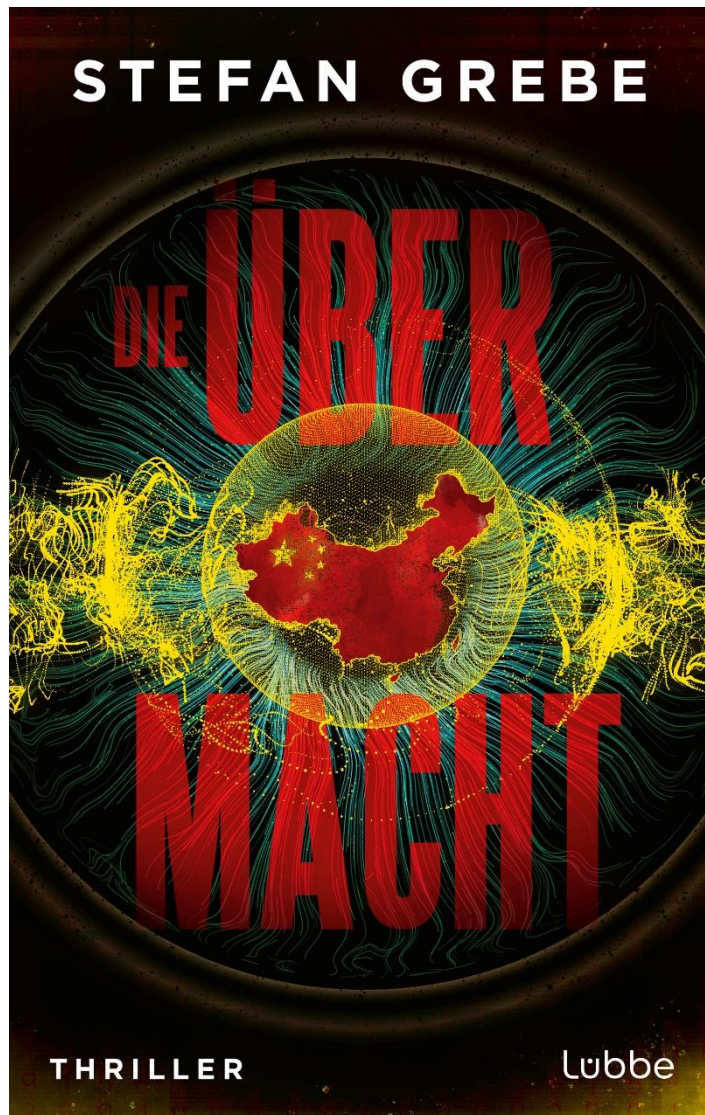


BAS 
TEI 
LÜBBE 

Stefan Grebe
THE GLOBAL SUPERPOWER

Sample Translation by Alexandra Roesch



Thriller

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Synopsis

The plot

The renowned Chinese scientist Jun Jin Bao takes part in a political talk show in Berlin. The cameras recording the live show capture the mysterious and spectacular circumstances of her death. At the top of the show, she had asked for political asylum in Germany and was just about to reveal what she called 'the biggest secret of the Chinese government.

Before an autopsy can be performed at the famous Charité hospital, staff from the Chinese embassy turn up with a purported diplomatic passport of the deceased and carry off the body, thus preventing any investigations by the German authorities.

Given that the Chinese president Xi Jinping is scheduled for an official visit the following weekend, the Chancellor's office asks that the case be kept low profile.

Robert Forster, an ex-operative with the BND – the Bundesnachrichtendienst, the German Intelligence Service – is asked by a former colleague to deal with the matter. His investigation leads him to GenTech AG, a company headquartered in Berlin that conducts genetic research into hereditary diseases. The company is owned by Tom Lee, a Chinese tech mogul trying to find a therapy for his son, who is suffering from atrophy of the muscles. Robert finds out that Jun Jin Bao had been working for GenTech as a scientific consultant and that one of GenTech's two managing directors vanished without a trace the evening before Jun Jin Bao's TV appearance.

At the same time, in Wuhan/China, the police inform Maria Lin, Jun Jin Bao's niece and only living relative, that her aunt has passed away while abroad. They lie to Maria about the cause of death, telling her it was a heart attack.

When she returns to her atelier, in her letter box she finds a small USB stick containing a video file with the German TV show – including footage of her aunt's death.

That very same day, Maria is contacted by the organisation that slipped the stick into her letter box. She agrees to come to a conspiratorial meeting with a member of this underground organisation which calls itself CRA, Chinese Resistance Army.

Through a video message recorded by her aunt shortly before her death, Maria learns that GenTech has been developing something that would change the world forever. Maria's aunt asks her to travel to Berlin, get some documents from a safe deposit box in a bank and make them public in order to alert the world to a secret Chinese plan.

However, there is a major obstacle: the Chinese authorities consider Maria a rebel who takes a very critical stance towards the Communist party. This means her social credit score is very low; so low, in fact, that she is not allowed to travel, neither by train nor by plane.

Developments

The CRA try to smuggle Maria out of the country by secret routes – a highly risky undertaking in a state practising surveillance. Three of her helpers die, and Maria herself gets away only by the skin of her teeth. After a failed attempt to leave China via Hong Kong, her breakneck escape eventually leads her to Taiwan, where the Taiwanese intelligence service joins the fray. From Taipei she continues on to Berlin, where Robert is trying to shed light on the scientist's mysterious death. And that, precisely, is what Tom Lee – who by now has come to Berlin from Shanghai – is trying to prevent, with the help of an operative of the Chinese intelligence service.

The clock is ticking. And this race will cost the lives of another five people as the stakes keep ratcheting up. In a highly dramatic encounter, Robert and Maria meet in Berlin and must agree to collaborate in order to expose the secret plan. This puts their lives at risk not only once, but several times. The furious finale plays out around Xi Jinping's visit to Berlin: the conspiracy

around 'Happy Genes' is exposed in its entirety, and both Tom Lee and the Chinese killer meet their deserved end.

The ending offers an outlook on possible future engagements for the former BND agent Robert Forster. A final twist in the book's last scene closes the loop to the opening and rounds off the plot.

Character Studies

Robert Forster

38 years old, German citizen, widower, living in Berlin. A former BND agent, he was stationed in Afghanistan for a long time during his active duty. In the chaos following the Taliban's takeover of the country in late summer 2021, he lost his wife and daughter, and to this day, he struggles with the resulting trauma. He gets involved in the case through a former colleague at the BND and is tasked with uncovering the mystery surrounding the death of the Chinese scientist Jun Ji Bao in Berlin.

Maria Lin

29 years old, single, Chinese citizen. Her mother is Chinese, and her father is German. She lives in Wuhan, working as an artist and DJ, and is considered a rebel by the authorities. The Chinese police lie to her about the cause of her aunt Jun Ji Bao's death. She learns the true circumstances of her death from a Chinese underground organisation and is determined to bring her aunt's documents to light in Berlin, aiming to warn the world about a secret Chinese plan.

Tom Lee

54 years old, Chinese citizen, married, living in Shanghai. A businessman who has risen to become one of the richest men in the country through surveillance technology. He fell out of favour with President Xi Jinping due to his criticism. He plans to change the world in favour of China with his revolutionary medical product, Happy Genes, which on the surface appears to be a harmless pregnancy test. He hopes to rehabilitate himself with the President through this project. He is determined to prevent the truth about Happy Genes from being exposed at all costs.

Sample Translation

Monday, 1st June, 04:04 pm, a TV studio, Berlin

The biggest secret of the Chinese government.

The handwritten words were carved into the paper like freshly inflicted scars.

The biggest secret of the Chinese government.

Just that one sentence. No sender, nothing.

The note had been crumpled up and relegated to Mark Kopp's waste bin under his desk a long while ago by the time he was contacted again. By email, in German. Had he received the letter? Who are you? Kopp countered, once he had replied in the affirmative.

After some to-and-fro the person revealed their identity and sent a copy of her passport: Jun Jin Bao, member of the Chinese Academy of Sciences. Kopp was rather surprised to see her photograph. A beautiful, petite, quite young looking woman, her straight black hair pressed tightly against her skull. Could she appear in his show? the next mail asked.

Why?

It's in the note, the reply came promptly.

Kopp had a tingling sensation, perhaps this was the coup he'd been yearning for. Quickly, he assembled his editorial team and, ignoring the fact that their expressions ranged from sceptical to disgruntled, he threw out the schedule for tonight's show, uninvited the guests and arranged for the Nano-CT scanner that Jun Jin Bao, in a further email, had requested be present when she revealed the secret.

On his way from the dressing room to the TV studio, Kopp nodded a greeting in passing to the production manager Rebecca Moltke, earning a weak smile and a few words he did not understand.

As he crossed the threshold to the studio he took care, like every Monday, to set his right foot down first on the green cement floor. Even though internally he always shook his head at this silly superstition, he just could not drop it. He lifted his eyes again and stopped, startled. He had not imagined that the machine would be this massive: the beige tube of a mobile nano computer tomograph sat in the studio like some sort of futuristic coffin next to a plain white room divider. The low-volume chatter of the studio audience made a buzzing noise like a swarm of insects. Kopp sat down on his moderator's chair and his assistant Jenny, her blond curls tumbling over her face, fastened his microphone cable. Her face was covered in freckles as if someone has scattered light sand across it.

Kopp hoped that his interview partner would fulfil what she'd promised. He did not like surprises, given that this was a live broadcast. It was risky to engage with this woman, that much was clear.

Kopp felt a drop of sweat trickle down his forehead; he beckoned for Johanna, his personal make-up assistant. What if all this was just some barmy media satire? In order to discredit him, to ridicule his move to a private broadcaster?

As Johanna powdered his broad, square-jawed face, he cast a glance towards the large digital studio clock where glowing red numbers were counting down.

Just over two minutes to go.

Kopp's right knee was nervously bouncing up and down. Where was she? The production manager gave him a signal, and the studio lights came up. On cue, the volume of the audience's buzzing decreased.

One minute to go.

Jun Jin Bao, wearing a grey skirt suit, entered the studio with brisk steps. Kopp had only given her a quick welcome in the dressing room and left it to Rebecca to explain the show's schedule. Now his guest offered a surprisingly firm handshake.

Kopp cast another quick glance at the clock. 00:35.

'Is she wired up?'

'Yes, all's under control, relax,' he heard the voice of Thomas Raabe, the show's director, coming over the microphone from the control room.

00:13.

'Audience quiet, please!' Rebecca called out, and silence settled over the studio.

Like every week, Rebecca lifted her hand, looked at Kopp and counted down the final five seconds on the fingers of her right hand. As she reached zero, Kopp switched on his smile like a spotlight and looked at camera two.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, good evening and welcome to a new episode of *Investigation*, German television’s most exciting talk show. Our guest today is unscheduled, but she promises a sensational revelation. Would you please introduce yourself briefly.’

‘My name is Jun Ji Bao,’ Jun said, her expression serious as she looked Kopp straight in the eye. ‘I am a member of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, and I herewith ask for political asylum in Germany.’

Damn. That had not been agreed on.

Barely suppressed murmurs and whispers scattered through the audience. From the corners of his eyes, Kopp saw Rebecca put a finger to her lips.

‘What prompts you to do that?’ Kopp asked, trying to hide his surprise. He felt a damp patch growing in his armpits.

‘Because after this show, I will be China’s public enemy number one.’

In the woman’s eyes, Kopp detected the unsteady flickering of a hunted animal that found itself trapped. His professional smile turned into a real one; this was a great start. ‘Would you mind explaining that a little?’

Her response was a question of her own. ‘Do you know what the Chinese dream is?’

‘Yes, of course,’ Kopp replied instantly; he hadn’t had the time for more than cursory preparations, but this one he knew. ‘Your president always talks about it. The Chinese dream is to regain former strength and greatness.’

Jun Ji Bao gave him a look that mixed pity and derision, as if he was some stupid party member who obediently trotted out sentences that nobody believed.

‘That’s the version China wants the world to buy into. Today I will show you what the real Chinese dream is.’

She stood up abruptly and pulled her blouse from her pants.

Shit. She had not mentioned any of this upfront.

‘Please, sit down again,’ Kopp said, not very convincingly.

‘This here,’ Jun Ji Bao called out as she held up her blouse with one hand and patted her stomach with the other. ‘This is where you’ll find the biggest secret of the Chinese government.’

Monday 1st June, 09:34 pm, a cellar, Berlin

He strained his ears, listening for any and all noises. Noises meant food. Or pain. Hellish pain. When they came to get him. And he still did not know who they were.

He had to cough, which made his entire body hurt. Surely his arms and legs were green and blue all over, probably even black in some places. His torturers had beaten every part of his body. The worst was that he never saw it coming. Never knew where they would hit next. The bag over his head, made from some opaque material, prevented this. He had no idea how long he had been trapped underneath it. His feeling for time had dissolved like stock cubes in water, leaving behind a cloudy time broth. Two days? Or three? Now his face started itching again from this crappy bag. Sometimes it was scratchy, sometimes itchy. As his hands were tied behind his back, there was nothing he could do about it. At first he had called for help, trying to catch someone's attention. They had not stopped him; after a while, groping around with his hands, he felt the thick wadding of the walls. Since then, he'd spent most of his time lying on the mattress on the floor and trying to move his aching muscles as little as possible.

Was that a noise? He listened as hard as he could. And began to tremble. Pain rolled around inside his head, heavy as an iron ball. Food or pain?

When they brought him food, they also fed him. They pulled the bag up a bit, poured water down his throat and pushed a spoonful of sticky rice into his mouth. At least he would not starve here, he thought as he kept listening into the darkness.

All was calm.

For now.

Until the next interrogation.

They kept asking the same questions.

Where is Jun Ji Bao?

I don't know.

They beat him.

He had no idea what they used to beat him with, but it caused hellish pain. He screamed every time.

What is she planning?

I don't know.

Another beating. More screaming.

He didn't know his torturer's voice. The only clue was his Chinese accent. Had Juan Wang have him kidnapped? Or even Tom Lee?

He should never have accepted their deal. He'd been blinded by all that money.

At some point they'd changed their torture instrument. The new beatings caused a different pain, a thunderstorm coursing through his nerve system, he couldn't even scream any more, he simply had no air left. Only a rattling sound escaped his throat.

At some point he had lost consciousness from the beating. And they'd locked him back in this room.

What else would they do to him? Did they think he was a tough guy? Someone who would eventually talk, you'd just have to ratchet up the level of pain?

That last thought opened all his pores. Panic flooded through him like a tsunami, his heartbeat picking up in high waves.

The itching of the hood on his cheek distracted him, and the fear abated. His thoughts cleared, and for the umpteenth time he went through his kidnapping in his mind. As usual, he had failed to find a parking spot in front of his girlfriend's flat and so had parked his Porsche round the corner. Normally he wouldn't care, but that evening it was bucketing down. Muttering curses, he'd got out and hurried towards Helena's flat. When he'd rounded the corner, he had heard a car speeding up behind him, the wheels kicking up spray. He tried very hard to remember those sounds in order to draw some conclusions from them. He hadn't turned, had not looked at the car. The vehicle had come to a sudden halt. One of the delivery van's sliding doors had been pushed open, and he had heard thumping steps, indicating at least two persons. Steps that quickly drew nearer, splashing through the rain. Just before he'd reached the front door, he had been grabbed from behind, and a hand had pressed a piece of cloth against his mouth. Then everything had gone black.

Once more he ran it all through in his head; no, there'd been no words. They had not spoken, not amongst each other either.

He had woken with the hood over his head, and shortly thereafter the interrogation had begun. Whatever it was they wanted to hear from him, he did not know it. He had no idea who Jun Ji Bao was or what she planned.

A noise startled him.

Food or pain?

His nerves were strung taught like wires. A jangling sound, he heard how a key was inserted, finally the sucking noise the door made as it opened into the hermetically sealed room.

Food or pain?

Tuesday, 2nd June, 01:27, a warehouse, Wuhan

Each beat was like the jolt of an electric current through her blood; her hard techno sound whipped the crowd on the dance floor into movement. Lights flashed through the derelict warehouse. All she could see of the dancing crowd were snapshots, brief moments in time, like a quick succession of photographs.

The man who had just climbed up onto her DJ platform shouted something in her ear, but the music was too loud for her to understand him. She studied him in the light cast by the laptop she used to play her music. He was handsome like the devil, his thick black hair shimmered in the light of the lamp on the DJ desk, his nose was a sharp line drawn with a ruler, his intense gaze simultaneously questioning and demanding. In his late twenties, she guessed. His black t-shirt stretched over taught muscles.

With a smile, she accepted his presence; normally she didn't like to be bothered by strangers when she worked. She searched for the next track in the depths of her laptop and conjured up a seamless transition for the dancefloor. Now she had a few minutes to spare.

She turned to him. He fixed his eyes on her. She leant towards his left ear and took in his scent, he smelled good, very good even.

'I'm Maria, what's your name?' she yelled into his ear.

'Yang,' he shouted back. Or was it Yong?

She grabbed the empty bottle of Snow from her DJ console, held it in his direction and motioned for him to get two more beers for the two of them.

He returned when the next track was playing. The music swallowed the sound of their bottles as they clinked together; she looked into his eyes as she drank. He was just leaning in to say something into her right ear when Maria became aware of something in the corner of her field of vision: the flashing lights were joined by permanently glowing points. Like oversized fireflies, they moved about hectically. The music stopped abruptly. The stroboscope continued.

'This is the police!' a voice bellowed through a megaphone. 'This illegal party is over.'

The severe tone coming through the megaphone was now mingled with multiple terrified voices; like cockroaches in sudden light, the party guests scattered in all directions but found every possibility to escape barred. More and more fireflies poured in through the entrance.

Yang took Maria's hand. 'Come!'

He pulled her away from the console, but she tore free. Two quick steps took her to her laptop; she pulled out the USB stick, grabbed her small backpack and hurried back to Yang. Together they jumped off the DJ platform. After a few steps, they reached the end of the hall. Yang pulled Maria to a huge rusty sliding door covering part of the wall. Pushing with all his strength, he managed to nudge it open enough for them to slip through the crack. Behind this was another hall, several storeys high. Pale moonlight shone through milky window panes. Yang's and Maria's steps echoed through the building. Using a small flashlight, Yang lit the way. At the other end they reached a wall. A door handle glinted in the light of the lamp. Cautiously, Yang opened the door and poked his head through.

'Okay,' he said quietly. 'Everything's calm outside.'

They slipped through the cracked-open door and found themselves looking at a back yard full of construction waste containers. The air was mild, the sky overcast, a gap in the clouds revealed the thin sickle of the moon. A stone wall with a metal gate closed the yard off to the street. The gate was open, and right outside it a street lamp cast its cold light. They ran across the yard and huddled in the shadow of the gate.

'Let me go first,' Maria whispered.

She slipped her backpack over her shoulders, stepped out into the street and the pool of light and looked around. To the right, this was a dead-end; to the left, about a hundred yards away, another street crossed. Maria squinted to check for CCTV cameras but could not see any in this darkness. The party organiser had said that this area was not yet infested by cameras.

She beckoned for Yang and took his hand. Her body was taut with tension, her pulse pounding in her head. The sound of their steps walls echoed off the walls. The buildings to the left and right of the dead-end hovered like cadavers. Signs of decay were visible everywhere in the light of the moon, broken window panes here, missing roof tiles there, the burnt remains of an attic. Suddenly, as they were halfway to the street crossing, a police car appeared, drifting into their field of vision like a sleepy crocodile.

Yang pulled Maria into the shadows of a wall.

The crocodile stopped. And suddenly opened its eyes wide, shining a searchlight around the area.

Just before the light beam hit them, Maria propelled herself off the wall and rushed to the other side of the street, disappearing down a narrow alley between two plots of land.

'Stop! Stay where you are!' a tinny voice came from the police car's speaker.

They didn't even hear the doors slam shut anymore; it was swallowed by the buildings. Yang kept close behind Maria. The light of his lamp danced

before her nervously. Her feet flew across the ground. Somewhere, a dog barked. Yang and his lamp overtook her. Behind them, the police were shouting orders. In the pool of their light, a turn-off to the right appeared, and they tore around the corner and immediately came to a small cross-roads. Onwards to the left. Suddenly Yang reached for her hand and brought her to an abrupt stop.

‘Quick, climb across,’ he whispered and shone his torch onto a wall next to them which ended half a metre above their heads. The thudding boots of the policemen were approaching fast. Yang folded his hands for Maria to step in, stirrup-style, and hoisted her up onto the wall. The thudding boots were threateningly close, only a few more moments away. Maria jumped off the wall and into the darkness, her heart racing. As she landed, she twisted her ankle and suppressed a cry of pain. Then she saw Yang’s hands grabbing hold of the edge of the wall, and he pulled himself up. He shone his light downwards, saw Maria at the foot of the wall and jumped. He switched off his lamp at once. It was pitch dark. The next moment, the police boots galloped around the corner and past them.

Maria was breathing hard.

‘Close call,’ she whispered, panting, her words directed more to herself than at Yang. She guessed more than she saw him nodding.

‘You don’t have a mobile phone on you, do you?’ Yang whispered, his breath pumping.

‘Course I don’t, what’re you thinking?’

Nobody with any common sense would bring their mobile phone to an illegal techno party. Digital surveillance was far too comprehensive for that these days.

‘Good. Then they can only find us with infrared cameras. But I don’t think that they consider a party worth that effort.’

‘Still. It’s getting worse all the time,’ she whispered.

Yang nodded. The party’s most recent campaign was directed at all things Western. Fashion. Art. Films. Music.

All China needs is China.

Everywhere in the cities, the party’s new slogan was displayed on huge billboards. TV spots had celebrities singing a song specifically composed for this purpose, with the slogan in the chorus.

Yang, quietly humming the melody, imitated this song in a whisper. A smile played around Maria’s lips. Then the corners of her mouth froze.

‘Shit,’ Yang whispered.

A nasty buzzing.

Like a big insect. Hunting for human prey.

Yang leapt to his feet. ‘A drone, quick, we have to get out of here!’

‘Wait,’ Maria said. ‘We stay here.’

She unzipped her backpack, reached inside and pulled out a small package. Yang looked down at her. The buzzing of the drone became louder.

Moving quickly, Maria unfolded a blanket that crackled and shimmered in the moonlight when she spread it out.

‘Quick, lie down,’ Maria whispered and looked up at Yang. A broad grin stole across his face. The insect was now hovering somewhere above the neighbouring plot. She stretched out on her back next to him on and pulled the gold foil over both of them.

‘You have to embrace me,’ she whispered. ‘This is meant only for one.’

They both turned on their sides, looking at each other. He slipped an arm underneath her torso and pulled her close. Her mouth touched his neck; she breathed in his scent.

The buzzing was approaching fast.

Maria barely dared to breathe. The drone flew over the wall. The buzzing got louder. It crossed above them and moved away again. With an audible sigh, Maria exhaled. Then she froze.

‘Fuck,’ Yang breathed.

The insect was returning.

Maria could feel the beating of her heart inside her head. The buzzing was right above them. The drone hovered in place. A drop of sweat made its way from Maria’s hairline down her forehead. The sound of the drone’s motor was echoing inside her head, mixed with the whooshing noise of her blood. Come on, bugger off already, she prayed. But the sound did not change. It felt like an eternity, time as viscous as tar.

Finally. The buzzing moved away.

They stayed in their position and listened as the noise got quieter and quieter. Only once it was gone completely, they loosened their embrace and crept out from underneath the blanket. They struggled to their feet, patting down their clothes.

Maria’s eyes searched Yang’s expression. He noticed this and smiled. Their eyes locked.

‘This wasn’t your first escape, right?’ he asked, leaning in.

She shook her head.

‘Thank you,’ he said quietly.

They kissed.

Tuesday, 2nd June, 06:24 am, an office tower, Shanghai

The morning sky was reflected in his spectacles. The glass facades of the surrounding skyscrapers were glowing in various shades of orange and red, depending on the angle at which they were hit by the light of the rising sun. Tom Lee loved the view from the top floor of his company's headquarters, but this morning he had no time for the beauty of the scenery.

The news from Germany were rotating inside his head like bumper cars gone out of control, at top speed and with no way to stop them.

He stood motionless at the panorama window looking out onto the Huangpu river, playing out possible consequences in his mind.

The biggest secret of the Chinese government.

Damn it. So far it had only been his biggest secret; the government knew nothing about it. He had planned it to be a surprise for the president, a sign of repentance and reparation. Showing that he'd learnt his lesson.

Having had him disappear for several weeks, which had triggered wild speculations about the why and wherefore, had been an unambiguous message. He loved to bask in the spotlight of public admiration, but that spotlight would be snuffed out for good should he ever criticise the president again in public. By now, President Xi was a monolith of Chinese society, against which any other ego had to break.

Lee's fifty-four-year old bones still remembered the time he'd spent in a bare, unheated cell in a prison somewhere in the mountains – the only indications of its location were the snow-covered peaks behind the barred windows and the brutal cold. A solitary cell, tiny, furnished with nothing but a stainless steel toilet and a black bed frame; all this had been etched deeply into his memory and his dreams.

Last night he'd woken again bathed in sweat. And yet, his dream was the same as his president's. This century was theirs for the taking. All he had to do to confirm that was look out the window: what did New York, London or Paris have to offer compared to this view?

Lee started pacing back and forth the twenty yards along the panorama window. He found it easier to think when he moved. His reflected image paced alongside him, mirroring his narrow lips, broad nose, the eyes that were set close together, the high forehead underneath the severely parted hairline.

His 2,000 square feet office was furnished with conspicuous simplicity: a desk, two visitors' chairs and a huge Lichtenstein painting opposite the windows. When planning the layout for this room, he had taken inspiration from German architects from Hitler times: build large rooms,

furnish them sparsely and ensure that visitors have to walk the entire length of the room to get to your desk. That will intimidate them.

For visitors walking from the door to Lee's desk – consciously chosen to be delicate, made of glass – every step would make the view more and more breath-taking while reducing their ego.

Lee slumped into the black leather chair behind his desk and turned his back on the city. Impatiently, he jerked open the top drawer, pushed aside a leather folder and dug out the pack of cigarettes. Would they forgive him for going it alone? Sure, he'd needed permission from the party to acquire that company in Germany, but what the scientists there had discovered was unknown to the party cadre. So far.

Damn, he should have known: women just were too squeamish. Jun Ji Bao may be brilliant, but she was just a woman after all. From now on, he would only take men into his confidence. Of course the party would trace everything back to him, her employment as consultant for the Berlin-based GenTech AG was no secret. He heaved an audible sigh, returned to his desk and took a sip of his tea, which had gone cold.

'Assistants.' The voice control system in his office connected him to the outer office. A red diode set into the glass of his desk began to pulsate gently, reminding him of the existing connection.

'What can I do for you?' the smoky voice of the younger of his two assistants, Kaiwen, asked from the speaker on his desk.

'Is there any appointment today I cannot cancel?'

Kaiwen cleared her throat, hesitated briefly and then said, 'Well, that depends.'

'What do you mean?' Lee asked, irritated.

'If you want to avoid getting into trouble with your wife, there is one appointment you should honour.'

'What...?' Of course, the premiere of her new film this evening. Bugger. 'Okay. In that case, book me on the first flight to Berlin tomorrow morning. Open return. Over.'

This last word disconnected him for the assistant's office. Less than five seconds later, the yellow diode next to the red one began to pulsate. His assistants asking him to check in.

'Yes.'

'Mr Lee,' came the pointed voice of his second assistant. 'The office of the president wants to speak with you.'

Already? That didn't bode well.

Suddenly an ice breath of air blew through his office. Just like in the cell. At least that's how it seemed to him.

Lee breathed in and out deeply twice. 'Okay. Put them through.'

Tuesday, 2nd June, 08:07, flat, Berlin

The buzzing of his mobile phone on the bedside table seemed like the ringing of church bells right next to his head. Robert Forster cursed quietly into his pillow, his right hand fumbling for the phone.

'Hello?' His voice sounded as rough as he felt.

'Robert? Markus here. Markus Mohrmann.'

Robert's head was thrumming, his mouth was dry, and his tongue felt as if covered in fur. He wondered how late it had got yesterday and had to admit that he didn't have the foggiest idea. He tried to cobble together bits and pieces of memory of last night but that didn't help. All he remembered that he had lost. Too much. Yet again.

'Can I call you back later?'

'No you can't. Don't you know what's going on?'

'Should I?'

'Are you living in a parallel universe?'

'What're you talking about?' Robert managed to mumble.

'My God,' Mohrmann groaned. 'Don't tell me you haven't heard yet.'

Robert, understanding f—all, kept silent.

'Okay, I'm going to send you something, have a look and come in as soon as you can. I have a job for you. Usual payment.'

'What am I supposed to do?'

'I'll explain in person. When can you be here?'

'An hour. Perhaps a little more.'

'Okay. Hurry.'

In the bathroom, the morning was trying to breach the grime of long untended windows. Robert popped two Aspirin for his head and added some Ritalin for stimulation. That was a left-over from the time when uppers and downers were staple food for him. When he had returned to Berlin, he'd had a proper collapse, the one you get when the rug is pulled out from under your feet and you discover there's no floor underneath, just a bottomless pit. These days, he only took those pills when there was no other way. Like today. From the mirror, a grim version of himself looked back at him, eyes milky with fatigue, skin as sallow as his mood. His light eyes dominated a face full of contradictions. The narrow nose was a sharp contrast to full lips forming a wide mouth; a square, dimpled jaw completed the picture. In former days, his brown curls, muscular body and intense blue eyes gave him the look of a race driver or fighter pilot, in any case a daredevil, but those days were over. As he inspected himself, turning his head sideways, he wondered if those curls had thinned any further. His scalp shimmered

through here and there, his fear of going bald before he turned forty seemed about to materialise. You look like shit, he thought, grinning awkwardly at his opposite.

As he left the shower, he noticed the overflowing laundry basket and resolved to deal with that when he got back. An image popped into his head, and he froze. Cino had shown up late last night. That wasn't his real name, but it was what Robert called him. As a matter of fact, the small, stocky Chinese had never introduced himself. Cino had sat down next to him shortly after Robert had settled at the roulette table and had wordlessly held out his hand.

'No holiday pay today,' Robert had said, trying to make it all sound like a game, but he knew only too well it wasn't.

'You have one last week,' Cino had said without even the hint of a smile. 'Plus interest. Or you'll have to pay in a different kind of currency.' Then he had left. The entire evening had passed without Robert catching sight of him again, perhaps because Cino had left the club again quickly or perhaps because he'd had too much to drink.

Entrusting his luck to a small ball was his usual m.o. when he was too drunk to play poker. That little ball worked no matter his state.

A wave of disgust at himself came over him as he got dressed. So often he had resolved to put an end to these drunken nights, but something inside him always failed. Kabul and the fall-out had led him to this life, a life whose limits were frequently as hazy as the memories of last night. A thrumming head and an empty wallet were often the only indications when, in the morning, he felt as if the world had simply vomited him out at the end of the night.

During breakfast, his brain was still wrapped in fog. He downed two double espressos and added a bowl of muesli to soak up the remaining alcohol in his stomach. As he ate, he watched the video on his mobile which, the night before, two million people had watched live and which by now had garnered six million clicks.

The clip ended. 'Holy shit,' he mumbled.

[END OF SAMPLE]