CHESS STORY

Written by

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Based on, novel by Stefan Zweig

EXT. CRUISE SHIP DECK

Wide shot. The cruise ship is from late 1930 and its deck carries a couple of chess boards at the front of the ship. Seagulls break the silence with their loud squawking as fly around the deck. Small waves hit the cruise ship which swings against the waves' force. Passengers who, after finding out the world's chess champion is on the cruise ship, have gathered to watch in silence MIRKO CZENTOVIC play against other players this afternoon. BUSINESS MAN and DOCTOR B sit far away from the chess player carefully analyzing the game.

BUSINESS MAN dives into his thoughts. He turn his face towards the empty chess board while his head and returns back to DOCTOR B. Hectically he tries to assure Dr. B with a small head gesture. DOCTOR B shifts uneasily.

DOCTOR B
No, really, don't expect too much.

DOCTOR B looks at BUSINESS MAN. BUSINESS MAN stares DOCTOR B in the eyes.

DOCTOR B (CONT'D)
It will be nothing, but a test for me... a test to see whether I...

Close shot to the characters. DOCTOR B turns his head and looks at the sea. BUSINESS MAN still watches him.

DOCTOR B (CONT'D)
Whether I am at all capable of playing an ordinary chess game. A game on a real chessboard with actual pieces and a live opponent... My only interest is postmodern curiosity to know whether that was a chess or madness in the cell. That's all, nothing else.

Camera goes back to wide shot. The gong rings at the other end of the cruise ship and fills up the air. People around them pick up their stuff to head towards the dining room for dinner. BUSINESS MAN looks towards the dining room and fixes his vest.

BUSINESS MAN
Thank you, Doctor B.

BUSINESS MAN turns his back to DOCTOR B, but DOCTOR B puts his softly shaking hand on BUSINESS MAN's shoulder. His face visibly shows nervousness and adds with a stutter.

DOCTOR B
One more thing! Will you tell the gentleman beforehand, so that I won’t appear impolite afterwards: I’ll play just one game...

DOCTOR B drops his hand from BUSINESS MAN’s shoulder and moves it to the pocket of his pants.

DOCTOR B (CONT'D)
I don’t want to fall again into that passionate chess fever... Which I recall with nothing but horror... Anyway the doctor warned me. So you understand, only this one experimental game for myself, and no more.

BUSINESS MAN nods and leaves.

INT. SMOKING LOUNGE - NEXT DAY

Wide shot. BUSINESS MAN, DOCTOR B and a couple of people assemble in the small smoking lounge filled with the natural sun light and dim candle light. Up near the ceiling the walls’ paint has turned yellow from cigarette smoke. Ashes from the cigarettes being smoked in the lounge float in the air. The middle of the lounge is prepared for the match. Only one table is present an old dark wooden chessboard with matching wooden chess pieces and two chairs.

People who come to watch the match turn the chairs toward the table. Two of the ship’s officers join the group a couple minutes later. BUSINESS MAN slowly takes off his jacket and slings it onto the backrest of the chair he has turned toward the chessboard. He notices DOCTOR B coming through the Smoking lounge’s door. BUSINESS MAN tips his brand new beige-colored hat to greet him. His friend MCCONNOR appears behind him.

MCCONOR
It’s a big day! Don’t you think?

BUSINESS MAN
Hello McConnor! Indeed... It is.

MCCONOR
It is almost time.

MCCONNOR takes place in his chair and adjusts his jacket. DOCTOR B is already sitting in his chair and has taken off his hat. He rolls up his sleeves getting ready for the match.

When the old grandfather clock in the far left corner of the room hits 3 PM, its chime rings loudly once, twice, thrice. At the same time, CZENTOVIC appears in the doorway, slowly reaches his chair and sits.

DOCTOR B moves naturally. He talks with his friends and smokes his cigarette while playing the match. He only glances at the chessboard when it is his turn, but CZENTOVIC takes his time to think longer at each turn and interacts solely with the board. A couple of hours later many people leave with the ship's officers. DOCTOR B impatiently pushes his queen forward.

DOCTOR B
Finished!

DOCTOR B smiles. The ones that are left in the lounge lean onto the chessboard. CZENTOVIC stares at the chessboard without moving a single muscle. He does not show any sign of emotion.

DOCTOR B jumps out of his chair. He starts pacing back and forth slowly, increasing the speed as his nerves get the best of him. DOCTOR B's body becomes tense, more intense and irritated. He clenches his hands together. CZENTOVIC slowly raises his hand to emote that he is surrendering. DOCTOR B hears everyone's excitement, voices cheering and he turns back to face the chessboard.

CZENTOVIC
Another game?

DOCTOR B
Of course!

DOCTOR B immediately sits back in his chair and starts setting up the black chess pieces back into place. His mouth curls slowly and his body shivers. BUSINESS MAN anxiously touches DOCTOR B's shoulder.He leans into DOCTOR B's ear and gently whispers.

BUSINESS MAN
No. Not now. That is enough for one day... It's too much of a strain for you!

DOCTOR B stops and loudly laughs.

DOCTOR B
A strain, ha!

He drops the chess pieces he was holding and turns his face to BUSINESS MAN.

DOCTOR B (CONT'D)
I could have played seventeen games by this time instead of all of this lollygagging! Now then! Start!

DOCTOR B picks up his chess pieces back. CZENTOVIC lifts his head and looks at him calmly. He clenches his fist under the table and tries to hold his anger back. He intentionally takes his time to make his first move. DOCTOR B immediately and impatiently plays his round. BUSINESS MAN slowly and cautiously backs up, but he doesn't separate his eyes from DOCTOR B.

After a couple of minutes of waiting, DOCTOR B starts tapping his foot after waiting for long minutes.

DOCTOR B (CONT'D)
Make a move!

CZENTOVIC looks up again to DOCTOR B and smiles.

CZENTOVIC
We agreed on a move time of ten minutes. I won't play with anything less.

DOCTOR B is stunned but says nothing. He taps his foot faster and faster as he waits for CZENTOVIC. He begins to drum his finger onto the table, breaking the peaceful silence that was filling the whole lounge. His face slowly turns red along with the scar on his right hand. He balls his hands into fists. CZENTOVIC looks at DOCTOR B again and raises his eyebrows.

CZENTOVIC (CONT'D)
May I ask you not to drum? I can not play if you do that.

DOCTOR B
Ha!

DOCTOR B starts giggling and relaxes his right hand. While he slowly leans into the chair's back, he tilts his head and holds it with his left hand, index and middle finger while his thumb rests under his chin.

DOCTOR B (CONT'D)
That's clear enough.

CZENTOVIC
What do you mean by that?

CZENTOVIC frowns as he stares at DOCTOR B, but Doctor B slightly laughs again. Doctor B tilts his head to the right.

DOCTOR B
Nothing... Just that you’re obviously very nervous.

CZENTOVIC says nothing and returns to the chessboard. He takes a couple more minutes to move his piece. Everyone around him becomes irritated by the slow pace. DOCTOR B pushes his bishop forward three squares and shouts.

DOCTOR B (CONT'D)
Check! Your king is in check!

BUSINESS MAN and CZENTOVIC immediately check the chessboard. CZENTOVIC looks at everyone in the room with one eyebrow raised. He then returns back to BUSINESS MAN and asks.

CZENTOVIC
Excuse me. But I see no check. Does any of the gentlemen perhaps see?

Everyone in the room leans over the chessboard to see if it is indeed a check. They realize CZENTOVIC’s king is protected by every corner from DOCTOR B’s bishop. Everyone turns to each other with confusion showing on their faces, not knowing what to say. DOCTOR B looks at the room and realizes. He returns to the chessboard to double check his move and squeezes the side of the table with anger and confusion.

DOCTOR B
But... But, the king! The king should be on f7.... That’s wrong...

DOCTOR B digs his hands to his hair. He starts pulling with rising anger but slowly drops his hands back to the side of the table.

DOCTOR B (CONT'D)
Where... Where it is... Completely wrong! Pawn shouldn’t be in there... Pawn should be on G5! Not on G4...

DOCTOR B rubs his chin and stops thumping his foot.

DOCTOR B (CONT'D)
Everything’s in the wrong place on this board... This is a different game... This is...

DOCTOR B stops. Slowly looking up, he stares right into BUSINESS MAN’s eyes.

DOCTOR B (CONT'D)
What... What do you want?

BUSINESS MAN draws his finger over DOCTOR B's scar and looks at him.

BUSINESS MAN
Remember!

DOCTOR B follows BUSINESS MAN's finger and slightly shivers with horror and whispers.

DOCTOR B
Oh my God! Have I said or done something wrong? Am I... Am I in trouble? Again...?

BUSINESS MAN pulls his hand back. He watches DOCTOR Bâ€™s movements to be sure he is back into the real world. DOCTOR B touches his scar that has turned a deep red from the stress.

BUSINESS MAN
No. But... You must end the game immediately. Remember what your doctor told you.

DOCTOR B instantly gets up, snatching his hat from the table and pushes it to his chest. He squeezes the corner of his hat and looks at everyone in the room with embarrassment. His expression relaxes and politely looks at CZENTOVIC.

DOCTOR B
Please forgive my foolish error.

DOCTOR B slowly bows to CZENTOVIC. And looks back at him again. CZENTOVIC raises his right hand politely.

DOCTOR B (CONT'D)
What I said was of course pure none sense.

DOCTOR B backs away from the table and turns towards the crowds again. He sheepishly places back his hat atop his head.

DOCTOR B (CONT'D)
I also beg pardon of the gentlemen. I am sorry to have made a fool of myself... This is the last time I will try my hand at chess.

DOCTOR B bows at the crowd. He looks at BUSINESS MAN for a brief second before walking away hurriedly, bee-lining to the smoking lounge's exit, showing no hesitation. BUSINESS MAN stares at the still swinging door from DOCTOR B's hasten departure.

People around the room put on their jackets, picking up their cigarette packets and lighters that were scattered around the smoking lounge. Some of them bid good day to each other before leaving. CZENTOVIC stays still and puts his finger to his chin while holding the arm of the chair with his right hand. MCCONNOR pats BUSINESS MAN's shoulder.

MCCONNOR
I'll see you tomorrow.

BUSINESS MAN flinches when MCCONNOR's voice pulls him back into the real world. He shakes MCCONOR's hand.

BUSINESS MAN
Of course, McConnor!

Before BUSINESS MAN can finish his sentence. CZENTOVIC cuts him off.

CZENTOVIC
Damned fool!

CZENTOVIC rises from his chair and comes eye to eye with BUSINESS MAN pointing at the chessboard. BUSINESS MAN follows CZENTOVIC's finger. MCCONNOR does not wait to listen to CZENTOVIC has to say and leaves the Smoking Lounge.

CZENTOVIC (CONT'D)
Pity... The attack was not at all poorly conceived. For an amateur...

CZENTOVIC looks back at the chessboard. Clearly BUSINESS MAN has tried to come eye to eye with him again.

CZENTOVIC (CONT'D)
This gentleman is extraordinarily talented...

CZENTOVIC bows his head to BUSINESS MAN in salute and opens the Smoking Lounge's door. The last sunlight of the day hits his face and CZENTOVIC looks at his hat for a second before placing it on his head and walks away. BUSINESS MAN sits onto DOCTOR B's chair. He stares at the black bishop that DOCTOR B has moved last and pushes the black piece with his index finger. The Black Bishop drops onto the board in a small clicking sound. It rolls around the board in a circle.

INT. COFFEE SHOP - ONE YEARS LATER ON AUTUMN AT NOON

Medium shot. Dimly lit in a small coffee shop. The sound of the radio is covered up by the sound of cars in traffic nearby. A few tables are lined up along the coffee shop's window, heated by noon's warm sunlight.

The bell on top of the door makes a sound to warn the waitresses whenever a new client comes in. BUSINESS MAN is sitting at the very corner of the coffee shop with his FRIEND. His jacket slung over the seat while his hat sits right next to his arm resting on the table. WAITRESS walks by and serves their coffee.

WAITRESS
Is there anything else?

BUSINESS MAN turns to WAITRESS. Before he could answer the WAITRESS, FRIEND cuts him.

FRIEND
So... So what happened to him?

BUSINESS MAN smiles at his FRIEND. He looks back at the WAITRESS.

BUSINESS MAN
Thank you, that is all for now.

He returns his attention to his FRIEND that can’t hold their excitement.

BUSINESS MAN (CONT'D)
He never touched the chessboard...
Not!

BUSINESS MAN raises his index finger, almost looking like a warning.

BUSINESS MAN (CONT'D)
Not, even chess pieces. Everyone has barely escaped from something. Something that is awkward and dangerous.

BUSINESS MAN sips his coffee. The FRIEND leans toward him with curiosity.

FRIEND
And?

BUSINESS MAN
So.. Doctor B left. I already know, I would never see him again...

FRIEND’s intrigued smile drops into a frown, looking very disappointed. BUSINESS MAN calls the WAITRESS back with a small wave of his hand. He takes out his wallet and pays for the coffees.

BUSINESS MAN (CONT'D)
It was nice...

BUSINESS MAN gets up, picking up his jacket which he places under his arm, holding his hat into his hands. His FRIEND stares at him with confusion on his face. The only thing the FRIEND receives from BUSINESS MAN is a slight bow as a farewell. BUSINES MAN walks towards the coffee shop’s exit and disappears in the traffic. The only thing that his FRIEND hears is the bell ringing at the door.