sleepy, docile naivety. They misinterpreted the minor changes, not understanding their actual significance until later. Sometimes only a few minutes passed between the false perception and their understanding, sometimes decades.

The waiter asked him if he'd like anything to eat. Tretjak shook his head. He had a nine-o'clock reservation for the restaurant around the corner from the foyer, its smart tables already laid.

Tretjak was fairly certain that the man he was waiting for in the hotel foyer had misappraised a minor change that day: the fact that his wife hadn't called him yet. According to everything Tretjak now knew about him, the man might not even have noticed that their usual phone call hadn't taken place – although it was a long-established habit when he was away on business. Well, it wouldn't be long before he realized the significance of that change.

Tretjak looked at his watch. It was a quarter to eight. He suddenly felt something that had often come over him recently. A kind of tiredness, a feeling of tedium. In the past he had always enjoyed these very moments, these moments before things came to a head, this approach towards a dramatic turning point in someone else's life, someone who had no inkling of what was coming. But for a few weeks now, he had been catching himself wishing these moments could be over – without having to do anything.

Tretjak sat with his gin and tonic in the foyer of the New Oriental Hotel in Galle, a port town in the southwest of Sri Lanka. He'd flown eleven hours to get there – Lufthansa LH 2016, Munich-Colombo – and sat in a car for four hours. The short, taciturn driver had steered his Peugeot as smoothly as a motorboat, around huge potholes and between donkey carts, swarms of tuk-tuks and un-roadworthy trucks. In a few hours the driver would take him back the same way, back to Colombo Airport in time for flight LH 2017, which took off for Munich in the early hours of the morning. Tretjak had come solely for this evening – to jerk someone out of his state of sleepy naivety.

It was hot in the hotel foyer. The old wooden fans on the ceiling rotated in tired repetitions. One of them squeaked, hanging directly above the black grand piano on the left side of the hall, where the bar was. A group of three Englishmen were perched there, a cocktail in front of each of them. Every now and then one of them emitted an odd burst of short hissing sounds when he found something funny.

Then a brawny man in khaki trousers and a green Ralph Lauren polo shirt walked in through the wide, open entrance door. He was sweating, his face flushed, behind aviator sunshades. He strode purposefully up to the reception desk and said in a deep, loud voice with a slight German accent, 'Room number seven, please.'

Tretjak had stood up and now stepped up to the man from one side, keeping a six-foot distance. 'Congratulations, Herr Schwarz,' he said. 'Number seven is the best room in the house.'

The man turned around, pushing his sunglasses up on top of his head, and looked Tretjak up and down with questioning blue eyes.

'Are you enjoying your little holiday, Herr Schwarz?' Tretjak asked.

The man was now clearly searching his memory. Did he know this stranger from somewhere?

‘Yes, I am,’ he answered in the end. ‘Do you mind me asking –’

‘We need to talk, Herr Schwarz,’ Tretjak interrupted. ‘I’ve reserved a table in the restaurant. Nine o’clock.’

‘I don’t know what...’ The man shook his head. ‘I don’t know you, and I don’t know what we might have to talk about.’

‘Oh, excuse me, my name is Tretjak. We have to talk about your life, Herr Schwarz. I’ve come to change it. With your help, of course.’

The man by the name of Schwarz, about whom Gabriel Tretjak knew more than anyone else in his life, was losing his patience. ‘Listen, there must be some mistake. I’m not planning on changing my life. And I certainly wouldn’t talk to you about it if I was.’ There was an amused glint in his eyes, a sign that he was regaining confidence. He was dealing with some kind of crank, nothing more. ‘There are plenty of attractions here in Sri Lanka but I’m not one of them. Goodbye.’

With these words, he turned back to the reception desk, picked up the brass key to room seven and was halfway to the stairs on the left when Tretjak said, ‘If you don’t get the Union Carry deal you’ll lose your seat on the board. That’s what your supervisory board says, anyway.’

Schwarz stopped in his tracks, turned around and stared at Tretjak.

‘Nine o’clock, Herr Schwarz,’ Tretjak said. ‘Don’t worry about a thing. We’ll get everything regulated.’ He turned to the receptionist. ‘Room number five, please.’ Tretjak took the key, cast a smile at Schwarz, still rooted to the spot in confusion, and walked past him to the staircase.

That went well, he thought. Schwarz was bewildered enough. Once he got to his room he’d realize his wife hadn’t been in touch, and he’d call her. Or rather, he’d try to call her. That would only intensify his bewilderment – under his wife’s cell phone number he’d hear the message: ‘The number you have dialled is not assigned.’ And nobody would pick up when he called the landline.

Tretjak went to his room, put down his briefcase, moved a chair over to the window, sat down and closed his eyes. The windows in the hotel had no glass in them, only shutters with wooden slats. You could hear the sounds from outside, insects chirping, children calling. The New Oriental in Galle was an insiders’ tip, an old hotel in elegant colonial style. The large, dark brown wooden bedstead must have been at least two hundred years old. It stood beneath

a high canopy of net curtains, reaching down to the floor to keep off the mosquitoes. Tretjak wouldn't be needing it. He got up, went into the bathroom and took a long, cool shower. Looking in the mirror, he decided it was time to do more sport. Now that summer was coming he could start jogging straight from his apartment in Munich to the Isar every morning again, along the river, then across Montgelas Bridge to the English Garden and back past the House of Art. Keeping in shape was important to Tretjak. He was 44 now and had been wearing the same size of suits for the past 25 years. His black hair didn't yet show a sign of going grey, and that would presumably stay that way. He got his hair from his mother's side, where there literally wasn't a single grey streak in the entire family. Tretjak's hair was thick and cut relatively long. Now it was wet, and he combed it back out of his eyes.

He took a new pair of underpants out of his briefcase and got dressed again. Dark blue synthetic trousers, a beige long-sleeved T-shirt. He slipped into his dark-brown shoes barefoot. The scent of cut papaya had permeated the room in the meantime, from the fruit arranged in a dish on the table. Tretjak sat back down on the chair by the window and thought about how to start the meeting downstairs in the dining room. He mustn't lose the pace he'd set at reception; he had to keep the tension rolling. Tretjak decided to go down slightly late and excuse himself with, 'I was just talking to your wife on the telephone, Herr Schwarz, and you know what she's like...'

A lot always rode on the first meeting for the mission as a whole, as Tretjak knew from experience. But in this case the matter didn't seem particularly tricky. It was more of a routine job. Tretjak had almost turned it down, not wanting to get bored. But then his client, Melanie Schwarz, said something that made him smile. It was down to those words that he'd be enjoying the *thali* in a few minutes' time, the speciality in the New Oriental's restaurant. He had ordered in advance so as not to lose any time reading the menu and choosing the dishes. The meal, he had been told, consisted of a large number of small dishes of the finest vegetable, meat and fish curries and various sauces, all very spicy and hot enough to bring diners out in a sweat.

Melanie Schwarz felt trapped in a life she wanted to escape but couldn't. A tangled web of her own conscience, responsibilities and lack of courage kept her from leaving, plus her fear of failure in a new life of her own. She had been a minor pop star in her younger years, recording two chart hits: *Now you're alone* and *The truth hurts*. But her career had been short. She soon disappeared from the limelight, once making headlines with an alleged suicide attempt and then vanishing from the public eye altogether. Then she met Peter Schwarz, who built up a safe fortress around her, made up of a family and a high standard of living. By now

their daughter was grown up, training as a dancer in London. They lived in a magnificent rooftop apartment at an exclusive Berlin address and a small restored estate outside of town, equipped with riding stables. Melanie had always loved horse riding, even as a child. Peter Schwarz had made her dream come true. But now she had a new dream. At the end of their meeting she had stared at the sheet of paper on which Tretjak had sketched out the plan, saying, 'I don't have any money of my own. I can't pay you.' Tretjak, a moment ago just about to turn down the job, pricked up his ears. He had looked at her and seen her muster all her courage for her final words: 'In the end you'll have to persuade my husband to pay for your work.'

The lentils were the hottest. Even Tretjak, used to spicy food from a young age, had felt tears in his eyes as he ate them. After a cautious test with a tiny amount on the prongs of his fork, Schwarz hadn't touched them.

The waiter with the rhinoceros face was clearing away the many dishes. All that remained on the table was a carafe of mineral water, an almost full bottle of Haute Medoc and a few glasses.

'Would the gentlemen care for a dessert?'

Tretjak looked quizzically at Schwarz.

Schwarz shook his head. 'Coffee. Espresso. Double espresso.'

Tretjak nodded at the waiter, signalling he wanted the same. Then he reached for the briefcase placed on the floor next to his chair, rested it on his lap, opened it and took out a single sheet of blank paper and a dark blue Parker ballpoint pen, placed them both on the table and returned the briefcase to the floor.

'So she wants to start a new life,' said Schwarz, more to himself than to Tretjak. 'But she can't tell me so herself... She needs someone like you to do it for her. How did she come up with you?' He looked Tretjak in the eye. 'Are you sleeping with her?'

Tretjak didn't bother answering. He gave Schwarz some time. Some people clammed up when they received bad news. Others had to put things into words and repeat them over and over to help them understand. Schwarz was one of the latter. He was upset, that much was clear. His hands trembled as he poured himself a glass of water. The brawny manager was swaying in the unexpected wind.

'Spread her wings, I see... Was that how Melanie put it, or did you think of that? An amicable divorce... a small apartment... just a small sum of money to start her off with... Start off with what? And I'm supposed to talk it all over with you? What's your part in all this anyway?'

The coffees arrived and both men let them go cold in silence, their cups facing each other on the table. Apart from a table in a distant corner, the restaurant was empty by now. The elderly lady sitting over there was immersed in a book. From the kitchen came quiet a clatter, the sounds common to all the world's restaurant kitchens at the end of a long day.

Tretjak was pleased. All he had to do now was explain the rules as clearly as possible to this man in this restaurant in Sri Lanka, a man who would soon be disappearing out of his life again. All he had to do was make it clear that there wouldn't be any talking with his wife for the time being. That his wife had gone away and only Tretjak knew where she was. That she wouldn't come back until everything had been arranged exactly the way she wanted it.

Another hour, Tretjak guessed, and then he'd walk out onto the terrace and wave over his driver.

At that moment, he saw the man from the hotel reception at their table. It was the moment that Tretjak was to keep recapitulating later. He had spotted the man out of the corner of his eye, crossing the foyer briskly, stopping to look around the restaurant and then heading straight towards them. In retrospect, Tretjak was even certain he'd seen him putting the telephone receiver down behind the reception desk before he set out. In retrospect, Tretjak knew very well that he'd reacted impatiently to the seemingly unnecessary disruption.

'Mr Tretjak, there's just been a call for you,' said the receptionist.

The human brain is a decision-making machine. It processes huge amounts of data without interruption, constantly making decisions literally one second after another, at lightning speed, for one sole purpose: securing our survival.

'A call? For me? Are you sure?'

'Absolutely. The caller said they had an important message for Gabriel Tretjak. They didn't leave a name.' The man looked at a piece of paper. '*Winner in the fourth race, horse number 6, Nu Pagadi.* That's the message.'

Even just crossing a road, the human brain performs a genuine feat of strength. It estimates the distance from one side of the road to the other and the time needed to cross it, including stepping down from one kerb and up to the other. It estimates the distance and speed of the approaching car, calculates the time needed for it to reach its own position, taking in the state of the street surface and two cyclists approaching from the right – and then decides: walk or don't walk? If a single one of these calculations is incorrect, a human life is lost, and the brain ends up spread across the asphalt in a sticky mess.

In the New Oriental in Sri Lanka, Gabriel Tretjak's brain decided at that moment that the phone call presented no threat, that it must have been some kind of mix-up. Nobody knew where Tretjak was at that moment. And he'd never been to the races in his life.

So all Tretjak said was, 'Thank you,' and he waited until the receptionist had left, reached for his pen and leaned forward to put a stop to the silence between Schwarz and himself.

'Listen very carefully, Herr Schwarz,' he began. I know you're planning to fly on to Mumbai in two days' time. You want to seal a deal between your company and the Indian chip manufacturer Union Carry.' Tretjak waited a brief moment. 'I also know that there's a plot going on in your own management board. The project will fall through, and the course is set in the supervisory board for your failure to cost you your job as CEO.'

Schwarz stared across the table at Tretjak, at a complete loss. Three hours ago his life had been clear to him, simple, lit up all the way into the remotest corners, a good life with no major problems on the horizon. He had taken a boat trip that 11 May, with a guide of course, who had paddled him inland along a river in a canoe. He'd been for a walk beneath mango trees on a little island, he'd seen alligators on the riverbank. He had sent a text message from the canoe to his daughter in London, who had given him the stay at the New Oriental for his birthday. She'd stopped off there on a trip around Sri Lanka, and when she heard her father had a business trip to India coming up she thought it would be the perfect opportunity for him to take a four-day break. Something a bit different, Dad, not like the air-conditioned, anonymous hotels you usually stay at, something new, something just for you... He had returned to the hotel in the best of moods.

Now he was sitting with a complete stranger, who had revealed to him that his wife wanted to leave him, or rather that she already had left him – and that he was about to lose his job. The company he ran made cooling units. The deal with Union Carry was for an electronic regulation chip that would help make the cooling units more compatible and competitive around the world. That was what his experts had assured him, at least, in an impressive presentation. There had used to be a special seat on the management board for international collaborations. But during cutbacks on personnel the management had wanted to set a good example, and subsumed the post into the CEO's portfolio, who now had to rely on his experts. What did this Tretjak know about cooling units?

'I have a number of documents in my case that will prove what I'm saying,' Tretjak explained. 'Emails, notes, telephone protocols, proof of secret meetings. I'll leave them here with you so you can read them in peace. Not very cheerful reading. I'd like to suggest a very clear arrangement, Herr Schwarz.'

Tretjak pushed the tablecloth aside a little, laid the sheet of paper on the wood as a solid writing surface, and drew a line precisely down the middle of it. ‘On the left hand side I’ll write what *you’re* going to do,’ he said. ‘On the right hand side I’ll write what *I’m* going to do. Let’s start with your jobs.’

Tretjak was speaking very urgently now, not leaving any pauses between his sentences, not taking his eyes off Schwarz. Once he’d finished explaining each point he made a few notes on the paper.

‘Your wife comes from Heidelberg, and she wants to go back there. You’ll open a small bookshop for your wife in Heidelberg, specializing in esoteric literature. The shop will presumably never make a profit, but you’ll support your wife financially and make sure she has a basic income. That and a small apartment at the centre of town, one bedroom, balcony, she doesn’t want anything more than that. You’ll also talk to your daughter and explain to her that you and your wife are separating, that it’s all very amicable, no hard feelings. Your lawyers will prepare the divorce proceedings. And you’ll write a letter to your wife. You’ll tell her you’re not angry, not even about her choosing this way of getting what she wants. You’ll tell her she’ll have a friend in you for the rest of her life. You’ll sell the two horses, but make sure they’ll be comfortable and your wife can visit them; you know how fond she is of them. You’ll talk to Melanie’s parents, and you’ll talk to your own parents. You’ll start planning a family Christmas right away. Perhaps on your beautiful estate by the lake that your wife loves so dearly. Everyone will come over for Christmas Eve, everyone will get on fine. Should you come up against any problems with any of these plans, which I don’t suspect you will, you’ll contact me.’

The left-hand side of the sheet was full now. The notes were lined up neatly one above another, with a dash in front of each one. Tretjak leaned back down to his briefcase, removed a brown folder tied with a strip of leather, and put it down on the table. ‘These are the documents I mentioned,’ he said, reaching for his pen again.

‘My part of the arrangement: I’ll save your job. I’ll make sure your adversaries on the management board leave the company. That the supervisory board gets back behind you. Of course, that will only work if you do exactly as I say.’

On the right-hand side of the paper he wrote: *Eliminate enemies*. And underneath that, with a new dash: *Turn supervisory board around*. Then he added a third dash below: *Double annual bonus*. ‘You ought to have slightly more money in your account at the end of it all. Partly because you’ll have to pay my fee.’

Tretjak was back on the back seat of the Peugeot, heading for Colombo. The drive was even more adventurous in the dark, but the short, taciturn driver gave the impression he knew exactly what he was doing. It was now just before midnight. He calculated the time difference to mainland Europe; it was only afternoon there. He reached for his telephone and dialled the number of a hotel near Sintra on the Portuguese Atlantic coast. Called the *Palacio de Seteais*, it was a small converted palace, delightfully situated on a hill between ancient trees with a view of the sea. Melanie Schwarz wasn't in her room, so he left a message. 'Made good progress towards your bookshop. T.'

Later, on Lufthansa flight 2017, first class, front row, he leaned back and thought about Peter Schwarz, who must have read the documents by that point. He'd found him rather likeable somehow, although it was one of his business principles never to think in those kind of categories. 'You used to be an excellent squash player, Herr Schwarz,' he'd said at the end of their meeting. 'So you know you have to occupy the middle of the court, you mustn't surrender it at any cost.'

There was only one really sensible direction when it came to manipulating a person for the future: backwards. You had to go back to his past. Tretjak had learned that from a CIA psychologist. 'If you fly to Mumbai you'll be a very long way from the middle, in the outermost corner of the court,' he'd told Schwarz. 'The way the game's looking, you mustn't do that. You have to go back to your HQ first thing tomorrow...'

Tretjak turned down the snack he was offered, drinking only a glass of water, adjusted his seat to the horizontal position and fell asleep with the comforting feeling that things would develop just as he'd planned.

When he unlocked his front door in Munich in the early hours, he noticed a minor change. The pile of last week's newspapers on the floor in the hallway was still there. That meant his cleaning lady, good old Mrs Lanner, hadn't turned up. But there could be thousands of reasons for that. Tretjak didn't attribute any significance to this minor change in his everyday routine.

A 8 Autobahn, Berlin – Munich, 6 p.m.

Max Krug had been on the road for almost eight hours now. He'd covered precisely 611 kilometres so far with his black horsebox. Krug had bought the most state-of-the-art version on the market, a double cabin with electronically secured doors and inside walls that could be adjusted at the touch of a button. To the left of his steering wheel was a small screen so that he could see what was going on inside the box. He had installed the highly sensitive webcam himself. It was a kind of high-security horsebox, and that was just what Krug wanted. He was driving an absolute golden goose around, after all. Possibly the best racehorse in Europe, and only four years old. What a future this horse had! Its name was Nu Pagadi, a Russian saying meaning something like 'Just you wait'. Krug had come up with the name himself. He'd studied at a military academy in Leningrad many years ago, as a soldier in the East German army. He'd liked the phrase even then, often used ironically by the Russians: 'Nu Pagadi.' The horse had won Krug half a million euro already. He was too superstitious to think about how much money might follow. Anything could happen to a horse. That was why he'd had it insured for a large sum of money, just in case, and invested more than 100 000 euro in his horsebox.

Ni Pagadi always travelled alone; the left-hand box was empty. The camera only filmed the right-hand box. So Krug didn't see the thick grey blanket lying on the floor since the last stop at a service station, with something concealed underneath it. Something large that didn't move.

It was about twenty kilometres on that Krug first noticed Nu Pagadi getting nervous, restless. The horse snorted, scraped its hooves against the floor, scurried slightly. That made Krug nervous too; Nu Pagadi was usually as cool as a cucumber, even on journeys. Was this one simply too long? Or was something else the matter?

Krug knew all the stories about cranky racehorses on the road, of course. The French super-stallion Ourasi would only get into a horsebox if a little white goat went first. Others were only calm if a certain other horse went along with them, their best friend, so to speak. Was Nu Pagadi starting to get fussy? Krug could see from the screen that his horse was getting more and more restless by the minute. It was obvious he'd have to stop the van. The next car park was coming up in five kilometres. Perhaps Nu Pagadi was just hungry. Krug had everything he needed in that case. He had all the horse's favourite food with him: carrots, bananas, his sweet milk mixture.

The car park Max Krug pulled into was precisely 22.6 kilometres north of the centre of Munich. He was never to forget what happened there. Three months later he would go to a psychologist, a trauma specialist, to try and ban the images of these few moments in the car park from his brain, stop them from stealing his sleep ever since.

Krug entered the security code, the rear door of the truck opened, and he instantly spotted the blanket that didn't belong there, that he hadn't put there. No one could get into the truck apart from him. Krug lifted up the blanket and saw the man, in a brown suit, white shirt, no coat. The man was lying on his stomach, not moving. A slim man with a bald head. Krug instantly thought, I don't know this man, he's a stranger. Perhaps that's what people always think when they see dead men. Dead men always look like strangers. Dead men are supposed to look like that.

Krug tried to feel for a pulse. But there was no pulse any more. Then Krug made the mistake of turning the man over. There was only a small amount of blood to be seen, an insignificant amount. But something had happened to his face. Something terrible. Krug went over and over this scene with his therapist, later. He was supposed to go through the moment over and over again. That was the only way, his therapist said, to get rid of the images one day.

Krug could barely remember anything else that happened in the car park in the hours that followed. The police came at some point, of course. And a second horsebox at some time too, which he led Nu Pagadi into by the reins. He must have made a pretty poor impression, Krug thought later, explaining to everyone in sight how fantastic and valuable his horse was. And that when they had a dead man to deal with... No, one thing he could remember was the name of the detective inspector who questioned him. Nothing much about his appearance – except that he had a prominent scar on his cheek – but Krug had remembered his name. The detective was called Maler, August Maler, and Maler was the name of a famous racehorse that had won the German Derby many years ago. Krug said to his therapist later that he really hoped he hadn't told the detective that, too.

The whole thing made no lasting impression on Nu Pagadi. Krug had him examined; you never know. But everything was fine, physically and mentally. Only two days after the horrifying incident, Nu Pagadi won his next race in Munich, by at least a length as usual. It was the fourth race of the day. Krug's therapist would later say there must be a reason for that German saying that a very insensitive person has skin as thick as a horse.