

THE LADY WITH THE TAIL

My mysterious client contacted me for the first time at a very inconvenient moment. A cousin had brought his video camera round to my apartment and we were filming a screen test for television when the phone rang. "Hello, Dr. Markus Hertz."

"Hi. I was wondering if you could help me with some historical research."

"I'm very busy at the moment. Can I ring you back?" I had no intention of ringing him back and thought his unsolicited phone call was not just bad mannered, but an intrusion breaking my flow of concentration.

"It's about a nun."

"Sorry?"

"The research. It's about a nun. I'm trying to find out the name of a nun."

"Can't you look in the phone book? Nunneries have telephones, you know."

"In the 14th Century?"

I heard my cousin helping himself to food in the kitchen. He said I had wandering arms when I spoke to camera and until he came back I couldn't do anything about them. I sat down and asked the mystery caller what on earth he was talking about.

"She was a nun in Lüne Abbey, probably around 1360 or thereabouts. I'm trying to find out her real name."

"Unless they were lost to fire there could be registers of the nuns from that period. But even if you had the list how would you know which is the nun you're looking for?"

"Because the one I'm looking for had a tail. . . ."

I hung up.

My cousin came back with a bowl of fruit salad. "Who was that?"

"Some crank, I don't know."

"What were they selling?"

"They weren't selling anything. He was looking for a nun with a tail."

"Tale about what?"

The phone rang again and gave me an opportunity to apologise. When he said tale I thought he meant tail. . . . "Hello, Dr. Markus Hertz."

"I think we got cut off just then. My train passed under a bridge."

"Yes, you were telling me this nun had some kind of tale to tell."

"No, sorry. You misunderstood what I was saying. I meant she had a tail. Like an animal's tail."

I hung up again and left the phone off the hook.

The following day I discovered my mystery caller had rung me from a train heading for my home city of Lüneburg. He must have known all about me, my position at the university, my interest in Medieval studies, and the fact that on my way home I always stopped for a drink in the same cafe near the town hall.

He found me at my favourite table and sat down. “Nice city,” he said removing his dark grey scarf. I noticed he was scared around the base of his neck and along the top of his collar bones. Deep, but healing scars. “Didn’t they kill a load of Nazis here?”

“The Belsen Trials in 1945.”

“Yeah, I read about it on Wikipedia. I read some stuff about the abbey too, but there’s no mention of the executions.”

“Which executions? Belsen or the abbey?”

“In 1359, seventy-two nuns were executed for heresy.”

“Well if it’s not on Wikipedia it obviously didn’t happen.” I hadn’t forgotten he was looking for a nun with a tail, but my main concern now was what I had to do to get rid of him. A scarred stalker, obviously delusional, you couldn’t make it up. However, it would probably make great television. As the mystery man spoke I made an obvious point of checking my phone for messages and sent an email to my literary agent Sabine with a proposal for a television programme.

Have a nutcase with me, but what he wants would make a good documentary. Will call with details.

“I don’t expect all this for free,” he said.

I missed the details.

“I can pay you a daily rate for your fees. A thousand euros or whatever you guys charge.”

“Are you serious?”

He leaned his shaven head towards me and grinned. “Deadly serious, Dr. Hertz.”

He left me with nothing more than a date and a conundrum. 1359, find the name of the nun with the tail who was executed for heresy. But I already knew there were no nuns executed at Lüne. It was a Benedictine abbey in a Hanseatic city. It wasn’t Bamberg in the middle of the witch trials, there was too much money to be made to go round accusing everyone of witchcraft.

But my mysterious client offered so much money. Even if this was a hoax, I could still play it to my advantage. I rang Sabine to see if she got my email.

“You’re ringing me to see if I received your email? Why not just ring to tell me what you wanted to say in your email?”

“I was in a meeting. I couldn’t ring you.”

“What was the email?”

“Haven’t you read it?”

“What was in the email, Markus?”

“Some guy has offered me a thousand euros a day to find the name of a nun executed in 1359. I think we could pitch this story to someone, make a documentary. . . .”

“Markus, I’ve already told you. You’re not made for television.”

“I’m working on my image. I can talk to camera without waving my arms around.”

“Markus, when you get a moment from your lucrative research deal can we meet to discuss your modest book publishing deal?”

“Okay. I’m free on Friday afternoon.”

“I’m not. Two weeks on Thursday morning?”

I was free on the date and we agreed a time. I told her I’d know more about my mysterious brief, if I wasn’t dead, that is. Sabine told me to stop being dramatic.

She should have been there when I approached Brother Alfred, Alfred Hoeglitz, who managed the archive at Lüne Abbey. I found him in the gardens guiding two Chinese students around the grounds. He spoke no Chinese and they spoke very little German, so the conversation looked like very bad sign language.

He left them a moment to ask what I wanted. “I’ve had a strange request, Brother Alfred, I don’t know if you can help.”

“Spit it out, Dr Hertz.”

Brother Alfred’s English colloquialisms always caught me off guard. “Yes. 1359, did anything happen here at the abbey?”

“It’s a bit before my time.”

“Well, obviously. But anything in the history books? I thought I knew the abbey’s history, but I’m not aware of anything happening in 1359.”

“Like what?”

“Like, a scandal or something. Execution. . . .” I waited for him to stop staring at me. His Chinese guests studied the bare courtyard bushes, laughing and photographing each other against the Gothic windows.

“No. Nothing like that here. You’ll have to excuse me, I’m busy.”

Off he went. His abruptness was uncharacteristic of the Brother Alfred I had grown to know over the five years I had lived in Lüneburg. He had a sense of humour which could be very sharp. He once told me I had the right face for radio, which at the time I thought was quite original until I discovered it was a popular joke about ugly celebrities. No, Brother Alfred’s dismissal was more than an urgent need to get back to his giggling guests, and he looked annoyed when he found me in the corridor outside the abbey library.

“I know you’re eager to get your face on television, but I didn’t have you down as a tabloid journalist.”

“I only asked about an execution, Brother Alfred.”

“There were no executions at the abbey, not in 1359 or at any other time in its history.”

“What about the Reformation? There were objections to changes in the observances.”

“That was 1528. How long were these so-called executions going on for? Did the victims put up a struggle?”

“No, no. Someone asked me about a nun in 1359 here at the abbey. He’s obviously mistaken.”

“Yes, he is, isn’t he.”

“Would it be possible to. . .” I shouldn’t have hesitated; the pause gave Brother Alfred an opportunity to calculate his answer.

“No.”

“Could you look for me? All I want is a list of the names living at the abbey in 1359.”

“I’m not becoming tangled up in your sensational hunt for sordid gossip.”

“It’s not sordid gossip, it’s a perfectly legitimate request.”

“I know what you’re up to.”

“What am I up to?”

He created a frame with his fingers. “Television,” he said and reversed into his office. “It doesn’t suit you, Dr. Hertz.” When the door closed in my face I imagined the sound of the lock, the door being broken down in ten years time and Brother Alfred’s mummified corpse found after a long search.

I rang the number given to me by the mystery man. “Bad news. I need to get into the archives of the abbey, but I’ve been told to get lost. You don’t owe me anything.”

“Don’t worry,” he said. I hoped the news would put him off. The money was attractive, but I didn’t need it. “I can get into the archive if you tell me what to look for.”

“What? Hang on a minute.” I stepped away from Brother Alfred’s eavesdropping office door. “You can’t do that. Breaking in is an offence. I’m not getting mixed up with something like that.”

“Who said anything about breaking in? What do I need to look for?”

I didn’t sleep very well that night. Brother Alfred’s mood upset me, but images of the mystery man kept me awake; his face scared me, the way his jaw came forward when he grinned making him look like a gargoyle. Yes, I admit it, his face scared me. He didn’t call the next day, or the day after, and I hoped he had given up his quest, thwarted by the obstinate locks of the abbey library.

Enough time passed for me to leave two messages with a producer friend in London. She was the director of an independent production company responsible for several documentaries on history broadcast by the BBC. My presentations to camera were improving and even my over-critical cousin admitted my arms were now fully under control.

Just before mid-day on Tuesday I left the hairdressers and was on my way to the cafe when I heard a whistle. The mystery man was back.

He hunched his shoulder and the rucksack hanging off his back. “I got it,” he said and displayed his gargoyle grin. “Where can we go to look at it?”

“What the hell . . . How?”

“Don’t ask.”

I didn’t. The cafe would be too busy to sit peering at a stolen 14th Century document, so I suggested we go back to my office at the university.

Even though I was eager to see this document I made an excuse to keep the meeting brief. “I have some seminars from one o’clock today. Have you looked at the document?”

“Yeah. Doesn’t tell me much. Just a load of names and the handwriting isn’t too clear either.”

I found a pair of gloves and opened the register on the table. He was right. “Did you wear gloves when you handled it?”

“No. I took care not to spill anything. What’s the problem? Grease from your hands or something rotting the pages?”

“The oils in your hands. I suppose one person opening it once won’t have caused too much damage. What have you been doing with it?”

He grimaced, turned his head, scraped his fingers across his unshaven chin. “Nothing. It’s okay. It hasn’t been under any table legs if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Table legs were the least of my worries. The vellum pages cracked with distress when I moved them. I held my breath hoping they wouldn’t snap.

“Page after page of names,” he said. “None of them mention tails.”

“What makes you think she had a tail?” I studied the pages, the weak handwriting, the ancient names. The sound of fingers scraped against chin.

“It’s just something I heard about. I was curious.”

“Curious. A thousand euros a day sounds like something more than curiosity.”

“Yeah. I’m not paying you for the last few days. I got this document, not you.”

“No, that’s fine. I fully understand.” With great relief I closed the final page of the register. There was no mention of a tail. “I spoke to the monk at the abbey who looks after the archive. He wasn’t aware of any executions in 1359. You either have the date wrong or the abbey wrong.”

“No, it’s definitely this one.” He tapped the register before I could pull it away from his unprotected finger.

“Well, the person who told you, couldn’t he help you find the name?”

“It’s a she actually, and no. She’s not the helpful type.” He noticed the time and stood to leave. “I’ll let you keep the document. You might have a flash of inspiration or something.”

“I’ll make sure it’s returned safely.” I reminded myself to check it was the original. The man had held onto it long enough to make a copy, although I wasn’t sure how long a forger needed to make a copy this good.

I cancelled my fictitious seminars and forgot about lunch. For the first time since meeting my mystery client I felt drawn into his search, hooked by the perplexing nature of his seemingly impossible request and headed for the city archives held in Lüneburg’s Principality museum.

My initial search was for executions and there were a lot of those for offences ranging from murder to slander. The further back in time I went the more sparse the details became. The 14th Century revealed little. And with nothing resembling a 1359 tabloid newspaper the amount of gossip and rumour at the local level, anything newsworthy amongst the lower classes of Lüneburg, was simply not recorded.

I did find illustrations, woodcuts, general scenes of general activities: a lady in a garden, a carpenter constructing a table, a procession of merchants, a new cargo ship in Hamburg. No execution pyres, no flaming heretics, no anguished nuns perishing in the tongues of an inferno.

The next tactic was to adopt a linear approach, think outside the box. Who was in Lüneburg at that time? It was a Hanseatic city, people coming and going from all sorts of places bringing their stories and lurid accounts with them. Maybe the mystery man's mystery nun appeared in a third hand account of an execution in Delft or Salzburg or Florence, but the longer I searched the quieter and emptier the reading room became until I was the last man standing, scanning with exhaustion and a small amount of tedium a list of European folk tales. The closest mention I could find to a nun with a tail was the description of a Swedish mythological figure called a hulder or huldra.

Creature found in forests, usually female, found across Scandinavian countries, seductive, occasionally protective, related to other creatures such as mermaids

One of the reading room lights blinked. A signal for me to leave. Outside, the early evening chill bit into my skin and shadows began to creep away from the buildings, following pedestrians including me as we scurried home. One shadow caught my attention, a figure walking in a circle, tracing the circumference of a pool of light beneath a street lamp. The figure saw me and approached.

A young woman, hands stuffed into the pockets of her black leather jacket, face partially concealed by a hood, watched the traffic when she spoke. "How's the search going?"

I detected a slight Mediterranean accent, possibly Italian, but tempered by a southern English pronunciation of her words. "Who are you?"

"Have you cross-referenced the names in the document against things like births or deaths?"

"How do you know what I'm looking for?"

She continued to avoid eye contact even when I tried to step in front of her. "It's only a hunch, but in those days people born with disfigurements or ginger hair might have been hidden away in a monastery or an abbey or something. Imagine being born with a tail, I mean, how you gonna get your kid in a school if it has a tail whipping about all over the place."

"Who are you?" The obvious answer, I suppose, was mystery man's girlfriend or wife or partner or possibly the 'she' who had told him about the executions. Here she was trying to torment me with the same ridiculous goose chase.

"Only trying to help." She walked away into the darkest shadows of the city down a narrow side-street. I watched her go, determined to see her walk away and not vanish or fly off above the rooftops, or what was I thinking, sprout a tail and go running towards the heathlands.

On the way home I teased myself by reasserting the fact that the hulder lived in forests not on heathlands or city centres, but the woman had a point: cross-reference the names. I still had the register, I could disguise it inside another book and return to the museum.

In the swirling confusion of the research I nearly forgot an appointment with Magdalene, a friend of a friend of a friend, who owned a pagan book shop. I had reluctantly agreed to host a book signing session once a publishing date was known. Now it was known. Magdalene sat behind the counter of her shop, hidden by mugs decorated with Tantric signs, and dive-bombed by papier mache witches.

The door bell tinkered, I caught my head on a dangling pentagram and apologised for being late.

“My mother told everyone I had the gift of precognition,” she said sticking a price tag onto a Lüneburg calendar. “I knew you’d be late.”

“You don’t need to be a medium to guess that.”

Magdalene sighed. “Mediums don’t predict the future.”

“Mediums. Plural. Shouldn’t that be media?”

“Can we get on with why you’re here?”

Any visitor to Magdalene’s shop would have been astonished that a book signing was possible. There was barely room for two people without being threatened by the hanging paraphernalia and floor to ceiling piles of hermetic and occult furnishings. The shop was called Cornucopia. It should have been called Claustrophobia.

Magdalene introduced me to my signing space. “I can put the table here between the window display and the pewter jewellery.”

“Will there be room for a chair?”

“There’s a stool.” She pointed at the legs visible beneath the table. “This is how it’ll be on the day. If it’s all right I’ll put the table back in the loft.”

In addition to the whimsy the shop had a large bookshelf containing a mixture of academic and sensationalist titles, self-published guides and second hand paperbacks. “Do you sell anything about local folklore?”

“One or two titles, I think.” She found one. ‘Lüneburg Mysteries, Ghosts, Spirits and Haunted Properties.’

“Anything about the abbey?”

“Not that I know of. Not here. Is there something in particular?”

If Magdalene’s mother was right, her daughter would have known what I was going to say next. No point keeping it secret. “I heard a story about a nun with a tail.”

“Ah, that would be Adelhait Hoegensche.”

“What? How do you know that?”

“I thought everyone knew that.”

“She was a nun?”

“No, of course not. She was a local witch. Lived in the Ubelriechendenhaus. It’s all gone now, but the area was countryside at the time.” Magdalene pushed her way towards the shop window. “No one went there. The name roughly means a house smelling of . . . you can imagine the rest.”

“What’s there now?”

She offered to show me to drop me off at the university and show me on the way. What had been Ubelriechendenhaus was now a collection of converted buildings from the 1970s used as office space. Magdalene left the car and stood facing an open patch of brown grass. “Rather appropriate really. This is roughly where the house might have stood. Not everyone agrees, but I think it was around here somewhere.”

The vegetation refused to flourish as if the ground knew about its own past, the reputation, the local name, the house smelling of . . . I didn’t want to say it either. Facing that patch of grass made brown by shame and guilt I felt the first indication that I was reconstructing the legacy of a real life. A life cursed by suspicion and misunderstanding, a lonely woman living on the edge of survival, shunned by her neighbours, cast out by her community. And for what? A knowledge of herbs, an acute understanding of nature?

“Well, the locals said she had sex with a bull.”

“Oh, Magdalene, for goodness sake.”

“I didn’t write the books. Frau Hoegensche was thought to be a sorceress. Her familiar was a bull and she’s alleged to have had sex with it to curry favour with the Devil.”

“Is that why she entered the abbey? I’m surprised they’d have her.”

“No, I told you she wasn’t a nun. The stories say she had a daughter who was born with a tail. . . .”

A fresh gust of cold wind fled the grassy void, freezing the moisture in my eyes and driving a rippling shiver along my back. Magdalene continued to speak, but I didn’t hear the words. Nothing else was relevant, none of it mattered. Adelhait Hoegensche’s daughter had a tail. Now the words of the hooded woman outside the museum made sense. Cross-reference the names in the register.

“It’s a fascinating story, Magdalene. I’ll keep you updated.”

“On what?”

“On my research. It was a friend who asked me about the nun. He’ll be interested to know about what you’ve told me.”

Back in my office I locked the door, unlocked the drawer to my desk and studied the register, examining every name with diligence until I came across Jutta Hoegens. It was similar to Hoegensche, but without the feminine ending, perhaps deliberately excluded to indicate the lack of a human father; a reminder of the shame she had to carry. I looked online for Adelhait Hoegensche, hoping to find a connection. She wasn’t a figment of Magdalene’s imagination and more importantly, all the accounts agreed she was born between 1280 and 1290 and died sometime between 1330 and 1340.

The office phone rang. I jumped, closed the register and tried to lock it away at the same time as answering the phone. “Hello, Dr Markus Hertz.”

“Yes, I know it’s you, Dr. Hertz. I need to meet you sooner rather than later.”

My stomach lightened. Professor Matheus wanted to speak to me sooner rather than later: his favourite euphemism for you're in trouble.

Such was the urgency, Professor Matheus agreed to meet me the following morning at 8a.m. When I entered his office I found myself in front of the faculty's great and good. A panel of three professors, the accumulated knowledge of their academic life totalling one hundred and sixty years pulling their faces into their necks.

Professor Matheus played with his spectacles to emphasise his main concerns. "Had an informal encounter with Brother Alfred Hoeglitz the other day. He's worried about you."

"Oh?"

"Why would he be worried about you, Dr Hertz?"

"I'm guessing you already know the answer."

"Yes I do." The others did too, nodding in unison, their combined gaze superheating my face.

"You're up to something."

"I . . . No, I'm not up to something. I was asked about an event at the abbey in 1359. I thought Brother Alfred might know, he didn't. End of story."

"It's never the end of the story, Dr Hertz. Executions, witchcraft, supernatural what-have-you. I don't mind if you want to ruin your academic standing, but not at the university's expense. Will it be at the university's expense, Dr Hertz?"

"No. If you must know I haven't been back to see Brother Alfred. The question is, I don't know, unanswerable."

The panel waited for a reason, but then chortled as if all three of them had been tickled at the same time by an unseen hand. Professor Matheus leaned to his right. "He sounds like a physicist." The chortling increased. "Brother Alfred thinks you've been in the abbey library after he told you he couldn't help."

"I haven't been back to the library or the abbey for that matter."

"Things disturbed, Dr Hertz. And a curious smell lingering amongst the bookshelves."

"Smell?"

"Sulphurous. Maybe you are a physicist on the sly, Dr Hertz. You're not practising alchemy, are you?" Professor Matheus was probably normal once, but age, intellect and perhaps a malfunctioning gland somewhere had turned him into a sentence-truncating quiz master.

"What were you enquiring about?" The question came from Professor Matheus's right hand man, Professor Lebanowski.

"I was told, incorrectly as it happens, that seventy-two nuns were executed at the abbey in 1359. I wanted to know if this was true and possibly identify one of the victims."

Regardless of any wrongdoing, a faculty panel is a faculty panel made up of academics who can't resist an unsolved problem. They sat in silence for a few seconds before Lebanowski said, "Could that be Bishop Salin?"

Professor Matheus, spectacles in mouth, nodded. “Possibly. Gustav of Gothia, he is on record for signing off executions, but not in Lüneburg. He wouldn’t have had the final say, that would have been,” he clicked his fingers for the name.

“Albert II.”

“Albert II. He never had anyone executed.”

To his left Professor Grohl offered another detail, “He had several hung in Stockholm, didn’t he? On the orders of Magnus IV”

“Who? Albert II?”

“No, Salin.”

“Oh. Yes, blamed the Black Death on them, but nothing in Lüneburg. He came and went, was only here four years,” Professor Matheus stopped himself when he caught my intense – possibly over-intense – attention. “Before his death.”

They continued to mutter, passing around one factual pebble after another, a verbal footpath of history tracing Bishop Salin’s progress from Stockholm via remnants of the old Swedish empire in northern Germany to the Hanseatic cities, and ultimately Lüneburg where he oversaw the observances of the Reformation.

“Was he sympathetic to the nuns’ objections?” I said.

“Of course he wasn’t,” said Professor Matheus. “He was a tyrant. They all were. But significantly, and unfortunately for you, Dr Hertz, he was no executioner. No inquisitor. Don’t change the subject.”

“I wasn’t, how was I changing the subject?”

“You’re here to explain what you were doing in the abbey library, leaving a bad smell everywhere.”

History presented its peculiar sense of irony. A diabolical coincidence that had me and the mother of my mystery nun associated with bad smells. I’m sure she had a tougher time than I was having, but my accusers were no less intractable in their determination to assign guilt. Guilt based on hearsay, Brother Alfred’s anecdotal speculation.

“I was not in the library, Professor Matheus. There’s nothing more I can say.”

We left the issue unresolved, my innocence unproven, but Professor Matheus promised to look further into the matter. I left the hearing shaken, but also elated to have been given another piece of the puzzle, another name. According to a brief online search Bishop Salin was a traveller, a demagogue and not one to mince his words. He may not have been an inquisitor, but only because he was born too early. And then I found out why Professor Matheus refused to reveal how the bishop had died.

He had been nailed to the door of the abbey in 1359, allegedly by the Devil himself.

I rang the mystery man to update him.

“That’s incredible. You think her mother was a witch?”

“I don’t think anything. I’m trying not to draw conclusions that can’t be explained by rational science. But yes, if the accounts are correct and we’re talking about the same person, the nun may

have been the daughter of a local woman accused of witchcraft, and at the time of the executions there was a bishop here in Lüneburg with a reputation for severe justice. But before we get carried away, there are no accounts of an execution for heresy in Lüneburg in 1359. None.”

“You’re sure of that?”

“As sure as the records allow. If this were a court of law the evidence would be circumstantial. There’s no direct link, no smoking gun.” I remembered the Professor’s description of the smell in the abbey library. “When you went to the library to get the register were you striking matches?”

“Striking matches?”

“Yes, to see in the dark perhaps?”

“No.” Over the phone I heard his fingers scraping his chin. “No, I always use a cigarette lighter.”

“To see in the dark?”

“To light a cigarette!”

I concluded the phone call by reminding him of the name, Jutta Hoegens, and told him there was nothing more I could do. The following day I found a large letter in my internal mail containing three thousand euros in crumpled notes. Wild goose chases could be quite lucrative, more lucrative than publishing an academic text book.

My literary agent Sabine wanted the title shortening. She met me with the news at the same table in the same cafe where I first met the mystery man several weeks earlier. “Echoes of An Ancient Memory. The Legacy of Pagan Belief in the Christian Monasteries of Europe, 1045 to 1684. It’s almost as long as the book.”

“Imagine how easily you could sell it on the back of a television documentary,” I said. My wry smile didn’t convince her.

“Forget television. Johanna wants the whole lot rewritten, more accessible, shorter title.”

“Well, Johanna knows best. Can’t we get a more sympathetic editor who won’t shove a spoke through the wheels at the eleventh hour?”

“It’s not the eleventh hour.”

“It’s a lot of work.”

“Well, you’d better make a start then. Forget all your presentation tutorials and ghost hunting.”

“I wasn’t ghost hunting. It was a perfectly legitimate request. And the answer turned out to be surprisingly revealing. What started as a bizarre question became a fascinating insight into local history. The way facts become transformed into folklore over time. I wondered if there might be a PhD in it.”

“Not a documentary?”

“Don’t think I’ve given up on that ambition. If you’re not interested I’ll find someone who is.”

Sabine searched her tablet. I thought she was ignoring me, but she pulled up a photograph of a man with a handlebar moustache, standing in front of what looked like an electric chair. “He would make

good television. Go and speak to him, find out what you have to do to make yourself appealing to the masses.”

“Who is he?”

“Uli Thorsholm. He’s publishing a book in two months time and the pre-orders have gone through the roof.”

I looked for the title of his book: the Encyclopedia of Execution. “He’s a nutcase.”

“He’s marketable.”

“He’s got a handlebar moustache. He has a face for radio if ever I saw one.”

“He’s also sitting on fifty thousand pre-orders. You’ll be sat on a stool when you do your book signing in that pagan shop.”

She had to throw that one at me. I couldn’t be bothered explaining it was a favour and that there’d be other venues, not just in Lüneburg but across the region. Uli Thorsholm’s moustache would never get through the door of Cornucopia without getting caught on something.

But Thorsholm may have been more than a portent of my book’s underwhelming sales potential. An expert on executions might know what was going on in Lüneburg in 1359. There had been so much opposition to the possibility of an execution that I wanted to prove them all wrong out of sheer bloody-mindedness. Thorsholm also lived in a house at the foot of the Alps. A perfect excuse for a weekend away from the combined sadism of Baltic and North Sea weather.

Thorsholm was a willing host and probably thought my interest would lend his own work some academic credibility. He certainly needed it. I found him at home in a timber chalet surrounded by a protective pine forest and a wood pile that would keep his fires burning for decades. Thorsholm led me into a room where he was testing a home-made guillotine.

“What the hell is that?”

“It’s based on the Madame that decimated the French aristocracy. It’s a one thirty-second scale model.” It was also big enough to remove a man’s leg. He demonstrated the speed and fluidity of the mechanism by cutting in half a succession of large vegetables and when he was satisfied with the contraption’s potency placed a small log at the base. The blade cut it in half like a piece of pork.

Later, over a meal of sliced ham and Stella Artois (Thorsholm only drank French beer) we discussed executions in the fourteenth century and I guided him towards Lüneburg, the abbey and Bishop Salin. The name stopped him drinking, the beer glass paused beneath a toupee of froth hanging off his handlebar moustache.

“Do you know how he executed one woman?”

“No.”

He placed his glass on the table and cleared his moustache. “This is only anecdotal, but I’ve heard of similar methods in other cultures in other periods of time. Salin is alleged to have ordered a woman, a heretic to pay for her sins, her pagan beliefs, by having a cow’s tale sewn into her back. And then she was forced to walk around the town with the tail where everyone would ridicule her, gossip, maybe even attack her. And then after maybe two weeks she would die from the infection. A slow cruel way to kill someone, Dr Hertz.”

Slow and cruel, two words that together equalled barbaric. Thorsholm's account, anecdotal or not, saddened me, the possibility of it being true had repercussions for a real human being, possibly Jutta Hoegens, daughter of the outcast Adelhait Hoegensche. On the journey back to Lüneburg Thorsholm's explanation haunted me. He was a good host and saw that I was disturbed by what he had told me. Before I walked away from his chalet he patted my shoulder and told me that he might be wrong, that it was only folklore, but folklore always had a kernel of truth. Folklore rarely evolved from a vacuum.

The following Monday I slumped in the chair of my office still dazed from the idea of a heretic being executed by septicaemic poisoning. I opened my desk drawer, it was locked. The register. I still had the register. My mystery client would have to take it back. If I was caught anywhere near the abbey I'd lose my job. . . .

"Yeah, sure I'll take it back. It's not a problem."

"It should be. It's a stolen document. Mind you, I don't want to know. Just get it back where it belongs please. I'll meet you in the cafe."

He was there at the time we agreed. Six p.m. A busy cafe, too many people to notice anything suspicious about a package being handed from one man to another. I told him all about my meeting with Uli Thorsholm, but the mystery man seemed more interested in how Thorsholm cared for his handlebar moustache.

"I don't know what it is about German men and their moustaches," he said scraping his own rough stubbled chin. "Keep it clear, that's what I always say. No chance of bugs and mites living on your face."

"Yes, thanks for that. Are you going to get the register back tonight?"

"If it'll put your mind at ease, yes. No, seriously, Dr Hertz I'm grateful for your help. This is the least I can do. You can trust me."

If only he hadn't grinned when he said the words trust me.

Expecting him to leave immediately I had to endure another few hours of him and his theories, opinions and solutions to a myriad of world problems, none of which involved urgency. I asked him what he did for a living, but he was reluctant to tell me.

"I get around. I shouldn't really talk about it. I'm taking some time off."

Whatever he did paid well. He had the register in his bag, I had three thousand euros in mine, but despite the lucrative stash I couldn't resist following him when he finally decided to leave. The time was after ten, the Lüneburg streets relatively quiet, quiet enough for him to hear my trailing footsteps, so I held back a little.

Of course, leaving the cafe late made sense. Any earlier and there might be people still milling around the abbey. The mystery man appeared to have a knowledge of espionage or even breaking and entering. I concluded he must be a spy, a member of an intelligence agency. He wasn't German, his accent was eastern European, possibly Russian. Keeping a good thirty metres between us I wondered if I had revealed some national secret to a Russian spy, or perhaps I was walking into a

trap: he'd take his money back, stuff me in a sports holdall and make off with a priceless document. . . .

. . . Full of unidentifiable names. My mind raced ahead of me and I had to restrain myself from chasing after it. After letting him cross the river I paused on Am Fischmarkt. Realising I couldn't follow him all the way to the abbey on foot (he had far more energy than me) I was about to order a taxi when I felt a presence. The hooded woman was following me following the mystery man.

"Did you find out?"

My prey was escaping. "Find out?" I lost sight of him at the junction. "Find out what?"

"The name of the nun? Seemed pretty obvious to me from what you described. It's not like th'owd days is it," she changed her accent to some peculiar English dialect and spoke like an old woman.

"Like in my day you ad'fot go t'library and read up a buk."

"Yes, very good. Have you considered a career in television? It's not as easy as you think."

"Haven't got the face for television."

From what I could see she didn't have a face at all, just a voice drifting from the deep shadow of her hood. "I have to go, nice to talk to you again. And thanks for the help." I ran ahead and called a taxi. I must have reached the abbey before the mystery man, although I arrived without passing him on the way. I had to know how he got in, whether by stealth or invite. There was no sign of anyone at the entrance, no lurking figures, no dashing silhouettes. Cautiously I approached the library, avoiding the lights, ducking under illuminated windows, ready to hide from doors opening suddenly.

The library was in darkness, but enough latent light caught the outlines of the furniture, the mass of the bookshelves, a hint of the polished flooring. The room was empty, but as I crept towards the southern end of the building I detected a smell, a feint whiff of matches. I told myself matches had no sulphur content. My mouth dried up. I stopped along the wall to let my thumping heartbeat recover. The smell grew stronger, a dominant odour of brimstone hanging like an invisible cloud around my head. I peered through the corner of the window, but the source of the smell remained hidden.

Unless, unless it was the product of the two figures I glimpsed inside the library. I ducked away from the window, but the glimpse was enough to force me to look again, to confirm what I thought I saw. I was right: two figures spread across a table, a man and a woman, very close, entangled, her legs wrapped around him, his torso thrusting. . . . They were having sex in the abbey library. The brimstone intensified, I heard them groan and a thud, the sound of a stray limb against the thick wooden table. It struck again and the woman moved, rolled slightly to her right and there swiping through the gloom of the library, a tail, a whip-like chord with a flared tip of hair, it swished with obvious sexual ecstasy, rising, pausing and then returning to the table with the same thud.

I stepped back from the window, dragged myself into the shadow and waited open mouthed, waited for my brain to offer an explanation, anything, I didn't care: scientific, nonsensical, speculative, some comforting reason why a man would be making love to a woman with a tail in the library of an abbey. Lüne Abbey, the 14th Century home of a nun with a . . .

"You found him then." It was her, the girl, the woman. Whoever she was. Whatever she was. I still couldn't see her face.

“Who are you?”

“Doesn’t matter who I am, it’s who she is that matters. Do you believe what you just saw?”

My fear of the hooded woman forced me towards the window. I couldn’t help looking again, but the couple had gone, the smell diminished, the tail a treacherous memory. “Do I believe it?” I wanted to see the face of the hooded woman and whether she too had a tail, but she backed away from me.

“No, no I don’t.”

“Good. Are you going to tell anyone?”

“They wouldn’t believe me if I did.”

“Good. No need to kill you then. I don’t like killing people, in spite of what they say about me. Don’t believe a word of it.” Her voice trailed away until she was gone, another ridiculous deception devoured by Lüneburg’s intense shadows. I hoped the window would help, but its Gothic decoration offered only mottled fragments and in the coloured panels between the lead veins of the glass I saw the vague reflection of a distant winged figure flying across the rooftops of the city as if lifted by some unearthly thermal, circling until distance and the darkness of night took it away from me.

“I know I said I wouldn’t talk to anyone about it, but when you turned up this evening I thought I should tell you.”

My producer friend, in Lüneburg to meet my agent (although their discussions were not about me), wanted to talk discreetly, but the book signing squeeze inside Cornucopia made a private chat impossible. We forced our way outside.

“Did you get photos?” she said.

“No.”

“Video?”

“No.”

She glanced at the gathering clouds before saying, “Well, with everything that’s going on at the moment it might make a half hour programme for radio. You have a face for radio, Markus.”